

Beauty and Ugliness

Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayeshev*, Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt. He is bought by Potiphar, who “puts him in charge of his household”. The Torah says:

Now Joseph was well built and handsome (וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יָפֶה-תָּאֵר וַיְכֶּה מְרָאָה).

After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon him and said, “Lie with me.”

But he refused. [Gen. 39:6-8]

It is the only time the Torah describes a man as “handsome”. Why mention it here?

-The Midrash says it's to remind us that Joseph was Rachel's son, and Rachel was very beautiful. [Gen. R. 86:4]

-Radak says it's to explain why a highly-placed person such as Potiphar's wife would try to get involved with a foreign slave. Rashi adds that “the daughters of Egypt used to climb up to gaze at his beauty.” [Rashi on Gen. 49:22]

But it's more than that.

Physical beauty is very important in Jewish lore

The Bible frequently mentions the beauty of some women:

-Abram said to his wife Sarai: “I know what a beautiful woman [*ishah y'fat*] you are.” [Gen. 12:11]

-Rebecca was beautiful. [Gen. 26:7]

-Rachel was shapely and beautiful -- וְרָחֵל הָיְתָה יָפֶת-תָּאֵר וַיְכֶּה מְרָאָה [Gen. 29:17]

-Esther was shapely and beautiful. [Esther 2:7]

-The Song of Songs glorifies physical beauty:

Your graceful legs are like jewels, the work of an artist's hands... Your breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle... How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights! [Song of Songs 7:2-6]
Every part of you is fair, my darling, There is no blemish in you. [Song of Songs 4:7]

Yet the same King Solomon who wrote the above also wrote:

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised. [Proverbs 31:30]

So beauty, while important, is not *the* most important attribute.

-Talmud:

Happy the man whose wife is beautiful! The number of his days is doubled.
[Sanhedrin 100b]

-Talmud: Four women were the most beautiful of all:

The Rabbis taught: There have been four beautiful women in the world: Sarah, Rahav, Abigail and Esther. According to the one who says that Esther was fallow, remove Esther from the list and insert Vashti instead.

Our Rabbis taught: Rahav inspired lust by her name; Yael by her voice; Abigail by her memory of her; Michal daughter of Saul by her appearance.

Rabbi Yitzhak said: Whoever says, "Rahav, Rahav" will immediately have an orgasm.

Rabbi Nahman said to him: "I say Rahav, Rahav, and nothing happens to me!" He replied: "I was speaking of one who knows her personally and was intimate with her." [Megillah 15a]

-Sarah compared to Eve is like a monkey compared to a human. [Bava Batra 58a] But Tosafot says Eve is not on the list because only daughters of human beings are mentioned!

Why are these remarks recorded? To teach that it's acceptable for men to talk this way.

Men too are termed attractive:

-Joseph (above)

-King Saul:

There was not among the people of Israel a more handsome person than Saul. From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people. [1 Sam. 9:2]

-King David:

So they sent for [David] and brought him. He was ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and handsome. And the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him, for he is the one [who shall be king]." [1 Sam. 16:12]

-Talmud rabbis comparing their beauty

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: I am the only one remaining of Jerusalem's men of outstanding beauty...

But that is not so; for did not a Master say:

Rabbi Kahana's beauty is a reflection of Rabbi Abbahu's beauty;

Rabbi Abbahu's beauty is a reflection of our forefather Jacob's beauty;

our forefather Jacob's beauty was a reflection of Adam's beauty;

whereas Rabbi Yoḥanan is omitted!

Rabbi Yoḥanan is different, because he lacked a beard...

Rabbi Yoḥanan used to go and sit at the gates of the mikvah. He said, "When the daughters of Israel come out of the bath, let them look at me, that they may bear sons as beautiful and as learned as I am."

The Rabbis said to him: Do you not fear an evil eye? He replied, I am of the seed of Joseph, against whom an evil eye is powerless... [Bava Metzia 84a]

Rabbi Eleazar fell ill and Rabbi Yoḥanan went in to visit him... He noticed that...

Rabbi Eleazar was weeping, and he said to him: Why do you weep? ...

He replied to him: I am weeping on account of this beauty [of yours] that is going to rot in the earth. [Rabbi Yoḥanan] said to him: On that account, you surely have a reason to weep. And they both wept. [Berachot 5b]

Note: Standards of beauty change. Rabbi Yoḥanan is described in the Talmud as being fat. [Berakhot 13b]

Some say: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. (Others say: Beauty is only skin deep, but ugliness goes clear to the bone. ☺)

Blessings

Blessing when seeing anything or anybody extremely beautiful:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁכָּכָה לוֹ בְּעוֹלָמוֹ.

Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has such things in his world. [Berakhot 58b; Mishneh Torah, Blessings 10:13]

Blessing when seeing a strange, unusual creature:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, מְשַׁנֵּה הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who makes all creatures different. [Berakhot 58b; Mishneh Torah, Blessings 10:12]

A celebration of diversity!

Talmud: Applies to rarely-seen animals and people afflicted since birth. On people afflicted after birth, say “Blessed be the true judge (בָּרוּךְ ... דִּין אֱמֶת)”. (Should you say this within hearing of the creature in question? No, if it would embarrass them.)

The role of ugliness

By contrast, ugliness is frowned upon. There are rituals that may not be performed by those who are physically impaired:

-Kohanim with physical defects may not offer sacrifices. God tells Moses:

Speak to Aaron and say: No man of your offspring throughout the ages who has a defect shall be qualified to offer... food...

No one at all who has a defect shall be qualified: no man who is blind, or lame, or has a limb too short or too long; who has a broken leg or a broken arm; or who is a hunchback, or a dwarf, or who has a growth in his eye, or who has a boil-scar, or scurvy, or crushed testes.

No man among the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the Lord's offering by fire. [Lev. 21:16-21]

Such discrimination was the norm of the times. The Greeks worshipped beauty. Aristotle [Politics 7:16] argued that that crippled children must be killed. Only in 1990 did the US issue Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), making it illegal to discriminate because of disabilities and mandating that public buildings facilitate access for the disabled.

Maybe ugly people are chosen for something else, such as teaching? Maybe the Torah is shielding them from public duties to spare them embarrassment? Also, Israelites can't offer sacrifices either, because of their birth.

-The Torah enjoins us not to degrade people with disabilities:

You will not curse the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. [Lev. 19:14]

If true for the deaf, who can't even hear the curse, how much more so for the disabled who *can* hear you.

The Talmud echoes this teaching in the following story:

Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from ... his rabbi's house ... and he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an extremely ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi. But Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar

said to him: Worthless person, how ugly you are! Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?

The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made!

When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned and insulted this man only on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey, prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me.

The man said to him: I will not forgive you until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made!

The rabbi walked behind the man until they reached his city. The people said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man said... If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people... He did such and such to me. They said: Even so, forgive him, because he is a great Torah scholar. He said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that he does not become accustomed to act that way. [Taanit 20a-b]

Rashi: It was Elijah the Prophet, who had come to rebuke him not to become accustomed to act that way.

The Maharsha adds, interestingly: We expected the man to say: "I forgive you provided that you don't behave like that again!". Instead he said: "I forgive you provided that you do not become accustomed to act that way."

The word "accustomed" it indicates that such behavior is sometimes acceptable. [Chidushei Agadot]

The Mishna enjoins us not to judge by appearance:

-Do not look at the container, but at what is in it. [Pirkei Avot 4:20]

Still, the Mishna allows a man to divorce his wife on grounds of beauty:

Rabbi Akiva says: [A man] may divorce [his wife] even if he found another woman who is better looking than she and he wishes to marry her, because the Torah says:

If a woman finds no favor in her husband's eyes, he may divorce her.

[Deuteronomy 24:1]

Actually, husband *or* wife may initiate divorce proceedings on *any* grounds.

Do ugly people make the best scholars?

The Talmud even teaches that ugly people make the best scholars:

[Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya was ugly-looking.]

The daughter of the Roman Emperor [Hadrian] said to him: You represent glorious wisdom and magnificent Torah, but in an ugly vessel.

He replied: Does your father not keep wine in simple clay vessels?

She asked: Where else shall he keep it?

He said to her: You are nobles, and so you should keep it in vessels of gold and silver.

So she went and told this to her father and he had the wine put into vessels of gold and silver. It became sour. The Emperor summoned the rabbi and asked him: Why did you give my daughter such advice?

He replied, I answered her according to the way that she spoke to me.

He said: But are there not good-looking people who are learned?

The rabbi replied: Yes, but if these very people were ugly, they would be still more learned. [Taanit 7a-b and Nedarim 50b]

Need controlled studies to test this proposition: Do pretty, popular girls; and handsome, athletic boys; typically spend less time on their studies and more time on the social scene? Is the nerd or mouse who can't get dates frequently a brilliant student; and the handsome or pretty one frequently is not? Do pretty girls frequently end up with the “wrong” boy, who is seductive, uninhibited and aggressive; and handsome boys frequently end up with the “wrong” girl, who is beautiful, uninhibited and flirtatious? There is even a 1963 song by Jimmy Soul that says: “If you want to be happy for the rest of your life”, marry an “ugly” girl!

Conclusion

Beauty, while important, is far from being *the* most important attribute of a person.

Shabbat shalom.