Leviticus 21:

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 יהוה’s offering by fire; having a defect, he shall not be qualified to offer the food of his God. (22) He may eat of the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy; (23) but he shall not enter behind the curtain or come near the altar, for he has a defect. He shall not profane these places sacred to Me, for I יהוה have sanctified them. (24) Thus Moses spoke to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites.

Notice – some of these would legitimate exclude a person from being capable of performing the sacrifices. But some would not.

And as Susan Hornstein notes:

The Torah goes on to enumerate the defects that disqualify the Kohen. Each blemish is external: limbs that were uneven in length, skin conditions, even weird eyebrows. Unlike the blemishes that make an animal non-Kosher, these are not life-threatening conditions. A Kohen could have a heart defect, asthma, or even a fever, as long as he had no external differences. How unusual this must have been! In a pre-modern society, without prenatal care or modern medicines, surely nearly everyone had something! Moreover, it is exactly these types of characteristics that distinguish us from one another. The angle of the eyes, the distinctive gait, these are the ways we recognize each other. The Kohen who was qualified to bring sacrifices didn’t even look like himself. He wasn’t there for us to look at and see ourselves in him. He looked like no one in particular, like a template of a human being, like an angel.

In other words, an abstraction of a human being. The Cohen’s appearance is one of the things that sets apart the experience of bringing a sacrifice from regular life and indicates the realm of the sacred.

No one in history would see themselves in the Cohen. And it’s unclear that the Cohanim would even recognize some of these blemishes, whether in themselves or in each other.

Kris’s point about lack of mirrors.

In fact, Chizkuni: “Even if he was born with a blemish from his mother's womb.” – implying that we might think that anyone in their normal state is considered “unblemished.”

Fast forward to after the destruction, the role of the Cohen has changed:

[Megillah 24b:12-14](/Megillah.24b.12-14)

**Rav Huna said:** A priest **whose eyes** constantly **run** **may not lift his hands** to recite the Priestly Benediction. The Gemara asks: **Wasn’t there a certain** priest with this condition **in the neighborhood of Rav Huna, and he would spread his hands** and recite the Priestly Benediction? The Gemara answers: **That** priest **was a familiar** figure **in his town.** Since the other residents were accustomed to seeing him, he would not draw their attention during the Priestly Benediction. **This is also taught** in a *baraita*: **One whose eyes run should not lift his hands** to recite the Priestly Benediction, **but if he is a familiar** figure **in his town, he is permitted** to do so. **Rabbi Yoḥanan said: One who is blind in one eye may not lift his hands** to recite the Priestly Benediction **Wasn’t there a certain** priest who was blind in one eye **in the neighborhood of Rabbi Yoḥanan, and he would lift his hands** and recite the Priestly Benediction?

The Gemara answers: **That** priest **was a familiar** figure **in his town**. **This is also taught** in a *baraita*: **One who is blind in one eye may not lift his hands** and recite the Priestly Benediction, **but if he is a familiar** figure **in his town, he is permitted**. **Rabbi Yehuda said: One whose hands are colored should not lift his hands**. It was **taught** in a *baraita*: **If most of the townspeople are engaged in this occupation,** dyeing, **he is permitted** to recite the Priestly Benediction, as the congregation will not pay attention to his stained hands.

In this world, Cohanim work – potentially the same nasty and menial occupations, like dying as everyone else. A Cohen is not an anonymous figure, to be encountered only once a year on pilgrimage.

The Cohen is still a special caste, but a human of a special caste. And it is the ability of the community to see the Cohen’s humanness, to recognize him as part of their community - that determines whether they are able to receive a blessing from him.

Perfection works in the realm of abstraction, but in the realm of community, there will always be blemishes.

Our task is to be and to continuing becoming the kind of community where people can be come “dash b’iro” on their own terms – and where we don’t let superficial blemishes get in the way of our ability to receive blessings from everyone.