**Summer Institute On Theology and Disability**

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**Uses of Disability in Liturgy and Ritual: Challenge, Exploration and Possibility**

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**Introduction: Jews are often called and refer to ourselves as the people of the book. Text plays a central role in Jewish religious life, in the synagogue, classroom, house of study (beit midrash) as well as in the home. Disability appears in a multitude of forms and contexts throughout Jewish text and tradition. In this workshop, we are going to be reading several examples of the ways in which disability generally and specific disabilities appear in texts from the Hebrew Bible, the Babylonian Talmud and the Mishnah as a means of exploring together the expansive readings of texts which can emerge when the voices and lived experiences of people with disabilities are brought to bear on the texts themselves. For the rabbis, the act of Torah study is sacred and to this day, study of sacred texts is a holy act in Judaism—it is often referred to as one way of serving God. When we come together to study text, and to ask difficult questions of painful passages, we are engaging in a truly sacred act as we reinterpret, reclaim, and understand these sacred texts and examine how our own lived experiences are or are not reflected in the texts of our tradition. It is this model of engagement that I wish to employ here.**

**We are going to begin by reading aloud several pivotal passages from the Hebrew Bible and will be focusing primarily on the Torah or Five Books of Moses. The Torah is read in its entirety in most congregations annually and is divided into 54 parshiot or portions which are read on Saturday mornings during the synagogue service. All English translations of verses from the Hebrew Bible are taken from the 1917 Jewish Publication Society translation.**

**Source 1: Genesis 1:27**

**27** And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.

כז וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.

Source 2: Exodus 4:10-16

10 And Moses said unto the LORD: 'Oh Lord, I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since Thou hast spoken unto Thy servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.' 11 And the LORD said unto him: 'Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh a man dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? is it not I the LORD? 12 Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt speak.' 13 And he said: 'Oh Lord, send, I pray Thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send.' 14 And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and He said: 'Is there not Aaron thy brother the Levite? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee; and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart. 15 And thou shalt speak unto him, and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. 16 And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and it shall come to pass, that he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him in God's stead.

י וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה, בִּי אֲדֹנָי, לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי גַּם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשִּׁלְשֹׁם, גַּם מֵאָז דַּבֶּרְךָ אֶל-עַבְדֶּךָ: כִּי כְבַד-פֶּה וּכְבַד לָשׁוֹן, אָנֹכִי. יא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו, מִי שָׂם פֶּה לָאָדָם, אוֹ מִי-יָשׂוּם אִלֵּם, אוֹ חֵרֵשׁ אוֹ פִקֵּחַ אוֹ עִוֵּר--הֲלֹא אָנֹכִי, יְהוָה. יב וְעַתָּה, לֵךְ; וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם-פִּיךָ, וְהוֹרֵיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר. יג וַיֹּאמֶר, בִּי אֲדֹנָי; שְׁלַח-נָא, בְּיַד-תִּשְׁלָח. יד וַיִּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בְּמֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אַהֲרֹן אָחִיךָ הַלֵּוִי--יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי-דַבֵּר יְדַבֵּר הוּא; וְגַם הִנֵּה-הוּא יֹצֵא לִקְרָאתֶךָ, וְרָאֲךָ וְשָׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ. טו וְדִבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו, וְשַׂמְתָּ אֶת-הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו; וְאָנֹכִי, אֶהְיֶה עִם-פִּיךָ וְעִם-פִּיהוּ, וְהוֹרֵיתִי אֶתְכֶם, אֵת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּן. טז וְדִבֶּר-הוּא לְךָ, אֶל-הָעָם; וְהָיָה הוּא יִהְיֶה-לְּךָ לְפֶה, וְאַתָּה תִּהְיֶה-לּוֹ לֵאלֹהִים.

Source 3: Exodus 6:10-12

**10** And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: **11** 'Go in, speak unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, that he let the children of Israel go out of his land.' **12** And Moses spoke before the LORD, saying: 'Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?’

י וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר. יא בֹּא דַבֵּר, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם; וִישַׁלַּח אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵאַרְצוֹ. יב וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לֵאמֹר: הֵן בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֹא-שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי, וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמָעֵנִי פַרְעֹה, וַאֲנִי עֲרַל שְׂפָתָיִם. {פ}

Source 4: Leviticus 19:14

14 Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling-block before the blind, but thou shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.

יד לֹא-תְקַלֵּל חֵרֵשׁ--וְלִפְנֵי עִוֵּר, לֹא תִתֵּן מִכְשֹׁל; וְיָרֵאתָ מֵּאֱלֹהֶיךָ, אֲנִי יְהוָה.

Source 5: Leviticus 21:17-23

17 Speak unto Aaron, saying: Whosoever he be of thy seed throughout their generations that hath a blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God. 18 For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath any thing maimed, or anything too long, 19 or a man that is broken-footed, or broken-handed, 20 or crook-backed, or a dwarf, or that hath his eye overspread, or is scabbed, or scurvy, or hath his stones crushed; 21 no man of the seed of Aaron the priest, that hath a blemish, shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire; he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God. 22 He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy. 23 Only he shall not go in unto the veil, nor come nigh unto the altar, because he hath a blemish; that he profane not My holy places; for I am the LORD who sanctify them.

יז דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, לֵאמֹר: אִישׁ מִזַּרְעֲךָ לְדֹרֹתָם, אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בוֹ מוּם--לֹא יִקְרַב, לְהַקְרִיב לֶחֶם אֱלֹהָיו. יח כִּי כָל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ מוּם, לֹא יִקְרָב: אִישׁ עִוֵּר אוֹ פִסֵּחַ, אוֹ חָרֻם אוֹ שָׂרוּעַ. יט אוֹ אִישׁ, אֲשֶׁר-יִהְיֶה בוֹ שֶׁבֶר רָגֶל, אוֹ, שֶׁבֶר יָד. כ אוֹ-גִבֵּן אוֹ-דַק, אוֹ תְּבַלֻּל בְּעֵינוֹ, אוֹ גָרָב אוֹ יַלֶּפֶת, אוֹ מְרוֹחַ אָשֶׁךְ. כא כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ מוּם, מִזֶּרַע אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן--לֹא יִגַּשׁ, לְהַקְרִיב אֶת-אִשֵּׁי יְהוָה: מוּם בּוֹ--אֵת לֶחֶם אֱלֹהָיו, לֹא יִגַּשׁ לְהַקְרִיב. כב לֶחֶם אֱלֹהָיו, מִקָּדְשֵׁי הַקֳּדָשִׁים, וּמִן-הַקֳּדָשִׁים, יֹאכֵל. כג אַךְ אֶל-הַפָּרֹכֶת לֹא יָבֹא, וְאֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא יִגַּשׁ--כִּי-מוּם בּוֹ; וְלֹא יְחַלֵּל אֶת-מִקְדָּשַׁי, כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשָׁם.

The next few sources are from the Babylonian Talmud and are examples of ways in which the rabbis whose voices and perspectives are recorded in the Talmud thought about and experienced disability. The English follows the Hebrew for these texts. I wish to thank Emily Fishman, Jessica Belasco, Matan Koch, Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson, Rabbi Aviva Richman, and Noam Sienna for the English translations.

Source 6: Babylonian Talmud, Megilah 24b

דתניא אייר יוסי כל ימי הייתי מצטער על מקרא זה (דברים כח) והיית ממשש בצהרים כאשר ימשש העור באפלה- וכי מה אכפת ליה לעור בין אפילה לאורה? עד שבא מעשה לידי: פעם אחת הייתי מהלך באישון לילה ואפלה וראיתי סומא שהיה מהלך בדרך ואבוקה בידו. אמרתי לו בני אבוקה זו למה לך? אמר לי כל זמן שאבוקה בידי בני אדם רואין אותי ומצילין אותי מן הפחתין ומן הקוצין ומן הברקנין

Rabbi Yose said: I was long perplexed by this verse, ‘and you shall grope at noonday as the blind gropes in darkness’. What difference does it make to blind man whether it is dark or light? Until the following incident occurred: I was once walking on a very dark night when I saw a blind man walking in the road with a torch in his hand. I said to him, my son, why do you carry this torch? He replied: as long as I have this torch in my hand, people see me and save me from the holes and thorns and briars.

Source 7: Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 25a

לוי גזר תעניתא ולא אתא מיטרא. אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם עלית וישבת במרום ואין אתה מרחם על בניך! אתא מיטרא ואיטלע. אמר רבי אלעזר לעולם אל יטיח אדם דברים כלפי מעלה שהרי אדם גדול הטיח דברים

[Rabbi] Levi decreed a fast [to plead for rain during drought] but rain did not fall. He said before God, “Master of the World, You have risen and sat in heaven, but you do not have mercy on your children!” Rain fell, but he became lame. R. Elazar said: “One should never cast accusations against heaven, for a great man cast accusations against heaven, and became lame; and who was it? Levi.””

1. Source 8: Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 3a

והא הנהו תרי אילמי דהוו בשבבותיה דרבי בני ברתיה דרבי יוחנן בן גודגדא ואמרי לה בני אחתיה דרבי יוחנן- דכל אימת דהוה עייל רבי לבי מדרשא הוו עיילי ויתבי קמייהו ומניידי ברישייהו ומרחשין שפוותייהו. ובעי רבי רחמי עלייהו ואיתסו ואשתכח דהוו גמירי הלכתא וספרא וספרי וכולה תלמודא

Consider the case of these two mutes who were in the neighborhood of Rabbi [Yehuda haNasi]: they were the sons of Rabbi Yohanan ben Gudgada’s daughter (some say they were the sons of Rabbi Yohanan’s sister). Whenever Rabbi would enter the study hall, they would enter and sit down before him, and they would nod their heads and move their lips. Rabbi [Yehuda] prayed for mercy on their behalf, and they were healed — and it was found that they were well versed in halakhah, Sifra and Sifrei [collections of midrash], and the entire Oral Torah.

Source 9: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eiruvin 54b

רבי פרידא הוה ליה ההוא תלמידא דהוה תני ליה ארבע מאה זימני וגמר. יומא חד בעיוה למלתא דמצוה. תנא ליה ולא גמר. אייל האידנא מאי שנא? אייל מדההיא שעתא דאייל למר איכא מילתא דמצוה אסחאי לדעתאי וכל שעתא אמינא השתא קאי מר השתא קאי מר. אייל הב דעתיך ואתני ליך. הדר תנא ליה ד' מאה זימני

Rabbi Preida had a student to whom he had to repeat each lesson four hundred times before he understood it. One day R. Preida was required to leave and attend a certain matter involving a mitzvah. Before leaving, he taught the student as usual four hundred times but he still did not grasp the concept. R. Preida asked him, “Why is today different?” He answered him, “From the very moment that they told my master that there is a mitzvah matter that he must attend to, my attention was diverted, because every moment I thought that now the master will get up and leave, now the master will get up and leave.” R. Preida said to him “Do not worry, and I will teach you.” He taught him another four hundred times.

Source 10: Megillah 24b

כהן שיש בידיו מומין לא ישא את כפיו. ר' יהודה אומר אף מי שהיו ידיו צבועות סטיס לא ישא את כפיו. והא ההוא דהוה בשיבבותיה דרב הונא והוה פריס ידיה! ההוא דש בעירו הוה. תניא נמי הכי זבלגן לא ישא את כפיו ואם היה

דש בעירו מותר. אייר יוחנן סומא באחת מעיניו לא ישא את כפיו. והא ההוא דהוה בשיבבותיה דרבי יוחנן דהוה פריס ידיה! ההוא דש בעירו הוה. תניא נמי הכי סומא באחת מעיניו לא ישא את כפיו ואם היה דש בעירו מותר: ר״י אומר מ .שהיו ידיו צבועות לא ישא את כפיו

Mishna: A priest who has blemishes on his hands may not perform the priestly blessing.

Gemara: Rav Huna said: “A [kohen] with watery eyes may not perform the priestly blessing.” Yet there was a one like that in Rav Huna’s neighbourhood who did! That man was well-known in his community. Rabbi Yohanan said: “A [kohen] who is blind in one of his eyes may not perform the priestly blessing.” Yet there was one like that in Rabbi Yohanan’s neighborhood who did! That man was well-known in his community.

Mishna: Rabbi Yehudah says, even one whose hands are stained with dye may not perform the priestly blessing because the people will stare at him.

Gemara: It is taught: if most people in that city work in such a field, it is permitted.

Source 11: Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 58b

אמר ריב״ל הרואה את הבהקנים אומר ברוך משנה הבריות מיתיבי ראה את הכושי ואת הגיחור ואת הלווקן ואת הקפח ואת הננס ואת הדרניקוס אומר ברוך משנה את הבריות את הקטע ואת הסומא ואת פתויי הראש ואת החגר ואת המוכה שחין ואת הבהקנים אומר ברוך דיין אמת ל״ק הא ממעי אמו הא בתר דאיתיליד דיקא נמי דקתני דומיא דקטע שמע מינה ת״ר הרואה פיל קוף וקפוף אומר ברוך משנה את הבריות

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said, If one sees spotted people, he says, "Blessed are You, who diversifies the creatures." This statement was challenged from the following baraita: If one saw a person with unusually black skin, a person with unusually red skin, a person with unusually white skin, a person who is obese, a dwarf, or a person with warts, he says, "Blessed are You, who diversifies the creatures." If one saw a person whose hands are amputated, a blind person, a person whose hair is matted [or: a person with a disproportionately wide head], a person whose leg is amputated, a person afflicted with boils, or people who are spotted, he says, "Blessed are You, the true judge."[[1]](#footnote-1) There is no contradiction. R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s ruling refers to a condition that was present since the person emerged from his mother’s womb, whereas the baraita refers to a condition that developed after he was born. This explanation is also borne out by a careful reading of the baraita, which mentions spotted people in the same category as an amputee, whose condition developed after birth. One who sees an elephant, a monkey, or owl should say, "Blessed is the One who diversifies the creatures.”

Important note about this source: Jewish tradition teaches that a person should say 100 blessings a day. There are blessings for nearly every occasion, including a blessing called “Meshoneh habriot”—who makes the creatures different which is supposed to be said upon seeing someone with an apparent disability. Many Jewish disability activists, including myself, have problematized this blessing, while others look to it as an affirmative blessing which should be reclaimed.

Source 12: Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5: לפיכך נברא אדם יחידי ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחת [מישראל] מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא ומפני שלום הבריות שלא יאמר אדם לחבירו אבא גדול מאביך ושלא יהו מינין אומרים הרבה רשויות בשמים ולהגיד גדולתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא שאדם טובע כמה מטבעות בחותם אחד וכולן דומין זה לזה ומלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא טבע כל אדם בחותמו של אדם הראשון ואין אחד מהן דומה לחבירו לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר בשבילי נברא העולם ושמא תאמרו מה לנו ולצרה הזאת והלא כבר נאמר (ויקרא ה) והוא עד או ראה או ידע אם לא יגיד וגומר ושמא תאמרו מה לנו לחוב בדמו של זה והלא כבר נאמר (משלי יא) באבוד רשעים רנה:

**Translation:**

Therefore, humans were created singly, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul [of Israel], Scripture accounts it as if he had destroyed a full world; and whoever saves one soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as if she had saved a full world. And for the sake of peace among people, that one should not say to his or her fellow, "My parent is greater than yours;" and that heretics should not say, "There are many powers in Heaven." Again, to declare the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be God, for one stamps out many coins with one die, and they are all alike, but the King, the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be God, stamped each person with the seal of Adam, and not one of them is like his or her fellow. Therefore each and every one is obliged to say, "For my sake the world was created." And lest you say, "What do we need with this trouble?" Has it not already been said, "He being a witness, whether he has seen or known, if he does not utter it..." (Leviticus 5:1). And should you say, "What need is there for us to be responsible for the blood of this one?" Surely it is said, "And when the wicked perish, there is joy" (Proverbs 11:10). [Moreshet translation. Edited for gender neutrality.

Taken from: <http://www.on1foot.org/print/237>

We are going to conclude by looking at what was very likely the source text for some of the blessings found in the daily morning prayer service which talk about disability either implicitly or explicitly and will discuss how some rabbis and scholars with disabilities are reclaiming them.

Source 13: Psalm 146:7-8

ז עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט, לָעֲשׁוּקִים--נֹתֵן לֶחֶם, לָרְעֵבִים; יְהוָה, מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים.

ח יְהוָה, פֹּקֵחַ עִוְרִים--יְהוָה, זֹקֵף כְּפוּפִים; יְהוָה, אֹהֵב צַדִּיקִים.

**7** Who executeth justice for the oppressed; who giveth bread to the hungry. The LORD looseth the prisoners;  
**8** The LORD openeth the eyes of the blind; the LORD raiseth up them that are bowed down; the LORD loveth the righteous;

1. On hearing bad tidings [note: especially on hearing of a death], one should say, "Blessed is the true judge." (Mishna Berakhot 9:2) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)