



A Sermon by
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Should She or Shouldn't She
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Every so often a rabbi has to take a stand. There comes a time in the career of every religious leader when you cannot be wishy washy or hide behind platitudes, when it becomes necessary to weigh in on the difficult controversial issues facing people, even at the risk of offending some by taking a position and expressing an opinion.

Those of you who attend regularly, and who read or closely follow my remarks know that until now I have avoided commenting on a controversial issue that has been in the news and all over the internet in recent weeks. But alas I can avoid it no longer, and so this Shabbat, I believe that it is important, as your rabbi to express an opinion on the controversy raging on both sides of the Atlantic. Yes, it is time for me to talk about Susan Boyle and an issue of considerable interest to many: should she or should she not have a makeover.

In case you haven't seen or heard, Susan Boyle is the short, stout, bushy eyebrowed, unattractive woman from Scotland who wowed not just the judges and audience of Britain's Got Talent, but just about the rest of the planet, with her rendition of "I Dreamed a Dream" from Les Miserables. Her appearance has been viewed approximately 200 million times on You Tube.

It is truly a phenomenon evoking a tremendous amount of articles, analysis and discussion. *Wall Street Journalist* columnist John Rash [says](#) the video "encapsulates the power of everyday people becoming overnight sensations." As Larry King gushed when she was on his show, "only in America".

I have read explanations from psychologists speculating about why we were so surprised by her ability to belt out a song, as well as why we feel the need to share the news and tell others about her performance. Experts in human behavior have commented on what our reaction to her says about us. I have read comments by sociologists and even anthropologists and neurologists offering their expertise to help us understand the sensational reaction.

Clearly her performance has sparked an intense consideration of a number of issues, not least of which is the relationship between physical appearance and how we arrive at our assessment of another person and their abilities. So many stereotypes were at work here, it is hard to sort them out. Age, appearance, dress, her socioeconomic class, a socially awkward individual who doesn't seem to fit in -- all led to preconceptions and expectations as evidenced by the smirks on the faces of so many in the audience before she opened her mouth and belted out her song.

What do the preconceived judgments we had about her before she began to sing and then the subsequent surprise say about us and how we judge people. Furthermore, you

can't help but think about what all that has transpired says about who our heroes are, and who we admire, and how we arrive at those determinations.

There are those who worry how the simple 47 year old woman who says she's never been kissed is going to be able to deal with all the attention. She herself said in an interview, "Modern society is too quick to judge people on their appearances...There is not much you can do about it; it is the way they think; it is the way they are. But maybe this could teach them a lesson, or set an example."

Her stirring performance has shown us that a powerful voice can be found in unlikely places. The public is rather proud of itself, for giving a victory for talent and artistry in a culture obsessed with physical attractiveness and presentation. Her choice of a song about dreaming a dream and a tune lamenting the cruelties of life crushing the promise of what could have been is nothing short of ironic and symbolic, an appropriate metaphor for her life.

But are there any lessons, lasting lessons we can learn from the experience? Can we learn anything about character, judgment or how we view others? As a rabbi, I can't help but wonder, if there is anything here that can be instructive and help us become better people.

Tom Bergeron host of "Dancing with the Stars" wrote in an Op Ed piece in the New York Times, "Ms. Boyle's experience seems to suggest that people are willing to overcome their prejudices and see the world anew. But," he then cautions, "those same people can turn back into snarky snobs just as easily."

Columnist (Dennis Daly) writing in The Salem News observed, "The contrast between the values foisted upon us by hedonistic Hollywood, greedy Wall Street and vacuous television and the basic good and simple nature inherent in most of us, as personified by the unpretentious Boyle.

It is as if the 21st century were demanding an antidote to the false values and childish idols we have lately grown to worship. Haven't we had enough of the Bernie Madoffs and other scam artists, the empty-headed starlets self-destructing, the corporate CEOs with their trophy wives and inflated salaries?

Boyle provides the antidote to all that in spades. She carries her pedestrian looks; her disability (apparently she was oxygen deprived at birth); her sometimes embarrassing, earthy humor; and her common awkwardness, with an airy dignity. Her singing is transformational; all her flaws seem to disappear as she hits the initial notes."

And then there is the issue of whether or not she should have a makeover to be more attractive, or stay as she is.

In a wide-ranging interview in *London's Times Online*, Susan Boyle says, "I'm happy the way I am: short and plump," and that while she might consider a "makeover later on," "I would not go in for Botox or anything like that."

Far be it from me to offer advice and tell her what to do.

Instead I wonder what would our sages say about all this?

I think that they would say that there is nothing wrong with caring about how one looks. The problem is when one begins to obsess over their physical appearance. The minor trim of her eyebrows and getting a new hair do are, shall we say, in the words of our sages, "most appropriate" -- provided the makeover is within reason and does not set out to drastically change her appearance. Perhaps King Solomon best summed up our predicament, as quoted in the Book of Proverbs: Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a God-revering woman is much to be praised." After all our matriarch Sarah is praised by the rabbis for her beauty as well as her many attributes. Maimonides always counseled that things should be done in moderation, and that we should strive to maintain a balance in our lives. So, makeup: yes. Full makeover: no.

The saying from Pirke Avot comes to mind, "Al tistakel bakankoon, eleh be mah sheyesh bo: Do not look at the container, (referring to a bottle), but rather, at what is inside." It is the Talmud's way of saying, over a thousand years before the printing press had been invented, not to judge a book by its cover. This advice is as helpful to all of us today as it was when first uttered. It is telling us to get beyond initial impressions.

Another insight I think our sages would offer is to remind us of the importance of derech eretz, meaning how we treat others, and to have respect for all human beings.

It is inevitable that despite our best intentions and the Talmud's advice, that we will formulate judgments and opinions based on appearance. In fact, David Amodio, an assistant professor of psychology at New York University said, "Stereotypes are seen as a necessary mechanism for making sense of information." But the snickering and the lack of respect she was shown is something not to be condoned. Our sages constantly affirm that every human being is created, betzelem Elohim, in the image of God.

Or perhaps today's torah reading, chapter 19 of Leviticus, known as the Holiness Code is instructive, for it reminds us that whereas the Greeks and other civilizations stressed the holiness of beauty, Judaism emphasizes the beauty of holiness.

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