

BEAUTY

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | March 19, 2019

This essay is reprinted from the book, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values” published by Urim, or the upcoming books, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to Man” or “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d” to be published in the future. This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).

Physical beauty, both in man and in women, has always been admired and valued throughout the ages. In the culture of ancient Greece, it was the highest ideal. But today, perhaps more than ever before, in a mass media age, society values physical beauty in everyday life as never before. Successful models have turned into superstars, emulated by millions. The cosmetics industry is a multi-billion dollar business, as people actively try to look and remain physically attractive, at all ages and in all walks of life. It has been proved that an attractive person will almost always get a job over a less attractive person with identical skills and qualifications. How does Judaism feel about physical beauty? Are spiritual ideals all that matter or is physical attractiveness a desirable trait in Judaism? Or, is physical beauty possibly a trait to be avoided completely in Judaism?

BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE, CITIES AND ANIMALS

In many different areas of life, Judaism recognizes and seems to admire physical beauty. The Talmud¹ describes four famous women as exceedingly beautiful. Among them were Sara, Abraham's wife and Queen Esther, showing that Judaism recognizes physical beauty as an admirable trait, something to be desired.

Judaism recognizes physical beauty not only in people but also in places. Of the ten portions of physical beauty given to the world, Jerusalem received nine of those portions.² Therefore, we can see that Judaism describes Jerusalem not only as a holy city, but also as a beautiful city, another aspect of the city to be admired. The Torah also commanded specific laws to insure the physical beauty of any city. It was forbidden to plant or graze in the area immediately around the city limits.³ Rashi comments⁴ that the purpose of this law was to insure the physical beauty of each city. Therefore, this concept of preserving the physical beauty of a city is not merely a positive feature to be admired, but a Biblical commandment, a necessary component in each city's development.

Even the physical beauty of non-Jewish people is admired in Judaism. When Rabban Gamliel saw a beautiful woman who was an idol worshipper, his reaction was to comment how beautiful she was and how beautiful is G-d's creation. Another sage commented that one should make a blessing when seeing such beauty.⁵ Thus, all kinds of beauty, not only those that related to Jewish people or Jewish cities are to be admired.

From Rabban Gamliel's comment, we can begin to see the reasoning behind Judaism's admiration for physical beauty. The admiration is not necessary for the person himself or herself. Rather, that person's physical beauty is a reflection upon the Creator of that beauty, G-d Almighty. Just as a beautiful painting

¹ Megillah 15a

² Esther Rabbah 1:16

³ Numbers 35:2

⁴ Rashi commentary, Numbers 35:2

⁵ Avodah Zarah 20a

reflects positively upon the artist and a compliment about the painting also compliments the artist, so, too, admiring a physically beautiful person honors G-d, the Creator of that person.

In the same sense, even a physically beautiful animal is admired in Judaism. In a similar fashion to a beautiful person, the Talmud says that one should make a blessing upon seeing a physically beautiful animal⁶ because the animal, as well, is G-d's creation and its beauty reflects positively upon G-d. Two of the three examples of beautiful animals given by the Talmudic passage may be difficult for people from western culture to relate to at first. Normally, we do not think of exceedingly beautiful donkeys or camels. Perhaps that is because we are not from the Middle Eastern culture where we can readily tell the difference between a beautiful or ugly camel. But we can relate to the third example, the beautiful horse, more easily. Most western people have seen and admired an exceedingly beautiful horse.

Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Fathers,⁷ shows us that not only is physical beauty in people to be admired if it happens to be noticed, but it is a goal to aspire to. It is one of the qualities that a sage should try to possess. In fact, it is the very first quality of a sage that is mentioned.

HOW THEN CAN IT SAY THAT "BEAUTY IS WORTHLESS?"

If all these sources portray a true picture of the Jewish view of physical beauty, then how is it that the verse many traditional Jews sing each Friday night around the Shabbat table⁸ declares that beauty is vain or worthless? Isn't this a contradiction to all that was previously mentioned and sources cited? How is this verse, then, supposed to be understood?

Perhaps an approach to help resolve this apparent contradiction can be learned from a story about Rabbi Akiva.⁹ When Rabbi Akiva saw the beautiful wife of the wicked Turnus Rufus, one of his reactions was that he cried. The reason he cried was that he realized that such unbelievable beauty could not be preserved and would one day decay and be gone. Therefore, as great as physical beauty might be, it is always transitory and will ultimately disappear. That may explain why King Solomon wrote that beauty is worthless – it cannot endure and one day it will be gone. Unlike other Jewish values which are more permanent, beauty by its very nature must be fleeting. This may be one reason why the Mishna¹⁰ says that one who stops his Torah learning, an eternal commandment, to admire a beautiful tree it is as if he is worthy to die. The reason this admiration is so abhorred is that by stopping Torah learning, that person is declaring, through this action, that the transient quality of beauty of the tree, which will disappear, supersedes the permanent quality of Torah, whose effect is lasting. In a similar vein, a relationship between husband and wife that is based solely on physical beauty and physical attractiveness will ultimately fall apart because this attraction must necessarily disappear along with the beauty.¹¹

The relationship of Judaism to physical beauty can further be illuminated by the Mishna¹² which exhorts the Jew not to look at the jug but at the contents (don't judge a book by its cover). There are some

⁶ Jerusalem Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a

⁷ Avot 6:8

⁸ Proverbs 31:30

⁹ Avodah Zara 20a

¹⁰ Avot 3:7

¹¹ Avot 5:16

¹² Avot 4:20

new jugs (which would ostensibly contain new, cheaper grade wine) that really contain old wine (better quality) and some old jugs (that should have old wine) that have nothing in them at all. Therefore, there can be a person who is a new jug (not very physically beautiful) who has fine wine inside, i.e. a great personality, Torah learning and a good heart. Similarly, there can be a person who is an old jug, i.e. a beautiful person without anything inside, i.e. no content or learning as a human being. Thus, physical beauty alone is not the most important thing in life. What is inside is far more important, not only because it is more permanent, but also because it is more valuable in the hierarchy of Jewish values.

The implication of this Mishna is also clear: if a person is an old jug and also contains old wine, it is better than either of the two previously combinations discussed. Thus, if a person does possess physical beauty on the outside and also possesses content and values on the inside, that is a superior combination to having only one of the two. So, while external beauty is less important than internal beauty, having both is the highest ideal. This idea was once demonstrated in that verse from Proverbs using a mathematical model. When it says that "beauty is worthless,"¹³ the word "worthless" in mathematical terms is zero. So, too, does the verse mean that beauty by itself has a value of zero. But if that same zero is placed after any number, it multiplies the value of that number by ten. So, too, if there is already inner content (a positive number), then physical beauty can enhance that person's worth and multiply the person's worth. All the previously cited examples of people in the Talmud described as beautiful already had content and meaning besides their beauty. Thus, physical beauty only enhanced the deep content of Sara and Esther and the holiness already present within them.

In a symbolic sense, the Talmud speaks about the qualities of the two sons of Noah, Shem and Yefet. Yefet (from the Hebrew word *Yafe*, meaning beauty) represents beauty in the world and was the ancestor of the Greek culture who admired beauty as the ultimate value. Shem, on the other hand, represents the spiritual side of man, and is the ancestor of Abraham and the Jewish people (Semites). In explaining Noah's blessing to his children,¹⁴ the Talmud¹⁵ says that the beauty of Yefet will reside in the tent (house of learning) of Shem. This implies that while physical beauty is a positive force in Judaism, it will only remain within the tent of Shem, as a subset of secondary importance to the totality of Judaism.

IS BEAUTY A SUBJECTIVE OR OBJECTIVE QUALITY?

The debate has probably raged for centuries on whether physical beauty can be objectively measured or does it differ in the taste from person to person. On the one hand, certain people may have universal appeal and are admired by all as beautiful or handsome. But, on the other hand, some people may be perceived as beautiful or handsome by some and not attractive by others. What does Judaism believe?

There is a mitzvah to make the bride happy by dancing before her at a wedding. But there is a Talmudic debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai whether you should say that the bride is beautiful (Beit Hillel) or whether you say the bride is "as she is" (Beit Shamai).¹⁶ Beit Shamai will not say the bride is beautiful because not every bride has physical beauty (and saying it for some who are beautiful and not others will cause embarrassment). In fact, Beit Shamai asks Beit Hillel: How can you lie and say that the bride is beautiful if she is lame, for example? Isn't it a violation of the Torah commandment to keep far away

¹³ Proverbs 31:30

¹⁴ Genesis 9:27

¹⁵ Megillah 9b

¹⁶ Ketuvot 16b

from a lie?¹⁷ Beit Hillel answers with an analogy about a special item, such as a dress, purchased in the market place (that cannot be returned). If a person spends a lot of time and a lot of money purchasing an item and then asks you what you think of the item, what will you answer? Beit Shamai admitted that they would say it was beautiful, implying that that this answer was given so as not to insult the person and because to him the item is indeed special. Beit Hillel said the same thing is true with any bride. To the groom, she must be beautiful, even if lame.

From this discussion, we can deduce that Beit Shamai measured beauty in objective terms, and if the bride is not objectively beautiful, it would be a lie to say that she is. Beit Hillel, on the other hand, believed that beauty is indeed objective, "in the eyes of the beholder" and thus, to every groom she is indeed beautiful. Saying that she is beautiful is not a lie. The Shulchan Aruch¹⁸ codifies according to Beit Hillel, implying that beauty in Judaism is indeed a subjective quality.

It is interesting to note that the most objectively beautiful things in the world are those things made by G-d. Man-made beauty is much more subjective than G-d made beauty. So, for example, almost all people will admire a sunset or a scene in nature as objectively beautiful. The same scene depicted in a painting will cause great debate if it is indeed beautiful or not. Man-made creations that do not try to imitate nature will cause even greater diversity of opinion as to their beauty. Sculptures, drawings or other original works of art will almost never receive universal recognition of their beauty.

COSMETIC SURGERY

If the underlying philosophical reason to admire physical beauty in Judaism is because a beautiful object is created by G-d, then it follows that plastic or cosmetic surgery which attempts to improve what G-d has created would not be sanctioned. If anything, this type of surgery is symbolically declaring that G-d did an inadequate job which has to be changed by man. Thus, most authorities¹⁹ do not permit plastic surgery merely to enhance beauty. There is also the element of some danger in any operation which causes an unnecessary wound, but the philosophical underpinnings of this ruling is the abhorrence to change what G-d has created for a person. Of course, it also follows that if the surgery is for reconstructive purposes, to return a person to the original status G-d created (and damaged because of injury, for example), it is certainly permitted. There are also those authorities who permit cosmetic surgery when a person is born with a particular feature which may cause undue psychological pain and suffering.

FIRST-TIME BEAUTY

In his ruling on beauty²⁰ the Shulchan Aruch indeed rules according to the Talmudic passages mentioned above, that a person should make a blessing on every type of physical beauty encountered, including trees, animals and people. He adds, however, that this blessing should only be made the first time a person sees the beautiful object. What is the reasoning behind this unusual caveat? The Shulchan Aruch apparently understood human nature and human reaction. Nothing is ever again as beautiful to a person as the first time it is seen. After that, one begins to notice the flaws and it will never be quite as striking. Therefore, the blessing is made when the beauty is most noticeable and most striking. Concerning the physical beauty a human being, as well, the impact of beauty is also lessened after the first time for similar

¹⁷ Exodus 23:7

¹⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Even Ha'ezer 65:1

¹⁹ For example, Tzitz Eliezer, Vol. 11, 41:29

²⁰ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 225:10

reasons. But another phenomenon also occurs. Generally, the first time a person relates to a someone beautiful, the relationship begins on a level of physical beauty alone. After that, as the effect of beauty diminishes, people begin to relate to this individual as a person, not merely as a beautiful object. One begins to see beyond the physical to what is inside the person, a phenomenon that is very natural and encouraged in Judaism for reasons discussed above.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is "to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way." Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and three grandchildren.