



## The Observant Life Book Club

# INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

(Source: “Individuals with Disabilities”, Edward M. Friedman, *The Observant Life*, Martin S. Cohen, Senior Editor, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2012, pp. 831-855)

### *The Impact of Disability on the Halakhab of Prayer*

#### **TEXT:**

The question, really, is whether the biblical laws excluding *ba-alei mum* [persons with physical disfigurements] from serving as priests should be translated into strictures concerning the contemporary role of prayer leaders. A number of authorities including Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1565-1630)...believe that a *ba-al mum*, such as a person without arms or one who is unable to walk, would actually be preferable as a prayer leader to one without an obvious physical disability, since God “uses broken vessels.” Rabbi Horowitz is referring to the verses in Psalms (34:19 and 51:19) that speak of God being close to the broken-hearted and being especially moved by people who approach worship with broken hearts—that is to say, imbued with a sense of their own inadequacy and wholly divested of arrogance or unearned pride. Referring to people with disabilities as “broken vessels” will strike moderns as odd, perhaps even offensive; but it is still interesting to note how many of our early biblical figures had disabilities of one kind or another, and how these disabilities, on the whole, did not disqualify them in any way from serving as leaders of the people. Moses’s speech impediment comes to mind. And some would surely add Jacob’s limp and Isaac’s blindness to the list.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

1. Had you considered the possibility before that Tradition indicates someone with a physical disability might be disqualified from leading prayer? How do we build a bridge between antiquity’s understanding of disability and our own modern understanding?
2. Has an illness or disability brought you or someone you know to a more spiritual place? What do you think of Rabbi Horowitz’s idea that someone with a disability might actually be a better representative of the community in prayer? Is it praiseworthy or condescending?
3. What does this passage say about the challenge for moderns to reinterpret Biblical law? Is it always possible to arrive at a reinterpretation that can resonate for modern Jews? Are there other areas of the tradition that also pose these challenges?