

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted August 21, 2003 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

YOU'RE NOT GETTING OLDER . . . YOU'RE GETTING BETTER!

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Standing in line at the grocery store check out I had ample opportunity to inspect the magazines displayed there. Aside from the few tabloids claiming that Elvis was not dead, the pictures on the magazines showed beautiful, smiling women in gorgeous clothes framed by titles for the articles therein: "Beat stress, Do More in less time, Look More Beautiful in 5 minutes, etc." Some of these women I recognized as movie stars who were in their mid-forties or older. And yet, through air brushing of the picture or plastic surgery or makeup, they appeared to be in their 20's. Clearly, the cultural definition of women's beauty in our society today is eternal youth. Though the rules may be more liberal regarding men, the pressure to appear young and healthy is important for them as well.

Judaism (thank God!) has a different set of rules about physical beauty and perfection. Physical perfection is required of only one group of people: priests functioning in the Temple. The "specs" for a priest, in addition to purity of priestly blood lineage and ritual purity are outlined in Leviticus 21:16-24. The emphasis in this passage is on visible defects instead of deafness, mental illness or mental disability, which are not as readily visible as other disabilities. In the most perfect of places, i.e., the Temple, in the presence of the most perfect entity, i.e., God, only the most perfect of persons, i.e., someone of unblemished priestly lineage and perfect physical form, may offer up sacrifices (which must also be unblemished). The list of blemishes which disqualify sacrificial animals (Leviticus 22:21-24) is, like those for the priest, are twelve in number.

In the following easily shows the difference and *Tosefta first expands the teaching of the Mishnah. Not only should a priest with blemished hands not bless the congregation, but also one with blemished feet or face likewise should not come forward to recite the priestly benediction. The priests' feet would be visible to the congregation since their shoes are removed prior to giving the blessing. Somehow, too, the priests' faces must have been visible to the congregation at this ritual moment. Therefore, blemishes in any of these areas might cause congregants to stare at the priest and this could not be allowed. However, if many of the people worked in dyes, for example, and so the sight of someone with bright blue or red hands would not cause staring, or if the priest and his deformities were well-known to everyone and would likewise not engender extended gazing in his direction, then this priest represents no danger to the congregation and he may offer up the priestly benediction.

The Yerushalmi builds on the Mishnah and Tosefta and, further, brings reports of cases where these rules were applied selectively:

A priest who has blemishes on his hands should not raise his hands in the priestly benediction....(M. Megillah 4:7)

Gemara: It has been taught: [If the priest has blemishes also] on his face [he should not raise his hands in the priestly benediction.] It has been taught: But if he was well known in his town, he is permitted. (T. Megillah 3:29)

Rabbi Naftali had crooked fingers. He came and asked Rabbi Mana [if he might offer the priestly blessing]. He [Rabbi Mana] said to him, "Since you are well known in your town it is permitted." (Y. Megillah 4:8, 75b-c//Y. Taanit 4:1, 67b)

Discussion Questions:

1. As we see, during the rabbinic era the texts show a building tolerance for physical disfigurement among priests.

Why do you think this occurred? Do you see it as a universal? To what extent?

2. How can we take this generalized idea of perfection mellowing into tolerance for those outside the "norm" of beauty to heart in contemporary culture?
3. Many people, Jody are starting second careers in their 30's, 40's or 50's. What sorts of special roadblocks do they find because they do not fit the "canonical" definition of someone starting out in a career? What kinds of advantages does their life experience give them?