

The Beauty of Beauty

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The Jewish Center

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“The reading of the Torah will be permitted at the Wailing Wall only on the first and seventh days of Succoth, the Feast of Tabernacles, which Jewry throughout the world is celebrating this week... The reading will not be permitted in the interim, according to a government ruling communicated to Chief Rabbi Kook... It was the original intention of the government to prohibit the ceremonies with the citron and palm branch, a part of the holiday services, but this ban was withdrawn after Rabbi Kook declined to enforce the new prohibitions, refusing to serve as a messenger for the ‘government’s medieval restrictions.’ This was the only disturbing element in the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in Palestine. Synagogues throughout the country were overcrowded.”

This was the report of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on Oct. 21, 1929.

That we can freely pick up our arba minim and bedeck our sanctuary with the beautiful Mitzvot of this Yom Tov should never be lost on us. There was a time not so long ago when no less a man than Rav Kook had to intercede on behalf of Palestine’s Jewish community for the right to take up the Lulav and Etrog.

Here we have before us the holiday most associated with the notion of הידור מצוה – the ethic of beautifying the objects of our Jewish lives. In some sense, the concept is always on the back of our minds: No one uses an unattractive seder plate or tarnished Kiddush cup. But on Sukkot, the aesthetic takes center stage. And it may even derive in part from the pasuk – pri etz hadar. The Etrog is not just any fruit, but a particularly beautiful one.

This preoccupation, though, should surprise us. As a general matter, we tend to downplay – if not reject outright – the notion that beauty should be a serious consideration. Every Friday night we declare: שקר החן והבל היופי – charm is deceptive and beauty vain. We aspire to a higher ethos in which we privilege virtue and character above appearance and externalities.

So just what is the message of Sukkot? Just what value are we meant to attach to physical beauty?

What I’d like to suggest is that – in some form or fashion – Sukkot is meant to reorient us and challenge the way we think about these issues.

And to make my case, I want to return with you to ספר בראשית.

There’s a phenomenon that repeats many times in the Tanach, but nowhere more prominently than in the first book of the Torah. You’ll notice that virtually any time something or someone is described as beautiful, the thing or the person always leads to temptation and sin. And even more specifically, more often than not, the object of desire is described as being taken.

- Chava in the garden sees that the fruit is desirable (כי טוב העץ למאכל), and she wants it; (ותקח מפריו);
- About the children of gods – though we may not quite fully understand who they are – we're told:

וַיִּרְאוּ בְנֵי-הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-בְּנוֹת הָאָדָם, כִּי טֹבֹת הֵנָּה; וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים, מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּחָרוּ.
- They saw that the mortal women were goodly, and they took them;
- Lot sees the fertile land and he wants it;
- The Egyptians see that Sarah is יפה היא מאד and Pharaoh has to have her. (ותוקח האשה את) (בית פרעה);
- Avimelech sees Sarah and it's the same story (האשה אשר לקחת);
- (Avimelech sees Rivkah and he wants her);
- Chamor sees Dina and abducts her: (ויקח אותה).

The pattern is always the same: Something or someone bound up with sustaining or providing life is described as beautiful. That beauty engenders desire. Desire engenders the need to fulfill the desire. The thing or person that is desired is then taken – almost always illicitly.

Given this seemingly inescapable pattern, one might have imagined a response characterized by retreat. If, by the Torah's own admission, physical beauty is such a snare, why not run in the other direction? And indeed there were sectarian groups like the Essenes or the members of the Dead Sea cult who all but renounced their attachments to the physical world.

But if such is not our approach, Sukkot may provide part of the solution to what is:

What's the mitzvah of the arba minim?

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם – We're called on to perform a very specific action: We're called on to take the four species. But they're not just any four species. They're paragons of beauty. Each is governed by its own set of halachot. But there's one common thread that applies universally to all of four. If any of them is יבש – too dry or too desiccated – it's considered פסול for use in the mitzvah. Just like the objects of desire in Bereishit, the arba minim have to be vibrant and full of life. They're florid, organic and beautiful.

So we stand on the precipice of the Genesis test. Here we perform the very same act so often repeated in בראשית – here we are *taking up* a bundle of items that epitomize beauty itself – fruits and plants that are lush and luscious; full of life and life-affirming – that appeal to all our senses.

And it's precisely at this moment that the Torah insists we redirect our attention. Yes, we marvel at their aesthetic qualities. But rather than employ them in the service of self-indulgence, we turn instead to the service of Hashem.

We all know the first half of the pasuk:

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפַּת תְּמָרִים, וְעֵנָף עֵץ-עָבֹת, וְעַרְבֵי-נַחַל

But it's the second half that's transformative:

וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם--שְׂבַעַת יָמִים.

That which is beautiful need not lead to base desire; it can be pressed into the service of a higher calling. We can pursue a kind of happiness that's not just ephemeral, but actually transcendent. To stand together before Hashem and behold something so beautiful that it inspires us to recognize the bounty we enjoy – that's a very different kind of שמחה.

When the opportunity to perceive beauty presents itself, the Torah never tells us to avert our eyes. Quite the contrary. We have special brachot reserved for those moments when we're privileged to see those elements of God's created world.

During the First World War, Rav Kook was stranded in England. He once wrote: "When I lived in London I used to visit the National Gallery, and my favorite pictures were those of Rembrandt. I really think that Rembrandt was a Tzaddik. Do you know that when I first saw Rembrandt's works, they reminded me of the rabbinic statement about the creation of light? We are told that when God created light [on the first day of creation, as opposed to the natural light of the sun on the fourth day], it was so strong and translucent, that one could see from one end of the world to the other, but God was afraid that the wicked might abuse it. What did He do? He reserved that light for the righteous in the world to come. But now and then there are great men who are blessed and privileged to see it. I think that Rembrandt was one of them, and the light in his pictures is the very light that God created on the day of Genesis."

And if I can obliquely reference the public discourse...

It's stunning to notice the timeliness of the Etrog's message. Not everything attractive has to be seized as an object of self-gratification. It can be held, appreciated, admired and at the same time perceived within the context of a higher purpose.

And so on this special holiday that celebrates our capacity to be inspired by that which attracts our attention, let's rise to the occasion: Let's not only elevate the level of our own discourse; let's seize upon opportunities to find beauty within others. What could be a greater pleasure?