

The Meaning of Beauty
(1st in Jewish Meanings Series)

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The festival of Chanukah offers us ^a ~~some~~ real opportunity to discuss a much misunderstood topic - the Jewish attitude towards Beauty. On the one hand, Chanukah is that holiday when an attempt is made to beautify the home and the synagogue and the services. Jews vie with each other in owning more beautiful Chanukah menorahs. On the other hand, Chanukah symbolizes the cultural differences between ancient Greece and Israel. The Greeks, we are told from year to year, worshipped Beauty, while we insisted on the aspects of holiness. It is usually reduced to the simple formula: ethics versus esthetics.

However, it is not really that simple. Is it true, for instance, that Jews always looked down upon physical beauty? Does Judaism really take a negative attitude towards beauty and art and esthetics? Just what does Judaism have to say about Beauty? What is the meaning of Beauty for the Jew - or better - what is the Jewish meaning of Beauty?

Let us understand, at the very outset, that the Jew certainly appreciated Beauty. While he was not a pagan who worshipped it, he yet found some very positive values in physical beauty, and his admiration for it was not less than that of other peoples. And let us realize, too, that we do not mean any sort of abstract beauty, or spiritual beauty. We mean beauty of form and color and harmony and symmetry - the word "beauty" as the layman means and understands and appreciates it. Our Bible and Rabbis took this attitude for the simple reason that there is nothing in the world that is wrong or sinful with beauty that should prevent man from delighting in it. When our Torah tells us that Rachel was "beautiful of appearance", it means just that. And when our Father Abraham told his wife Sarah "Behold, I know that thou art

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beautiful", he, too, meant what he said. So too, when our Rabbis allegorize and say that of the ten measures of Beauty bequeathed to this world, Jerusalem took nine, they mean that Jerusalem was a charming and delightful city. No, our Rabbis were not insensitive to the charm and grace of beauty. And even that great scholar and saint, Rabbi Akiva, felt an intense admiration for beauty and sadness at its passing. The Talmud relates that when Rabbi Akiva saw the wife of "Toronosropus Ha'rasha", who was a very beautiful woman, that he began to weep, because, he explained, "hai Shufra bali afra", this beauty will be destroyed by the earth, beauty is bound to die in time. These are not the words of an austere and ascetic hermit who hibernates in his ivory tower and has no appreciation for the more human aspects of life. These are not the words of a Christian Theologian who damns the sinful origin of "the flesh", and sees in physical Beauty the work of the Devil.

So that when we are told that the cultural differences between Greece and Israel lay only in the attitudes towards Beauty, and that Israel rejected all emphasis on it, we can be certain that that is not true. Jews are not strangers to the world of beauty and art and harmony.

But to leave the matter there, would be a gross injustice. We should not imply that the Jewish meaning of Beauty is exactly the same as that of the pagan peoples. Indeed not. And this leads us to our second point: that while Jews enjoyed physical beauty, it was to them also a moral experience; that is, they learned something from it. Anyone who has been inspired by some great vision of beauty or work of art can testify to the fact that it teaches you something very definite: it teaches you that there is a G-d, Lord of the Universe, who created all this beauty.

When Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel, the Talmud relates, was one day walking past the Har Ha'bayis, the mount upon which the Temple stood, he saw "nachris achas na'ah be'yosser", a gentile woman who was exceptionally beautiful. I can imagine what would have been the reaction of an ascetic person, some austere Monk who would have seen this beautiful woman atop Mount Zion. No doubt he would have been terrified at beholding what he regards as the work of the Devil in this Holy place. I can imagine, too, what would have been the reaction of some ancient pagan or, in fact, the typical modern person to that situation. He would have reacted in a lewd and lascivious manner, showing his contempt for both holiness and beauty. But not so Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel! His reaction was neither that of outrage nor that of temptation. His reaction was the very essence of the Jewish reaction. For he merely quoted a verse from the Psalms: MAH GADLU MA'ASECHA HA'SHEM!, "How great are Thy works, O LO-d". What a powerful expression of the Jewish attitude towards Beauty! Unlike the poet Whittier who exclaims,

"Art's perfect forms no moral need,
And Beauty is its own excuse",

Judaism maintains that "art's perfect forms" are a moral - the moral that it is G-d who created them; and Beauty, far from being its own excuse, is G-d's elegant way of saying: "I was here". Where an art critic says, "Beautiful! The work of a genius", the Jew says, "Beautiful! The work of G-d".

Our Rabbis, in a very quaint passage, try to tell us that same thing in yet another way. In discussing the beauty of our Mother Sarah, they say that "HAKOL BIFNEI SARAH, KI'KOF BIFNEI ADAM", that anyone else compared to Sarah, was like a monkey compared to a man, so great was her beauty. And that Sarah was inferior in beauty to Eve, the first woman "KIKOF BIFNEI ADAM", like a monkey compared to

a man; and, further, that in the same way, Adam, the first man, was so much more handsome than Eve was beautiful. And finally, "ADAM HA'RISHON BIFNEI SHECHINAH KI'KOF BIFNEI ADAM", that the beauty of Adam compared to that of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, was like that of a monkey to that of a Man. Now, we can understand the comparison of Sarah to Eve, and Eve to Adam, but what do our Rabbis mean by comparing the beauty of Adam to that of the Shechinah? Certainly no one has ever seen G-d; how then can He be called beautiful? What our Rabbis mean, obviously, is that all beauty - physical beauty, the handsomeness of Adam and the beauty of Eve and Sarah - stems from the work of the Shechinah, the Creation of G-d. Without G-d, our Rabbis mean to tell us, there can be no beauty. MAH GADLU MA'ASECHA HA'SHEM. "How great are Thy works, O L-rd!"

Perhaps both these points we are trying to make - the Jewish affirmation of Beauty and the moral experience of it - are best summarized in the words of the Baal Shem Tov, the great founder of Hassidism, who said, "When you admire beauty in a woman, remember that her beauty is but a reflection of the Supreme Source of Beauty - the Lord. Then, why be attracted by the mere reflection? Why not attach yourself to the Source of Beauty itself? "

The third, and final, point which must be mentioned in an analysis of the Jewish meaning of Beauty, is that the Jew recognized more than physical or material beauty. True, the Jew appreciated that too - but there was a higher type of Beauty which held an almost hypnotic fascination for our people. And that is not physical beauty, not material beauty, which is frozen and static and can only be viewed with the eye passively, but a type of beauty which describes action. There is such a thing as a beautiful act, the beauty of MA'ASIM TOVIM. In a word, it is the beauty of Goodness. And goodness is not static, it must result from a good deed,

a good accomplishment. When our Bible tells of the "discovery" of Saul, later to become first King of Israel, by the Prophet Samuel, the Bible describes young Saul in glowing terms. We are told that VE'AIN ISH MI'BNEI YISROEL TOV MIMENU - "there was no man from among the children of Israel better than he". So that he was a good person. But the Aramaic translator, the TARGUM, translates that verse somewhat differently, and writes, VE'LAIS GAVRA MIBNEI YISROEL SHAPIR MINEI - "there was no man from among the children of Israel more handsome than he". Goodness, then, and beauty are related. Goodness is good-looking too.

I shall never forget one certain old man whom I remember only ^{by} the name "Reb Shaye". This was in the days when I "davened" in my grandfather's shul in Williamsburgh when I was six and seven and eight years old. When we children would make a good deal of noise and disrupt the services and the adults would scold us, Reb Shaye would wink to us and in a very audible whisper would advise us not to listen to them because a shul is a place where a child should have fun. When one of the younger children, who had not learned to read yet but who came to shul and wanted a siddur in imitation of his elders, asked for one, Reb Shaye would give him not only a siddur but a big Chumash with all the "meforshim". During the High Holidays, when Services were a bit too long for the patience of eight-year olds, Reb Shaye would gather us about him and tell us one of his "chassidische maasilech". How we loved that man. To us he was a terrifically handsome person. I think that he was one of the most beautiful people I have ever known. And yet, as I think back after all these years, I remember that he was hopelessly deformed man, with an unsightly hunchback. His face was the most homely I have ever seen, and he had a scraggy beard that was eaten out in spots. Physically he was truly ugly. Yet, I repeat, to us he was a specimen of real beauty. Somehow his goodness was that

catalyst which changed ugliness to beauty.

Our Rabbis, interpreting a verse from the Song of Songs, make that point too. MAH YAFU FE'AMAYICH BA'NEALIM, "How beautiful are thy feet in sandals", exclaims Solomon in his Song. Our Rabbis comment that this refers to the feet of the pilgrims, the OLEI REGEL, as they traveled, from all parts of the world, to the Temple in Jerusalem three times a year. One would think that there are many more objects in this world which our Rabbis could single out for their exquisite beauty. But our Rabbis were very discriminating. Yes, they said, these feet of the pilgrims, feet which had traveled from the hot-springs of Tiberius in the north and the deserts of the Negev in the south making the long trek to the Holy City, feet which were tired and muddy and perspiring and calloused and cracked and swollen and blistering - such feet are beautiful; for when such feet walk because their object is a MITZVAH, when such feet blister because they are on a pilgrimage, when such feet swell because they are on a mission of holiness, then beautiful they are indeed. MAH YAFU FE'AMAYICH BA'NAALIM.

How often people expect of a Rabbi that he should, in speaking and preaching to them, demonstrate the "beauty" of Judaism. "Rabbi, I want to appreciate the Beauty of Judaism". Judaism is beautiful indeed but what we must understand is that it is not the ^{sort} ~~art~~ of beauty that can be seen or heard in order to be appreciated; it must be felt and lived. The feet of the pilgrims were nothing to look at; but they were beautiful in their walking and acting - and yes, in their aching!

Hans Christian Anderson, the great fairy-tale writer, in one of his stories published for the first time only this week, tells of a very severe art-critic who one day stood by the seashore

watching the waves. "This is beautiful, superb", he admitted, "superb and right". Whereupon G-d appeared, took off his hat and said, "Thank you, Herr Professor". You see, G-d does not want us so much to appreciate the Beauty of what **He** created; He would rather choose to appreciate the Beauty of what we do and create.

In summary, then, we have made three points: First, that Judaism takes a positive attitude towards Beauty and affirms the appreciation of ordinary physical Beauty. Secondly, that this involves, for Jews, a moral experience; it tells us that there is a G-d who created this Beauty. And thirdly, that there is a **higher** type of Beauty, the beauty of goodness and good action and good deeds, the esthetics of ethics, which has always fascinated us.

In the words of an almost forgotten poet, "Music is the voice of G-d; Beauty - His fingerprints".