

Beauty and the Body: A Jewish Take

Parashat Vayeshev

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Joseph was very handsome. When Joseph walked into a room, all heads turned! He was one of those rare human specimens whose every feature communicated beauty. In fact, Joseph is the only male in the entire Torah who is referred to as beautiful: *Vayehi Yosef y'fei toar, viyfei mar'ei*, Joseph was well built and beautiful to behold. (Genesis 39:6) It is no accident that the very next verse describes how Mrs. Potiphar, the wife of Joseph's Egyptian master, is smitten by this chiseled and exotic Israelite working around her house. The Torah informs us at the beginning of next week's parasha that before Joseph goes to see Pharaoh, he stops at Seven Locks Barber to get a haircut, and he gets a whole new wardrobe, so he looks dapper for the king. Rashi tells us that Joseph was *m'taken be'se'aro*, he took time to make his curly hair look just right, and even that he fluttered his eyelashes at all the right times. Melting the hearts of all those around him. All this virility was just too much for Mrs. Potiphar to resist.

Now the truth is that Joseph is not the first person in the Torah whose physical attractiveness is noted. Our matriarch Sarah is described as an *isha y'fat mar'eh*, a very beautiful woman. When Rebekkah first appears to Abraham's servant she is described as *tovat mar'eh me'od*, very good looking. Rachel is proclaimed in the exact same terms as her son Joseph: *y'fat to'ar v'yifat mar'eh*; she was apparently so beautiful that Jacob went totally bananas when he saw her, moving massive boulders, proclaiming his love, and his willingness to serve for however long it would take in order to have her hand in marriage.

The question is, why is the Torah, a text that often skips over incidental details and leaves gaps in stories that require extensive commentary and midrash to explain and fill-in, dwell so much on external beauty? The same Torah that forbids the making of sculptures or images *asher ba'artetz mitachat*—of anything that dwells on earth—is elaborating on the physical appearance of our forefathers and foremothers? What's going on here? Not only that, but there were another ancient people who were hyper-focused on beauty and physique, and that people of course were the Greeks. Since we always read *parashat Vayeshev* at Hanukkah time, I wonder if this is a coincidence, or if there is an intentional contrast between how Jews and Greeks understood the meaning of external beauty.

While preparing for this sermon I sort of went down a rabbit hole...I started reading all these articles and papers on Greek ideas of beauty. The whole concept of aesthetics, a Greek word that means “pertaining to the senses” or “sensory perception,” is a branch of philosophy first explored by the ancient Greeks. The Greek admiration for attractive people, bodies, and for that matter, sculpture, clothing, utensils, even weapons was based on the idea that what was beautiful was necessarily good. If you were a good citizen, you looked the part. Your appearance, your physicality communicated the kind of person you were. There was a term for this: *Kalos kagathos*, the good and the beautiful, goodness and beauty were fundamentally intertwined. In fact of all the gods of Mt. Olympus, only one, Hephaestus, was considered physically ugly. And when his mother, Hera, beheld his unseemliness at birth, she tossed him off of the mountain into the sea below. Talk about Mommy Issues! The Olympic Games, another inheritance of ancient Greece, were not only a celebration of athleticism, but also of the physical form, the human body, and of course, external beauty.

So what's a Jew to make of all of this. We know that our ancestors wrestled with how much to participate in such a body-oriented culture. This is key to the Hanukkah story. To many Jews Greek body culture seemed so vain, so exhibitionist, even immodest. The utter focus on the external seemed like a skewed understanding of what made human beings sacred and unique. Rabbi Aron Lopiansky, a prolific author and teacher from right here in our community, distinguished between external beauty and genuine beauty in Jewish thought. External beauty he described as something that is attractive on the outside but poison on the inside. It reminds me of when I was in summer camp as a kid--we'd be on these hikes in the woods and see all kinds of berries, bright red or purple, and being kids, we'd want to pull them right off the branches and eat them on the spot. The counselors would say, don't eat those berries, they're poisonous. But to us, they looked so good, so ripe, so tempting; those counselors made us deathly afraid to put them in our mouths though. This is what Proverbs was referring to when it says: *Sheker ha'chein ve'hevel ha'yofi*, charm is deceitful, and beauty is fleeting. Beauty that is only skin deep doesn't count for much. And it's often a poison for those who bite into it. This is the beauty that objectifies, the beauty that leads to body dysmorphia, the beauty that makes people feel inadequate and unloved if they don't conform to its rare and near impossible standards.

Internal beauty, according to Rav Lopiansky does not require a denial of the external. You can be beautiful, handsome, attractive on the outside and also possess an inner beauty, which he describes as genuineness, goodness, spiritual depth, a moral compass that is displayed by Joseph, for example, who refuses to be ensnared by the advances of a married woman, even going to jail rather than violating the trust of Potiphar, who had given him so much. This is the beauty of Sarah, who opened her home to the hungry, the thirsty, the weary desert traveler. This is the beauty of Rebekkah, who drew water for Eliezer and for his camels, who invited him to join her family for a meal and offered him lodging...who comforted Isaac after the death of his mother. This inner beauty was possessed by Rachel, who protected the dignity of her older sister Leah, and who the prophet Jeremiah says was *m'vakah al baneihah*, who wept and lovingly watched over her descendants, the Jewish people when they went into exile. This is the kind of countercultural beauty the Torah commanded when it said: *Mipnei seiva takum ve'hadarta pnai zeken*, that is usually translated as "You must rise before the elderly and show deference to the old." That's how Leviticus 19:32 is translated in the *Etz Hayim Humash* on page 700. But the word *hadarta* comes from the word *hiddur*, one of the Hebrew terms for beauty. The Torah is commanding us to recognize beauty in the old, not just the young. To see in the faces of older people the beauty of living a long life, the privilege of being in this world for so many years, of learning and amassing wisdom, of having the blessing of seeing children and grandchildren and perhaps great grandchildren. That's true *hiddur*! That's real beauty, not just the nubile, unwrinkled faces of the young. And this inner beauty is also the resplendent beauty of Hanukkah, which was a victory over the Greek ideal that what you looked like on the outside necessarily described what kind of person you were on the inside.

This victory is celebrated even in how we light the Hanukkah menorah. The Talmud says that the mitzvah of Hanukkah is *ner ish u'veito* that one member of the household lights one candle on each night of Hanukkah. I don't know a single Jew who lights the menorah that way. Instead we do what the Talmud calls the *mehadrin min ha'mehadrin* way, in other words the most beautiful way possible, which is that each member of the family lights their own menorah on each night, adding an additional candle with each passing night of Hanukkah. What a huge difference that is from one family member lighting one candle each night. This *mehadrin min*

ha'mehadrin approach, this most beautiful way of lighting not only results in increasing light each night, but also celebrates each and every family member for their uniqueness and essential beauty.

On this Hanukkah, which begins tomorrow night, let us repudiate any Greek inspired ideas that our self-worth is tied to our outer appearance. And may we all celebrate that true beauty is more than skin deep, like the beauty of Joseph and our holy ancestors.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah