

**“Re-Shaping Our Souls”**  
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There’s a television show on the E! Entertainment Network that you might have seen. It’s called, “Dr. 90210.” It’s a reality show in which the stars are plastic surgeons who practice cosmetic surgery in L.A. The show follows people through the process of seeking a consultation, undergoing surgery and recovery.

Now, I have nothing against plastic surgery. In fact, I’m in awe of it. What a wonderful gift to be able to re-work the appearance of the human body after an accident, after surgery, in the event of some sort of birth defect—even for cosmetic purposes. What relief, what comfort and consolation this specialty can provide!

What is striking, though, is how many of the people who make appointments to see the physicians on this show look perfectly fine—even attractive, even very attractive. One episode featured three sisters—all Southern California beauties—who came in to re-shape their figures.

I’m sympathetic. In our society, there is a tremendous focus on how we look. There’s an [on-line audio-visual exhibit entitled, “Girl Culture,”](#) created by an artist/photographer named Lauren Greenfield. Lauren Greenfield photographed and interviewed teenage girls all across America. On one of her slides, a girl named Lisa says, “There is so much peer pressure. I mean, not with drugs or cigarettes or anything, but with the fact that *everybody has to look the same.*” (Emphasis added.)

The pressure is great, not only on teenage girls, but on all of us, really. Whether we’re boys, girls, women or men, appearances seem to be almost everything. We are understood to be a reflection of how we look. How we fill out our clothes is considered to be one of the core pieces of data on which others believe they may legitimately judge us. And thus, as a society, we spend an enormous amount of time thinking about our bodies, and we spend an enormous amount of *money* on them as well.



Moreover, as Rabbi Camille Angel has observed, “it now seems popular to reveal whatever was kept hidden in the past . . . , whether biographical, anatomical, or otherwise personal,” [quoted in *Striving Toward Virtue: A Contemporary Guide for Jewish Ethical Behavior*, by Kerry M. Olitzky and Rachel T. Sabath, Hoboken: Ktav (1996)].

I’m reminded of a recent cartoon in the *New Yorker* [July 24, 2006, by William Haefeli]. The scene is the beach. A woman is putting down her beach towel on the sand. It’s an ordinary scene, except that the woman happens to be naked. She says to her friend, “I hate the way I look in a bathing suit!”

We not only reveal a lot more than we used to, a lot of us spend a lot of time talking about our bodies and how we have or haven’t altered them.

Now it won’t surprise people to hear that within Judaism, the soul is highly valued. “*Haneshamah Lach*”—“The soul is divine,” as we sang just a few moments ago.

But it would be misleading to suggest that Judaism is *only* interested in the soul. In fact, Jewish tradition values the body very highly as well.

There’s a beautiful prayer that we say each morning, the *Asher Yatzar*. It begins by giving thanks to God for “fashioning the human being with wisdom.”

Now we might expect to see in that prayer, immediately thereafter, a description of how we’ve been created in the image of God, or how we have been born with a moral sense, or with intelligence. Isn’t that what it must mean to say that God has created us “with wisdom?” After all, God is without shape or form: we must surely be about to praise God for our souls, which are also without shape or form.

Instead, the prayer goes on to talk about our physicality. We thank God for “creating within our bodies: openings, arteries, glands and organs, marvelous in structure, intricate in design.” We acknowledge that “should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it would be impossible to exist,” and we conclude by thanking God, “healer of all flesh who sustains our bodies in wondrous ways.”

Our bodies are thus to be admired, and not just for their beauty. The body is an object of awe and reverence. It is a gift from God. As we recited a few minutes ago, not only is the soul divine, but “the body” as well “is [God’s] handiwork.”

We are not just our souls. We are happy when our bodies work well and we lament when they don't.

We should take care of our bodies. We should be pursuing healthy lifestyles so that we can preserve our bodies. Maimonides—who, as I'm sure many of us know, was a physician—stresses this in his legal code, the Mishneh Torah [Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot, selections from Chapter Four]. Some of his advice seems contemporary:

We must distance ourselves from unhealthy substances and practices, and accustom ourselves to healthy practices. For example, we should never eat unless hungry, nor drink unless thirsty. And we should never eat until our stomachs are entirely full. Overeating is like poison to the body, and is the cause of many illnesses. ...

Anyone who does not exercise ... will have a painful life and will become progressively weak, even if he eats good foods and looks after himself medicinally.

Notice that Rambam's focus is not on the *appearance* of the body, but on our need to take care of it.

Because the body is a gift from God, we aren't entirely free to do whatever we want with it. For example, we are not casually or indiscriminately to reveal it to others. *Tzniyut*—or, modesty—is the name for this sensitivity in Judaism, and for the practice of covering up our body in the presence of others.

Within Jewish culture we show respect for the body by maintaining its privacy, by *not* revealing it,—as opposed to the way that, in our own society, if you have it, you are encouraged to flaunt it. Let's put it this way: in our society, "clothing malfunctions" are encouraged.

There is an exhibit called Body Worlds that is currently showing at the Boston Museum of Science. It features bodies: real, human bodies. Bodies that have been preserved using a new technique that allows one to see not only the bones, but the muscles as well. The potential for this to enhance our appreciation of God's creation is enormous. But I was speaking with a member of our congregation who attended the exhibit. She felt uncomfortable and finally left the exhibit. She "kept realizing," she said, "that these were human beings she was looking at." Our tradition recognizes that a body is never just a body; it's the body of *someone*. Someone with dignity, and with a unique personality.

*Tzniyut* is a sensitivity that survives death. When a person dies, we are as protective of his/her privacy and modesty, we are as respectful of his or her personhood after death as during life. Not only are we respectful; we are loving as well. We lovingly tend to the remains after death, and except for members of the Hevrah Kadishah, we do not view the body. The body is a *nir'eh v'lo ro'eh*: one who is seen but does not see. Therefore, only those who must see the body may do so. To maintain privacy, men care for men, and women for women. And after the body is washed and placed in a shroud, we lovingly restore it to the earth from which it came, as it is written, "For dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return." [Genesis 3:19] Precisely because of our reverence for the body, the Jewish tradition frowns on cremation or any other method of committal that unnaturally speeds up the process of decomposition. Our attitude is, let time and nature take their course.

As reverent as we are toward our bodies, so too should we be toward our souls. Every morning, in addition to reciting "*Asher Yatzar*," we recite "*Elohai Neshama*," a prayer thanking God for our souls. "The soul that You have given me is pure," we say. "You created it. You formed it, You breathed it into me and You preserve it within me." At the heart of Judaism is a recognition of the importance of the soul.

Souls don't take care of themselves. They need nurturing. Maimonides believed that our souls express themselves through our temperaments or dispositions, and that generally these are not properly balanced. For example, he wrote,

There are people of **angry** disposition who are always annoyed, and then there are people who are **even-tempered** and are never angry. ... There are people who are excessively **haughty**, and then there are people who are excessively **meek**. There are those who are **never satisfied** with what they receive, and then there are those [who] **do not desire** even the simplest things that the body needs.

And so it is with other temperaments, such as ... **cruelty** and **mercy**, **cowardice** and **courage**, et cetera.

Should we discover that our dispositions veer to any of these extremes, Maimonides believed that we had a duty to alter them, to achieve an intermediate position. For example, we shouldn't be **miserly**, but we also shouldn't be **irresponsibly generous**. Rather, we should strive to be philanthropic without ending up in the poor house. And so on with all of the other traits. According to Maimonides, to achieve the intermediate position on each disposition is to pursue

the “way of the Lord.” And Maimonides had no doubt that we could accomplish these changes.

Maimonides lived before the age of plastic surgery. But you could say that he was encouraging us to perform a kind of internal plastic surgery on ourselves:

To **nip and tuck** at certain faults, like pettiness and engaging in gossip, which almost all of us develop over time;

To **suction away** pervasive traits like lethargy and selfishness.

And to **augment** certain qualities, like compassion and patience.

This kind of surgery is not accessible to the surgeon’s scalpel—only to our own honest efforts to change bad habits and destructive tendencies, and to enhance our inclination to be generous and openhearted.

For this kind of plastic surgery, you don’t need board certification. The manual [i.e., the *mahzor*] is right here. By contemplating and sizing up our personality traits—which we can and should do during this long day ahead of us; by determining what needs to be trimmed and what needs to be stretched; we can make some changes. And if we are persistent and disciplined, we can make these changes last.

Working on our souls inevitably leads to a better use of our bodies.

As good Jews, we learn to use our bodies in positive ways. In tomorrow’s *haftarah*, we’ll read about how it isn’t enough to pray and to refrain from eating on Yom Kippur. The kind of fast God desires is one in which we break the bonds of injustice, free the oppressed, care for the homeless, the naked, the hungry and the wretched. These goals we cannot achieve merely through good intentions.

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There’s an old Yiddish compliment: A person, someone might say, is a “*shayne yid*.” A *shayne yid* means, literally, “a beautiful Jew.” Now, a *shayne yid* may be handsome; or he might be ugly; tall; or short. He may have excellent posture; or he may be hunched over. One never knows.

What you *can* say is that a *shayne yid* has fine qualities. Such a person is charitable, generous, and warm. He makes you feel at home. It’s one of the nicest

compliments you can give someone. [See *The Joys of Yiddish* by Leo Rosten, McGraw-Hill, N.Y., (1968), pp. 335-6.]

A *sheyneh yid* lives up to Jewish values and represents Jewish values in the way he/she lives his/her life. A *sheyneh yid* is observant, attentive to mitzvot, and is a worthy representative of the Jewish community. Most of all, a *sheyneh yid* is someone you're happy to meet. He or she is kind and has a giving nature.

Let's hope for a year in which, however long or flabby or skinny or short the various parts of our bodies might be, however we might look on the outside—let's hope for a year in which every one of us will be, and will be known to be, a *shayneh yid*.

Then, we'll really be looking good.

*Shanah Tovah!*