

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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**BH**

### WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN YOU SEE SOMEONE DISABLED?

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I recognize that this study text is likely to hit some nerves. But if we're going to be honest about blessings then we need to face this issue head on.

Disabled persons, or persons who simply have a distinctive appearance, are considered part of God's creation and the emotions one feels upon seeing such persons are consecrated with blessings. M. Berachot 9:1-3 outlines blessings for various occasions, such as seeing remarkable things (M. Berachot 9:1). Tosefta adds to these blessings one to be said on seeing a person with a remarkable physical constitution and one to be said upon seeing a person who has become disabled or is afflicted with sickness.

One who sees an Ethiopian, or an albino, or [a man] red-spotted in the face, or [a man] white spotted in the face, or a hunchback, or a dwarf (or a deaf-mute or a mentally ill person or a drunk person) says, "Blessed [are you Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe who creates such] varied creatures."

[One who sees] an amputee, or a lame person, or a blind person, or a person afflicted with boils, says, "Blessed [are you Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe] the true Judge". (T. Berachot 6:3)

The implication here is that all these persons are part of God's creation and that any feeling experienced upon seeing them should be consecrated with a blessing. One whose condition simply makes him or her physically distinctive is not considered judged by God. Such a person is one of the wide variety of creatures created by God. However, one who is visibly disabled or ill, i.e., one to whom the "true judge" blessing applies, is deemed adjudged by God.

The Yerushalmi refines Tosefta's categorization system. The concept of disabilities as a judgment from God can be seen in the rationale given for the blessings one says upon seeing disabled persons:

This teaching [to say the blessing, "the True Judge"] applies [to those who see persons with disabilities who were born] whole and later were changed. But if [one sees a person who] was born that way he says, "Blessed [are you Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe who creates such] varied creatures." (Y. Berachot 9:1)

If one is born without disabilities and they later develop, that person is deemed adjudged by God. If they are born with disabilities, however, they are simply deemed one of God's varied creations. The Yerushalmi lends a different meaning to this passage from its straightforward one in Tosefta. There, the difference was drawn between conditions that were physically distinctive and afflictions. The issue of timing, however, does not adequately explain Tosefta's categorization while the differentiation of condition does so.

The Yerushalmi gets to the heart of a disability's meaning for the person who has it: it can be experienced as either a normal condition, in its way, or as a punishment. The Bavli (58b) will make a different distinction between these two groups: the former having their conditions from birth and the latter acquiring their disabilities later in life. However, this is not quite consistent with the text we have here. One would imagine that persons were born blind, or acquired psoriasis later in life in those days, so such a distinction cannot be the core of the differentiation between the two groups.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you feel when you see someone physically distinctive? Imagine Yao Ming (the Houston Rocket's 7'4"basketball player) walked into the room. Wouldn't you be filled with wonder at his height? Wouldn't it be good to recognize how varied God makes all of us?
2. What do you feel when you see a person with a disability? Are you glad it's not you? Do you try to find reasons that might have made them that way (thus making you feel safe that such a fate will not happen to you)?
3. Could we apply the "varied creatures" blessing to everyone or is that trying to be politically correct and glossing over the true feelings these things engender.

FYI: I am a person with a disability so these matters are not merely academic for me. This also means I've developed quite a thick skin so bring on the discussion!