

Judging Books by Their Covers
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Rabbi Keren Gorban
Temple Sinai PGH

The town of Plotsk was looking for a new mayor. Everyone had gathered to discuss the qualities they were looking for...and everyone had an opinion about what would make a good mayor. "Our new mayor should be the smartest person in town!" someone shouted. "Our new mayor should be a businessperson!" called another. "Our new mayor should be a good communicator!" "They should be righteous!" "They should be trustworthy!" The list went on and on and on.

Finally the town elders decided that there should be an open forum. Anyone who wished to become the new mayor would come to the synagogue on the following Tuesday and share their ideas and why they should be the new mayor.

The following Tuesday was like a town festival. Everybody showed up at the synagogue to hear from the different candidates. They listened to speech after speech after speech. Some were better than others, but no one really stood out. As the townspeople started to get antsy and irritated, wondering how they would choose a new mayor from among the candidates, a stranger showed up at the door. No one knew this stranger, who was dusty from the road, had frayed, mismatched clothes, and was hunched under the weight of a bag.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" one of the town elders asked angrily. "Can't you see that we're in the middle of an important meeting?"

"Um, well, that's what I'm here for," the stranger replied hesitantly. "I'm here to present myself as a candidate for town mayor."

"You're late," the elder declared. "You should have been here hours ago. And no one wants to hear what you have to say anyway. Go away." And with that, the elder slammed the door in the stranger's face.

A little while later, as everyone was getting ready to leave the synagogue feeling like they would never find the right person to be mayor, a new stranger showed up at the door. This one was tall and good-looking, was wearing a perfectly cut suit of fine cloth, and had an air of confidence.

"Come in, come in!" cried one of the town elders. "Are you here as a candidate for mayor? If so, please come and speak to us. We're so looking forward to what you have to say."

“I’m Jessie,” the stranger said, “and yes, I’m here to share my ideas for what I would do as mayor.” The elders ushered Jessie up to the podium to speak and quieted everyone down so they could all hear. Jessie stood tall and began to speak, showing wisdom and integrity, the ability to communicate clearly and inspire people, skill in business and in caring for people. Jessie was the perfect candidate, and by the end of the speech, everyone called for this stranger—who now seemed quite familiar—to be the new mayor.

A few weeks later, the townspeople gathered again for the inauguration of their new mayor. The mood was celebratory and festive. The town elders had set up a podium in the town square where Jessie would give the first speech as the new mayor of Plotsk. The townspeople roared with applause as Jessie’s name was announced... but no one arrived. The elder announced Jessie’s name again and again and, finally, someone started to come up the stairs.

But, wait a minute, it wasn’t Jessie coming up the stairs, it was a suit. A perfectly cut suit of fine cloth. Good-looking and tall, wafting confidently in the breeze.

Murmurs ran through the crowd. What had happened to Jessie? Frantic cries filled the air. Finally, a dusty stranger dressed in frayed, mismatched clothes and hunched under the weight of a bag appeared. But it wasn’t a stranger, it was Jessie!

“Jessie, what are you doing?” the town elders called. “You’re supposed to be up here. What are you doing down there and what is this empty suit doing up here?”

Calmly Jessie replied, “When I came to you, dressed as I am now, you wanted nothing to do with me. It was only when I wore that nice suit that you paid me any attention. Since the suit made the difference, it was clear that you wanted the suit to be mayor. So there it is, ready for the inauguration.”

We all know that we’re not supposed to judge a book by its cover, that outside appearances don’t tell us a whole lot about what’s inside. But we still make all sorts of assumptions based on appearances, especially when it comes to people. We look at each other and decide whether someone is intelligent or ignorant, caring or self-centered, hard-working or lazy, trustworthy or sneaky. Each of us might base those assumptions on different factors—having biases towards certain skin tones, hair colors and textures, weight, height, size, gender presentation, disability, and more—but generally we decide who a person is just by their looks. We don’t even talk to them first.

There have been a handful of studies over the past 5 or 6 decades that have explored some of those snap judgments. One set of studies showed that, everything else being equally unknown, children prefer to be friends with kids who have no visible disabilities and are straight-sized (that means that most stores will carry clothes of their size). Another study of storybook characters found that body shape and size align with character types. Obesity and extreme thinness, for example, are both used to signal evil characters. An overweight character is often a bit of a fool, and a pale character is usually hiding something. And in our own lives, clothing choices tell us if someone fits into our social circle, whether that circle is defined by socio-economic status or interests and hobbies.

These snap judgments are then exacerbated by the way we comment on each other's appearance. "Dear, you would look so much better if you wore a little makeup." "Have you thought about losing a few pounds?" "Don't you think that outfit is a little too revealing?" "You know, a haircut wouldn't go amiss."

Often these comments are well-intentioned—after all, we just want people to see the good qualities in those we appreciate without getting bogged down by judgments based on appearance. But despite our good intentions, these comments hurt more than they help and they deepen the shame that is already too pervasive in our society that prioritizes appearances.

And shame, despite what Bill Maher said on his show last month, is NOT the first step in reform. Shame does not lead to meaningful or lasting change; at best it leads people to try to hide what is considered shameful. And remember, in talking about appearances, hiding what's shameful means hiding oneself. If that's the best case, I can't even decide what the worst case is. Is it people too paralyzed by shame to even try to change? Is it people failing at change over and over again and despairing of ever succeeding? Is it the unnecessary perpetuation of stereotypes and tropes that cause yet more generations to experience this shame? I'm not sure what the worst-case scenario is, but I AM sure that even the best case scenario is terrible and will hurt our society more than help it.

Because here's what we're really saying when we approve or disapprove of someone's appearances: That gift of a body that lets you do all the things that make you you—it doesn't matter what you think of it or what you can do with it. The only thing that matters is whether other people appreciate it.

Do you hear how ridiculous that is? Since when do I determine how much you value the gifts you've received? And why, oh why, would I want to make sure that you know that I don't appreciate them? Of course I don't care for them—it's not my gift! I've got my own

that means more to me! There's no need for me to diminish your appreciation just because mine differs. And, frankly, even if I like your gift, my opinion is pretty irrelevant.

And that's truly what our bodies are—gifts, blessings, miracles. They're not perfect and they break down pretty easily. But they're sacred vessels of the divine spirit within each of us and they're ours. We, created in the image of God, with the spark of the divine, have incredible bodies to help us participate in the world. So incredible are our bodies that there's a blessing for them. It's traditionally said every morning...and after every time we go to the bathroom. Yes, Judaism has a blessing for going to the bathroom, because the fact that our bodies work—especially all of that internal plumbing—is a miracle. This prayer of wonder and gratitude is intended to remind us— multiple times a day—that our bodies are incredible gifts.

Gifts, blessings, miracles. Imperfect to be sure, but no less amazing when we consider all that can break down and still allow us to live meaningful lives. Who are we to judge, criticize, place value on these miracles and how they are or aren't adorned as though they're just another thing that can be tossed aside or replaced? It is our responsibility, our obligation to treat them with respect and honor and to take advantage of what they can do. And if we're honoring the vessels, how much more important is it that we honor the souls within.

On Yom Kippur we confess a litany of sins, many of which refer to the body parts that have led us astray. I ask that we add these sins to our list as a reminder to do better in the coming year:

Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—for the wrong we have done by assuming that physical appearance indicates a person's value.

V'al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—and for the harm we have caused in your world by accepting and buying into society's false standards of beauty and worth.

Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—for the wrong we have done by judging, criticizing, and commenting on others' bodies and our own.

V'al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—and for the harm we have caused in your world by placing more value on appearances than on what's inside.

Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—for the wrong we have done by causing people to be ashamed of how they look or how well their bodies function.

V'al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—and for the harm we have caused in your world by allowing that shame to pervade all parts of society.

Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—for the wrong we have done by focusing on what we can't do rather than what we can.

V'al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha—and for the harm we have caused in your world by holding perfection as an ideal instead of celebrating what we can do despite or because of our imperfections.

For all these sins, O God of Forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, and grant us atonement.

Grant us atonement, God, but more than that: as we begin this new year give us the strength, the courage, the fortitude to see our bodies as the blessings they are and to resist the temptation and pressure to conform to standards of beauty and value that obscure the truth of their wonder. Help us honor these sacred vessels of divine spirit and let them bring blessing to the world. And let us, Amen.