

The Halo Effect – Parashat Vayeshev

If you find yourself broken down on the side of the road, it doesn't hurt to be beautiful! It also doesn't hurt to be beautiful if you're taking a class in school, applying for a job, or serving in the army. In fact, a study of soldiers conducted in 1920 by the psychologist Edward Thorndike was initially responsible for demonstrating what has come to be known as "the halo effect," a cognitive bias by which humans tend to see people who are physically attractive as also being smarter, kinder, more successful, better at parenting, and a whole myriad of other good things. In his pioneering experiment, Thorndike asked commanding officers to rate their subordinates on such metrics as intelligence, leadership, and character along with physique, noting a correlation between otherwise unrelated traits with service members who were taller and more attractive also seen as being smarter and better soldiers.

Subsequent studies have found that ratings of physical attractiveness are reasonably good predictors of success in US Congressional races, that subjects are more lenient in sentencing attractive individuals than unattractive ones for the very same crimes, and that attractiveness leads to success in being hired even for positions in which physical attributes should be irrelevant. "What is beautiful is good," write authors Dion, Berscheid, and Walster in their 1972 paper explaining how individuals tend to conflate aesthetic and moral virtue. Perhaps the world's very first example of this strange phenomenon is none other than our forefather Joseph, protagonist of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayeshev*.

There are a lot of different words by which we might describe young Joseph, the coat-clad dreamer and father's favorite who inspires ire amongst his brothers by sharing with them visions in which they are bowing down to him in a posture of submission. While some see Joseph as haughty and arrogant, lording future success over his siblings with no regard to their potential feelings of jealousy, others take a more charitable view towards the boy viewing him simply as immature and perhaps tone-deaf, so

excited by the prophecies received that he can't help but share them with others, not recognizing the hurt they may cause. Joseph is clever, the one who ultimately devises a way to determine whether his brothers have truly changed years later in Egypt when he pretends to take Benjamin captive. He is scrappy, continuously rising to positions of power despite difficult circumstances. He is magnanimous, able to forgive his brothers the terrible wrongs committed against him in their youth and ultimately embracing true reconciliation and repair.

Joseph, as it turns out, is also *yefeh toar vifeh mareh* "well built and handsome," a description offered about no other male character in all of Scripture although the exact same phrase is used in conjunction with Joseph's mother, Rachel, perhaps evidence of some kind of genetic predisposition towards beauty. Not only is it unusual for the Bible to employ this language in depicting a man, but one might wonder why the Torah – usually laconic and sparing of words – would waste time on such a detail at all, particularly since Jewish tradition tends to emphasize inner virtues over external physical appearance. Bereshit Rabbah, a collection of midrashim (rabbinic stories) on the Book of Genesis, sees Joseph's beauty as emblematic of his becoming corrupted by wealth and power once in Potiphar's house writing: "When Joseph found himself so comfortably suited [in Potiphar's mansion], he began to eat well and drink well, to frizz his hair, and to say: 'Blessed be God who is everywhere, who helped me to forget my father's house.' Then the Holy One said to Joseph: 'Your father is mourning for you in sackcloth and ashes, and you eat and drink...and frizz your hair – you pampered brat!" The midrash raises what for many of us is a most difficult question about Joseph's behavior, wondering why he did not try to contact his father once he arrived safely in Egypt with all the resources of Potiphar's household at hand. It answers this curiosity in the most condemnatory of ways, imagining that Joseph fell prey to trappings of money and status and selfishly forgot his family back home in Canaan.

One Chasidic commentator (Fun di Chasidische Ostros) takes a far kinder view towards Joseph's behavior when he imagines that in Potiphar's house Joseph initially tried to teach his Egyptian friends the way of God but they would not listen to him, dressed as he was as a foreigner characterized by foreign ways. So he attempted to better integrate into high society, adopting the clothing and manners of his hosts in order to ultimately win them over and introduce them to the Jewish God. Unfortunately, his plan worked a bit too well and ultimately incited the passions of Potiphar's wife who attempted to seduce him. At this point, Joseph left "his garment and fled" – he not only renounced his coat into Mrs. Potiphar's hands but also abandoned this strategy of covering up his true identity (Genesis 39:15).

Finally, the 20th century commentator Nechama Leibowitz sees a different connection between Joseph's good looks and his seduction by Potiphar's wife, explaining that physical descriptions most typically accompany a character when he or she is first introduced in Torah but here Scripture postpones telling of Joseph's beauty in order to explain the reason for Mrs. Potiphar's infatuation. Joseph is so handsome that he becomes irresistible to the woman; apart from any advances that might have been made on Joseph's part, she is simply overtaken by his good looks. While this explanation is problematic today, at a time when we well understand that what a person looks like or wears is never a justification for harassment and abuse, Leibowitz' understanding is perhaps meant to exonerate young Joseph. We should not understand that he did something in particular to invite such attention from his master's wife. His good looks simply made him a most unfortunate target.

In addition to these explanations, I can't help but wonder if Joseph's beauty is almost a halo effect in reverse – the boy lives such a charmed life in many ways, he's so successful and sought after and wise and beloved that of course he must also be beautiful. It is worth nothing that King David, too, is described in aesthetically pleasing terms in the Book of Samuel when he's said to be "ruddy cheeked,

bright-eyed, and nice to look at” (I Samuel 16:12) although the first two descriptions, at least, seem at least moderately relevant when it comes to selecting someone who will be involved in warfare. David’s son, Absalom, too is known for being superlatively attractive as it says, “No one in Israel was so admired for his beauty as Absalom, from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head he was without blemish” (II Samuel 14:25). Sarah, Rebekah, Queen Esther, and even minor characters like Job’s daughters are described for their beauty throughout the Bible. For a tradition that claims in the Book of Proverbs “*sheker hachen v’hevel hayofi*, grace is deceitful and beauty illusory,” we certainly seem pretty obsessed with what our forebearers looked like (Proverbs31:30)!

So what, then, *are* we to make of Joseph’s beauty and why it is mentioned so prominently in our *parasha* this morning? In his book on Genesis, Dr. Leon Kass points out that Joseph’s good looks are not the only aspect of his physical appearance that gets the boy in trouble – in fact, the ornamented, multi-colored tunic given to him by his father, Jacob, also serves to court misfortune, provoking the jealousy of Joseph’s siblings. The same coat that belies his father’s favoritism also becomes the one dipped in blood when the brothers deceive their father and claim that Joseph has been devoured by a wild beast. Some commentators see this as an example of *middah k’neged middah* – measure for measure punishment – with the same tunic causing the chain of events that eventually leads to its bloody threads being returned to Jacob in sorrow.

In our *parasha*, too, distinctive clothing – this time the cloak left in Mrs. Potiphar’s hand – gets Joseph into trouble where once again he is stripped of the garment and thrown into a pit, just as before. In fact, when we look at the story in this way, beauty – whether it be that of an article of clothing or that of the man Joseph himself – seems to have an almost anti-halo effect, bringing with it not success but rather danger, hardship, and sorrow. The story of Joseph is, to some extent, an affirmation of the line

from Proverbs that grace is deceitful and beauty illusory. For all his fine looks and gorgeous clothing, the man constantly finds himself in harrowing circumstances.

And so, too, it is for us! Despite cognitive biases to the contrary, we know that what is ultimately important about a person is not what he wears or what she looks like, not the shape of a person's physique but rather the shape of his or her character. Like Mrs. Potiphar's wife, we easily become seduced by people and things that are beautiful, we chase after what is exciting and attractive rather than what is good, we lust over things we cannot and should not have. Perhaps one of the lessons of the story of Joseph is that appearances are often deceiving – a chain-clad prisoner with faith in God can rise to second in command over all of Egypt while a handsome young man in designer duds can be cast aside and sold into slavery. In fact, just as Joseph tends to find misfortune while elegantly dressed and in good form, he tends to find success at his lowest moments both physically and spiritually. Our wealth and beauty should not determine the circumstances of our lives.

I'm quite certain that our Biblical ancestors didn't know of the halo effect but they were able to rail against it nonetheless. By associating beauty with hardship rather than triumph, they helped to remind us about those things in life that are ultimate and those that are insignificant. They caused us to see that it is not external appearance but rather inner fortitude and values that reign supreme.

“Va'yhi Joseph yefeh toar vifeh mareh – Joseph was well built and handsome” (Genesis 39:6). The man was also was resilient, forgiving, and faithful – qualities of infinitely more significance.

Shabbat Shalom!

