

Rabbi's Message

Dear Friends,

For my message to you this month, I have chosen to share the sermon that I delivered during Shabbat last week. First though, a warning: At the risk of spoiling the flow, I should tell you that midway through, the topic turns to male predation against women. There is nothing graphic in my presentation, but if you are someone for whom the topic is emotionally triggering, you should know this before you read.

It was a difficult sermon for me to write, but also so very important. I hope you find it meaningful.

L'Shalom,

Rabbi Dubin

Shabbat Emor

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Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey

When people learn that I didn't start Rabbinical school until I was already a doctorate-holding 43-year-old married father of four, the question inevitably becomes, what took me so long?

Of course there are plenty of reasons, but towards the top, ironically, is that I was blessed with some truly excellent rabbis as a kid. Since I had such admiration for these giants in my mind, I never became a rabbi, because couldn't possibly live up to their standards.

Chief among my perfect role models was Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, known to us simply as "Shelly." Ever approachable, Shelly not only cleared time from his busy schedule to teach us high school kids from inside his own office, he encouraged us to choose our topics. Shelly had a way of relating to us that precious few adults are ever able to pull off. Even as I grew older, I never stopped admiring Shelly's breadth of knowledge. So far as I could tell, there was nothing Jewish that he didn't know.

I remember Shelly also for his spectacular ability to sermonize. His thoughts were deep, his writing poetically artful, and his delivery masterful. Whenever he preached, I always hung to the edge of my seat.

Eventually the Board of Trustees at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion came to acknowledge what everyone else already knew, which is why they tapped Shelly to become the 7th president of our Reform seminary and graduate school of higher Jewish learning in 1996.

It was for these reasons, and more, why my vision of Shelly was indeed one of the biggest impediments to my applying to Rabbinical School at a more typical age, because no matter how hard I tried, I would never be the rabbi he was. Perfectionism will do that to someone, especially if that someone is me.

So, for the next four years, as I continued to pursue my own path of academic Jewish learning, not at HUC on West 4th Street, but at Jewish Theological Seminary on West 122nd Street, I watched from afar as Shelly led the Reform Seminary with all the mastery I would have expected.

But then, in December of 2000, my entire house of cards came crashing down. After less than 5 years at the helm, Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, had resigned from HUC. Why? Because a couple decades earlier, during the years I had been idolizing him at Central Synagogue, Shelly had carried on an “inappropriate personal relationship” with a member of my childhood Jewish home. That’s all I knew at the time, but it was enough. I was devastated. I knew his indiscretions must have been major – otherwise, why would he have resigned? – but still, it was horribly difficult for me to believe the man I knew and loved and admired was the same man who had abused his position so terribly. So I did the only thing I was emotionally capable of doing; I stopped thinking about it. I wiped it from my mind and pressed forward with my own studies, secretly thanking God that it was HUC that had to deal with the fallout and not my own JTS. It may not have been the best solution, but it was the only one I could pull off at the time.

About 18 months later, though, on June 1, 2001, Shelly assumed a new position as Executive Vice President of Birthright Israel, which, at the time, was a scarcely known organization, still in its infancy. Having finished my tenure as the Reform Movement’s Director of College Education just a year prior, though, I knew how important a position it really was. And if the impressive folks at Birthright had found it acceptable to reinstate Shelly, who was I to disagree? Ultimately, after more than a year of commanding myself to remember to forget Shelly, my self-imposed moratorium had come to a rather sudden end. In my mind, the rehabilitated Shelly morphed into a fallible human being who had made a terrible mistake a quarter century earlier but then made successful *teshuvah*, thus earning his way back to serving the Jewish people with integrity.

While I would never again think of him without also thinking of his indiscretion, he did come to own my respect once again.

And then, about six years later, in yet another sign of rehabilitation and re-acceptance, Shelly finally returned to congregational life as the rabbi of the Jewish Center of the Hamptons in New York, where he remained until his eventual retirement a decade later. Indeed, the Shelly I had known and admired as a kid was back. So much so, that when I finally ran into him at rabbinic conference a few years ago, I felt truly honored to sit with him alone for over half an hour catching up on old times.

And yes, by the way, by then I had already met enough less-than-perfect rabbis over the course of my career in and out of Jewish life, that I finally admitted to myself in 2008 that I, too, could also be a less-than-perfect rabbi myself!

There is more to the story, which I'll share in a moment, but for now, let's turn to this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Emor*, the first two chapters of which dictate God's instructions about what priests must do to create and maintain eligibility for engagement in their holy work. In these chapters, there is one verse, though, that strikes me as out of place, since it addresses the entire community of Israel, rather than the priests alone. Leviticus 21:8

ח וְקִדְּשֵׁתוּ--כִּי-אֶת-לֶחֶם
אֱלֹהֵי, הוּא מִקְרִיב; קֹדֶשׁ,
יְהִי-לָךְ--כִּי קְדוֹשׁ, אֲנִי יְהוָה
מִקְדָּשְׁכֶם.

8 You (that is, “each member of the community of Israel”) must treat him (the priest) as holy, since he offers the food of your God; he shall be holy to you, for I the Lord who sanctify you am holy.

Shouldn't they have to **earn** that kind of respect? Doesn't it cheapen it for God to have to **command** us to sanctify our priests?

Well, perhaps, but maybe this instruction is actually pointing out the underlying truth to the classic Yiddish aphorism: ניין רבנים קענען קיין מנין מיט מאַכן אַבער צען שוסטערס יאָ – *Nine rabbis can't make a minyan, but ten cobblers can*. In other words, priests/rabbis embody no more inherent holiness than anyone else. Because they are flesh and bone, embodying the same strengths and weaknesses as the rest of us, for them to succeed in their holy work, which surely benefits the rest of us, they require the support of the entire community to treat them as holy.

But what if they **don't** deserve it? What if their actions are decidedly **unholy**? What if they take advantage of their position by abusing their flock? Perhaps the text here is telling us that in cases as this, it becomes **our** job to do what **we** can to help them return to a state of grace. By commanding us to treat the priests as holy, perhaps God is acknowledging there **will** be times when even the priests behave in unholy ways. And if that can be true of them, it must surely be true of us, too. Therefore, by commanding us to treat them as holy, even after they have fallen from grace, God is showing us that there is indeed a path to redemption. A path for them, and a path for us.

Verses 16 – 21 continue:

טז 16 The LORD spoke further to Moses: וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר.

יז דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, לֵאמֹר: אִישׁ מִזֶּרְעֶךָ לְדֹרֹתָם, אֲשֶׁר יְהִי בּוֹ מוֹם--לֹא יִקְרַב, לְהִקְרִיב לַחֶם אֱלֹהֵיוּ.

יח כִּי כָל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ מוֹם, לֹא יִקְרַב: אִישׁ עִוֵּר אוֹ פֶּסֶחַ, אוֹ חָרָם אוֹ שָׂרוּעַ.

יט אוֹ אִישׁ, אֲשֶׁר-יְהִי בּוֹ שִׁבְרַת רֶגֶל, אוֹ שִׁבְרַת יָד.

כ אוֹ-גִבָּן אוֹ-דֶקֶה, אוֹ תִבְלַל בְּעֵינָיו, אוֹ גֵרֵב אוֹ יִלְפָּת, אוֹ מְרוּחַ אֲשָׁף.

כא כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ מוֹם, מִזֶּרַע אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן--לֹא יִגַּשׁ, לְהִקְרִיב אֶת-אֲשֵׁי יְהוָה: מוֹם בּוֹ--אֵת לַחֶם אֱלֹהֵיוּ, לֹא יִגַּשׁ לְהִקְרִיב.

17 Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the food of his God.

18 No one at all who has a defect shall be qualified: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long;

19 no man who has a broken leg or a broken arm;

20 or who is a hunchback, or a dwarf, or who has a growth in his eye, or who has a boil-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testes.

21 No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the LORD's offering by fire; having a defect, he shall not be qualified to offer the food of his God.

Recognizing the historical context in which our ancestors understood the necessity to reserve our very best for God, we understand why ancient standards would render anything short of so-called “physical perfection” a disqualifier. Still though, to the modern eye, it remains quite a jarring list. So perhaps the only way to make sense of it by today’s standards would be to read less literally, to understand the disqualifications as encompassing spiritual deformities within the physical. Certainly, as the Etz Hayim Torah Commentary points out, later biblical writers understood the two to be very much related: “...in the Psalms and in the prophets, the Bible emphasizes that the broken in body and spirit, because they have been cured of the sin of arrogance, are especially welcome before God. ‘True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit; / God, you will not despise / a contrite and crushed heart.’ (Psalm 51:19)” Read this way, the text is teaching that God bars religious leaders from their holy duties not because of physical deformities, but because of any deformity that has not yet produced a contrite spirit. In this way, it would be the sin of arrogance, not physical challenge, that keeps the priests from sanctification.

So in the case of my vaunted childhood rabbi, given that he had weathered the formal process of CCAR ethical review and accepted his consequences, Shelly had indeed proven himself the owner of a contrite heart. Thus, so far as I understood it, my allowing him to repopulate the perch of spiritual authority in my life seemed not only permissible, it seemed obligatory. So I made peace with it.

And then, just a few days ago, came a copy of the letter that had just been sent to the membership of Central Synagogue. It began as follows:

Last fall, after Rosh Hashanah, a former congregant approached Rabbi Buchdahl [currently the Senior Rabbi of Central Synagogue] and disclosed that Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, Central’s Senior Rabbi from 1972 to 1985, initiated an inappropriate relationship with her while she was a young religious school teacher and congregant at Central...

The letter continued:

In addition to the initial complaint, a second woman, whose family were members of Central, shared that Rabbi Zimmerman began an inappropriate relationship with her that included sexual contact while she was an underage teenager and that lasted many years. A third woman shared that Rabbi Zimmerman engaged in an inappropriate sexual relationship over several years that began while she was a student at Hebrew Union College (HUC) . . . and while Rabbi Zimmerman was both a teacher at HUC and Central's Senior Rabbi.

We learned that in 2000, the second and third individuals both spoke to the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the Reform rabbinic leadership organization, in the context of an ethics charge brought to the CCAR by one of the women. At that point, Rabbi Zimmerman was President of HUC. Following its investigation, the CCAR suspended Rabbi Zimmerman from serving a Reform congregation for no fewer than two years (which we believe ultimately ran until late 2004) and he resigned from his position at HUC. Central Synagogue was never informed by the CCAR of the events that led to Rabbi Zimmerman's suspension.

After a thorough and independent investigation, which included an interview with Rabbi Zimmerman, our legal team found the women and their respective stories to be credible...In his meeting with Morgan Lewis, Rabbi Zimmerman confirmed certain key facts...and expressed remorse for the harm he caused.

An important note: while Shelly may have expressed remorse to the lawyers, my understanding is that he has yet to express remorse directly to the women he actually assaulted.

Again, I was devastated. And then numb. And then resigned.

I'm tempted to ask how we've gotten to the point where, whenever another man of power is discovered to have abused women under his authority, as sad and angering as it is, it is no longer unbelievable, or even all that surprising, but I already know the answer: the only thing new about this scourge is my awareness of it, not its existence.

So far as I see it, the necessary question cannot be, "when did this start?" or even "why does this happen?" but "how do we stop to it?" And so we turn back once again for another look at Leviticus 21:8.

וְקִדְשֵׁתוֹ--כִּי-אֶת-לְחָם
אֱלֹהֶיךָ, הוּא מְקַרֵּיב; קֹדֶשׁ,
יְהִי-לְךָ--כִּי קָדוֹשׁ, אֲנִי יְהוָה
מְקַדְּשֵׁכֶם.
8 You (that is, "each member of the community of Israel") must treat him (each one of the priests) as holy, since he offers the food of your God; he shall be holy to you, for I the Lord who sanctify you am holy.

What you will not see if you rely here on the English only, is that while the Hebrew for "to you" (as in "the priest shall be holy **to you**") would typically be לְךָ, which is the common form of "to

you” in the 2nd person singular masculine (while Biblical Hebrew grammar employs the masculine to refer either to males specifically or to unspecified people in general, it uses the feminine only when the object is specifically female), here it is different. Here, it is אַלְּ, which, upon first glance appears to be in the 2nd person singular **feminine**. If so, the natural conclusion would have to be that Torah is singling out women and girls – but not men and boys – as the only ones obligated to sanctify the priest, or, in the context of my address tonight, the rabbi, no matter how that rabbi may have behaved or **misbehaved** in the past. Can you imagine a more misogynistically offensive or dangerous policy? At the same time, tragic as it may be, so too would it be within the realm of possibility. After all, since our criminal history of male predation has revealed itself in every **other** aspect of society, why wouldn’t it appear in Torah, too? Of course it does.

Ultimately, however, while such a reading may sound plausible, the fact remains that it relies on a grammatical fallacy, because the truth of the matter is that אַלְּ actually **is** the correct form of the 2nd person masculine singular when written in the infrequently utilized “pausal form,” which is utilized sometimes to emphasize the end of a verse or clause, as it is here (“the priest shall be holy **to you**”).

That said, it cannot be denied that the risk of grammatical confusion is strong. To be honest, I myself mistook the masculine pausal form for the feminine regular form, and didn’t correct myself until after I ruminated over why Torah would single out women and girls as being singularly obligated to sanctify the priest. And so I’m left wondering whether it might be better were we to amend the Hebrew, so as to protect women and girls from such misunderstanding? While I recognize the many dangers inherent to rewriting Torah (even though in this case it would be reassigning the vowels only, which don’t actually exist in the Torah scroll), since the very lives of women and girls are endangered by a misreading, might not *pikuach nefesh*, the sanctity of life, supersede all other considerations? It is indeed a reasonable question.

All the same, no. In my eyes, there is no text more valuable, more holy, or more critical than Torah in its received form. The stories and other writings are hardly without fault, but really, isn’t that the point? After all, why does Torah preserve record of the sins of our heroes? In order to universalize the humanness of our ancestors, which, in turn, grants us permission to be human, too. And why does Torah preserve record of our historical misogyny? In order, I believe, to push us to grapple with this sin every time we read of it, until one day, God willing, we will finally be able to grow beyond it. Unfortunately, that day has not yet come, which is why it would be wrong to alter the text. Even if it were to make a crystal clear distinction between masculine and feminine, regardless of whether or not a sophisticated Hebrew reader would actually mistake the two, excising even the **possibility** of perceived misogyny here, before **actual** misogyny is defeated elsewhere, would be simply to sweep our ongoing scourge of violence of male predation under the rug, which we cannot accept.

In the end, I am sad, I am hurt, I am angry, and I feel cheated by my childhood rabbinic idol. But so too am I **embarrassed** for having trusted Shelly, for having minimized his misdeeds, and for having considered it an honor that he would give me half an hour of his precious time a few years back.

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But, alas, now that I've had a few days to process, I also can't say I'm all that surprised – even as I truly was shocked at the moment of discovery – because men of power have been abusing women this way from the beginning of time.

So where to from here? Again, from *Parashat Emor*, this time in Chapter 22, verse 32 of Leviticus:

וְלֹא תִחַלְלוּ, אֶת-שֵׁם קֹדֶשׁי, **לב 32** You shall not profane My holy name; that I
וְנִקְדָּשְׁתִּי, בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל : אֲנִי יְהוָה,
מִקְדָּשְׁכֶם. people – I the LORD who sanctifies you.

– *in the midst of the Israelite people* – is critical, because just as public honor to God benefits not only the one offering the honor, but everyone else who witnesses it, too, so too does public **dishonor** harm the entire community that witnesses it. Yes, it was his direct victims first and foremost that Shelly Zimmerman harmed, but in stealing a portion of our collective trust in rabbis, so too did he harm me, and indeed everyone else who now knows of his misdeeds.

Collectively speaking, and individually too, we have it within us to bring about change for the better. By keeping from sinful behavior, by actively **not** profaning God's holy name, as is commanded of the priest this week, we bring ourselves closer to becoming the dominion of priests we are meant to be, thus contributing to our communal pursuit of a more perfect world.

But there's more, because merely **refraining** from profaning God's holy name cannot, in and of itself, be sufficient. We have to do more than just that. And by "we," I'm talking especially to my fellow men and boys. We need to expose the misogyny that lurks among us. We need to make public our disgust and rejection of predation against women and – especially, in the case of Shelly Zimmerman, adult predation against girls, because only by shining light on this issue will we stand even a chance of defeating it.

Dear God, let ours be the generation that finally brings justice to our shattered reality. Let this finally become the age of true equality and respect for every human being. And let us be the ones to make it happen.

May this be God's will.