

Shabbat Emor 5786

May 2, 2026 15 Iyar

Responding to Ella Duboys and Gemma Johnson-Fries

Ella and Gemma, thank you for two bold divrei Torah. You each took issue with a particular text in your parasha, questioning its premises and articulating an alternative set of values.

Ella, you focused on an early section of the parasha, which excludes a man with a disability or any kind of blemish from serving as a priest. Note that this law only applies to the male descendants of Aaron, because in the time of the Torah, only men were considered qualified to serve as priests, so already 50% of potential priests were excluded.

Today, the majority of our people have come very far on the question of gender equality, fully embracing spiritual leaders of all genders, but we have come less far on the question of accessibility for people with disabilities.

On Wednesday, I had the heartbreaking honor of performing the graveside funeral for Matan Koch, the son and brother of our members Roz Koch and Rabbi Shira Koch Epstein. Matan was a force in the world, full of passion and brilliance and “spiritual sensitivity,” just like ideal leaders you described, Ella. He went to Yale when he was 16, he went to Harvard Law School after that, he was appointed to a presidential commission by President Obama, and then he dedicated his life to changing hearts and minds and establishing policies about inclusion and access for people with disabilities. Matan had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair. He taught that ensuring accessibility to an event wasn’t just for the sake of the person with a disability. It was for the sake of everyone else. When a person with disabilities cannot get into the room, everyone else misses out on their wisdom, experience, and contributions. That is like what was lost to the ancient Israelites by the exclusion of wise and spiritually sensitive priests who were somehow physically different. Beyond all of Matan’s accomplishments, he always wished he could be a rabbi. But the Jewish community was not set up to make that possible. I pray that very soon we will do as you say, Ella, and become a people who value and prioritize spiritual sensitivity and emotional maturity above any ideas about normative physicality. I pray that we will understand that

we are missing out if people with disabilities are not in the room or are excluded from leadership.

Gemma, you focused on a passage in a later section of the parasha, in which a man with one Israelite parent and one Egyptian parent blasphemes G-d and is put to death. And you ask, did he receive such harsh punishment because he did not have two Jewish parents? And since you yourself have parents of two different backgrounds, you asked whether you should expect to be treated differently, or even shunned by the Jewish community. It's true that some of the Rabbinic commentaries on this incident are rife with xenophobia. Da'at Zekenim even goes so far as to say that this man cursed the name of G-d because he had Egyptian blood in his veins. We know that that is not how blood works. There is no such thing as Egyptian blood or German blood or Israelite blood. Blood can be donated or transfused from one person to another and it does not change that person's attributes or behavior.

Exploring this a little bit more, I'd like us to step back and notice that in the wilderness, while standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, which is where this Torah portion takes place, there were people with Egyptian parents. That's not how we usually think of who was there. We usually imagine that the freed slaves who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years were a fairly homogeneous group made up only of descendants of Jacob's twelve sons. But we know that was never true about our people. Never. Hagar the Egyptian lived with Abraham and Sarah, the original Jews, as part of their family. Joseph married an Egyptian and his two sons, Manashe and Ephraim, who had an Egyptian mother, became two of the twelve tribes. Moses himself grew up in an Egyptian home, was married to Tsippora, a Midianite, and had a deep bond with his Midianite priest father-in-law Jethro. King David's grandmother was a Moabite, Ruth.

Despite efforts to police the boundaries of our people by pure parentage, we have always been a mixed multitude. We have always included people of different backgrounds, and the sooner we recognize and embrace that, the sooner we can step into the full beauty and strength of who we are. Our diversity is a superpower.

That instinct to exclude, to seek purity and homogeneity in people, whether by appearance as in the ban on blemishes and disabilities among priests, or by

parentage as in the Rabbinic approach to this story about the blasphemer, faces a powerful countervailing force in Torah itself. And that is the 36 mitzvot related to the stranger. For who is a stranger other than a person who is not like you? When you have set up a boundary distinguishing sameness from difference, a stranger is a person who comes from outside that boundary. And the Torah doesn't just command us 36 times not to oppress the stranger and to love the stranger – it does that. The Torah also commands us twice, once in our parasha, and once in last week's parasha, to feed the stranger, to share what we have with the stranger.

Right here in our parasha, right in the midst of the instructions for our holidays and how they are to be practiced, we find this:

וּבְקִצְרְכֶם אֶת־קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא־תִכְלֶה פְּאֵת שְׂדֵךְ בְּקִצְרְךָ וְלִקַּט קִצִּירְךָ  
לֹא תִלְקַט לְעַנִּי וְלִגֵּר תִּעַזֵּב אֹתָם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them .for the poor and the stranger: I the ETERNAL am your God

Rashi, the great 11th century French commentator, says that the Torah repeats this law twice so that if you do not share your harvest with the stranger, you have broken not one but two commandments. He then quotes R. Abdima the son of R. Joseph to say that this law was placed right in the middle of the list of holidays, right after the rules of Passover and Shavuot, and right before the rules of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, to teach that if you do this, if you leave part of your harvest for the stranger and the poor as you ought to, it is as if you had built the Temple yourself and offered the sacrifices there. In other words, it is as important, or even more important, than any of the holidays.

On Thursday night, about 35 of our members stood with a large crowd of Jews from across the city in one of 17 national protests by Jews against ICE. Ten rabbis, including our own Rabbi Kolin, committed civil disobedience and were arrested in front of 26 Federal Plaza, ICE headquarters. I was in the position of emceeding the protest. The first speaker, Ruth Messinger, reminded us that we, the Jewish people, *are* refugees, *we are* asylum seekers, *we are* immigrants. That is *our* story. This country has been a haven for so many people, including

many of our ancestors, who were fleeing persecution or who were seeking a better life, and who arrived here and built New York City. Ruth reminded us that this city was made by the hands of immigrants, including our grandparents and great grandparents.

One of the rabbis who spoke, Roly Matalon, remembered when he himself arrived at 26 Federal Plaza many years ago, having fled a dictatorship where people were being ripped from their families and disappeared, never to be seen again. He spoke about receiving his green card and later his US citizenship, remembering his gratitude for being welcomed, for becoming an American. He then talked about visiting 26 Federal Plaza in recent months and seeing the place transformed into one that reminded him painfully of the country he fled. Masked ICE agents ripping people from their families, disappearing them to who knows where. He recognized the fear, he recognized the abuse of power. And he recognized that the law itself can be used for evil purposes. It can be entirely legal to persecute a stranger – an immigrant, a refugee, an asylum seeker – but it is still wrong.

The Torah makes that abundantly clear by commanding us 36 times not to oppress the stranger, and here in our parasha, we must go farther and actually provide food for the stranger, actually share what we have with the stranger.

Underneath all of the scapegoating, all of the racism and xenophobia that is spewed from this president and his representatives, all of the spurious claims of people eating cats and dogs, of massive crime waves, of widespread violence – underneath all of these lies is another idea. The idea that we don't have enough to share. That we should not share. That immigrants are taking our jobs, taking our resources, taking what's ours. That when times are hard, we should keep other people away from our land.

The Torah had an entirely opposite logic. As 16th century Italian commentator Sforno said about this verse, "after giving thanks for the harvest and the successful storing of it in the barns, the Torah warns of what has to be done to ensure that the financial success which this harvest represents not be ruined. This is why the farmer is commanded to set aside, or simply not harvest, [the extra produce in the corners of their field or that which was dropped or left behind when they harvested.] Some people, in a play on words," Sforno says, "change

the word חסר [which means lack] for רחם, loving kindness or charity, suggesting that the only way to ensure that one does not lose one's own money is by engaging liberally in handing out charity to those who need. The legislation in our verse then is this insurance for the farmers not to lose their crop even after they've already brought it into the barn.”

From the perspective of Judaism, from the perspective of Torah, if you want to be sure that you will have enough, give some of what you have away. If you want to stop worrying that you will run out of money, or property, or sustenance, share what you have. That is the only insurance policy that will work. And whether you see this approach as faith in G-d, or faith in community – because sharing with others makes it much more likely that they will in turn share with you – it is the opposite ethos to the one that our country is enacting now.

All of these ideas – the priests with blemishes, the man with parents from two different backgrounds, the farmers leaving the edges of their field for the stranger – they're about the impulse to exclude and the impulse to include. As Matan Koch, of blessed memory, taught us, exclusion has a cost, not only to the excluded, but also to the excluders. *We* lose out when we fail to welcome people with disabilities. *We* lose out when we fail to welcome Jews of diverse backgrounds. *We* lose out when we fail to welcome the stranger. *We* shrivel and *we* shrink. *We* contract and harden. *We* become less supple, less complex, less joyful, less kind, less alive, less feeling, less free.

Ella and Gemma, I said to both of you in our meetings before today that the Torah is not only the words in the scroll. The Torah is the entire conversation about those words that has taken place ever since and even before they were first written down. It is more than 2,000 years of diverse and sometimes contradictory commentaries and ideas – and that is what makes our tradition so rich. Every voice expands Torah, every new interpretation makes it live. Today, you have added your voices to that conversation. You have called for a Torah, and for a Judaism, of depth, of kindness, of inclusion, and of generosity. That is the very Torah, the very Judaism, we need now.

Shabbat Shalom.