

BEAUTY
AND
UGLINESS



Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum



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22 And the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed their demands and appoint a king for them.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “All of you go home.” **1** There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of substance. **2** He had a son whose name was Saul, an excellent young man; no one among the Israelites was handsomer than he; he was a head taller than any of the people.

Text #2: I Samuel 16:18.

ויען אֶחָד מֵהַנְּעָרִים וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה רָאִיתִי בֶן לִישׁׁי בֵּית הַלְּחָמִי יָדַע גָּזֹן וְגִבּוֹר חָיִל וְאִישׁ מִלְחָמָה וְנָכוֹן דָּבָר וְאִישׁ תָּאֵר וְהִ' עִמּוֹ:

One of the attendants spoke up, “I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite [David] who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and the LORD is with him.”

Text #3: Esther 2:2-4; 2:7; 2:16-17.

ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ נְעָרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׁרָתָיו וּבְקִשּׁוֹ לְמַלְכָּה נְעוּרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מִרְאָה: ג וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל־מְדִינֹת מְלֻכּוֹתָו וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־נְעָרֵהָ בְּתוּלָה טוֹבָת מִרְאָה אֶל־שׂוֹשֵׁן הַפִּירָה אֶל־בֵּית הַנְּשִׂיִם אֶל־יַד הַגָּא סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַנְּשִׂיִם וְנִחַן מִמְרוֹיָהוֹן: ד וְהַנְּעָרָה אֲשֶׁר תִּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ תַּחַת וְשֵׁתִי וַיִּשָּׁב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן....:

ז וְהִי אִמּוֹ אֶת־הַדּוֹסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בְּתִדּוֹ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְאִם וְהַנְּעָרָה יִפְתִּי־תָאֵר וְטוֹבָת מִרְאָה וּבְמוֹת אֲבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לְקַחָהּ מִרְדֵּכָי לֹו לְבַת.... ט וְתִלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָד וְשׂוֹרֹז אֶל־בֵּית מְלֻכּוֹתָו בְּתוֹדֵשׁ הַעֲשָׂרִי הוֹאִי־תוֹדֵשׁ טַבַּת בְּשַׁנְת־שָׁבַע לְמַלְכוּתָו: יז וַיִּצְאָהָב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל־הַנְּשִׂיִם וַתִּשְׂאֵתָו וַתִּסָּד לְפָנָיו מִכָּל־הַבְּתוּלוֹת וַיִּשָּׂם כְּתֹר־מְלֻכּוֹת בְּרֹאשָׁהּ וַיַּמְלִיכָהּ תַּחַת וְשֵׁתִי:

2 The king's [Ahasuerus] servants who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. **3** Let your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. **4** And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti.” The proposal pleased the king, and he acted upon it...

7 He [Mordecai] was foster father to Hadassah — that is Esther — his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter... **16** Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. **17** The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

➤ Ask:

1. What do Saul, David and Esther have in common? How do they differ?
2. What are some of the traits used to reinforce the descriptions of the characters' attractiveness?
3. According to the texts, did any of these characters attain power by personally using their beauty? How?
4. Do you think people need to be beautiful to become politically powerful? Why or why not?
5. Do we remember people as more beautiful because they were powerful?

These three characters attained royal power at least in part due to their beauty. Based on the characterizations of Saul, David and Esther, we might think that beauty is a prerequisite for even being considered for a position of royal power. Esther is chosen by King Ahasuerus as queen due to her beauty. While she is not automatically given the same type of royal power as the king, her position as queen gives her the opportunity to influence the king.

While Saul and David were both selected by God directly — their power was conferred upon them by that divine selection — the Bible mentions their physical beauty explicitly, and states clearly that they were beautiful even before they were crowned. In Saul's case, his height/beauty seems to be quite relevant to the choice. Yet the selecting of David is more nuanced. Earlier in the chapter in the Book of Samuel, when Samuel goes looking for the one who will become king after Saul, he comes across one of David's older brothers and receives this advice from God:

Text #4: I Samuel 16:7.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל אַל־תִּבְט אֶל־מְרֹאֶהוּ וְאֶל־גְּבוֹה קוֹמָתוֹ כִּי מֵאִסְתֵּיהוּ כִּי לֹא אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה הָאָדָם כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לְעֵינָיו וְה' יִרְאֶה לְלֵבָב:

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Pay no attention to his appearance or his stature, for I have rejected him. For not as man sees [does the LORD see]; man sees only what is visible, but the LORD sees into the heart.”

➤ Ask:

1. What does it mean to look “into the heart”?
2. When you are choosing a person for something specific (e.g. a job, a date, a partnership, etc...), how does beauty — or physical appearance — influence your decisions?

When David is chosen to help King Saul, Text #2 tells us that, in addition to his physical beauty, David was a warrior, a man of valor, one who speaks well, and has God's approval. In Text #4 (which comes before Text #2 in the Bible), when Samuel goes to look for the successor, God provides clear advice to look beyond appearance. We say that David is beautiful, but being beautiful is not enough to be chosen as the king. God does not choose a king solely because he is beautiful, but beautiful appearance is often a sign of God's favor. The same biblical story implying that beauty is a pathway to power also shows how God told Samuel clearly that appearance is not to be taken into consideration.

There is a complicated relationship between beauty and power — which comes first? A leader's beauty can reinforce the legal or social power that is part of his or her hierarchical position, by inspiring loyalty and devotion in his or her followers. A ruler who comes to a powerful position can quickly lose that control without some participation from the subjects; whether by coercion, force, charm or devotion, a ruler's power only extends as far as his or her ability to have commands carried out. Beauty can make people want to do as they are commanded.

Beautiful people can have a certain power over those around them, even if they are not royalty. Let us look at Joseph, son of Jacob, whose beauty affords him some power and influence in a situation in which he would otherwise be helpless.

Part Two: Your Own Beauty Can be Dangerous to You (25 minutes)

➤ Ask participants to read Text #5 and answer the questions in *chavruta*.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

With your *chavruta* partner, pay close attention to the beginning and the end of this biblical episode involving Joseph and Potiphar's wife:

Text #5: Genesis 39:6-20.

ו ויהי יוסף ופיהתאר ויפה מראה: ז ויהי אחר הדברים האלה ותשא אשת־אדניו את־עיניה אל־יוסף ותאמר שכבה עמי: ח וימאן | ויאמר אל־אשת אדניו הן אדני לא־נגדע אתי מה־בבית וכל אֲשֶׁר־ישׁלו נתן בְּיָדִי: ט איננו גָּדוֹל בְּבֵית הַזֶּה מִמֶּנִּי | וְלֹא־חָשׂוּךְ מִלְּנִי מֵאוֹמֶה כִּי אִם־אוֹתָךְ בְּאֶשֶׁר אֶת־אֲשֶׁתּוֹ וְאִיךָ אֶעֱשֶׂה הַרְעָה הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת וְחַטָּאתִי לֹא־לִי: י ויהי כַּדְּבָרָה אֲל־יוֹסֵף יוֹם | וְגַם וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֶלְיָהָ לְשׁוֹכַב אֶצְלָהּ לְהִיזֵת עִמָּה:

יא ויהי כַּהֵינִים הָיָה ויבא הַבַּיִתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֹאכְתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם בְּבֵיתִי: יב וּתְתַפְשֶׂהוּ בְּכַנּוֹן לֵאמֹר שְׁכַבָּה עִמִּי ויעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ ויָנֹס ויֵצֵא הַחוּצָה: יג ויהי כַּרְאוֹתָהּ כִּי־עֲזָב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ ויָנֹס הַחוּצָה: יד וּתְקַרְא לְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתָהּ וּתְאָמַר לָהֶם לָמָּר רָאוּ הַבָּיִא לָנוּ אִישׁ עֲבָרִי לְצַחֵק בָּנוּ כֹּא אֵלַי לְשׁוֹכַב עִמִּי וְאֶקְרָא בְּקוֹל גְּדוֹל: טו ויהי כְּשִׁמְעוֹ כִּי־הִרְיַמְתִּי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא ויעֲזָב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי ויָנֹס ויֵצֵא הַחוּצָה: טז וּתְנַחַּח בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלָהּ עַד־בּוֹא אֲדֹנָיו אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ:

יז וּתְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לֵאמֹר בְּאֲזֵי הַעֲבֹד הָעֲבָרִי אֲשֶׁר־הִבֵּאתָ לָנוּ לְצַחֵק בִּי: יח ויהי כַּהֵינִים קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא ויעֲזָב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי ויָנֹס הַחוּצָה: יט ויהי כְּשִׁמְעוֹ אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־דְּבָרֵי אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה לִי עַבְדְּךָ ויָחַר אָפוֹ: כ ויִנְחַח אֲדֹנָי יוֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֶהוּ אֶל־בֵּית הַסֹּהַר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אִסְרוּ [אֲסִירֵי] הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲסִירִים וַיְהִי־שָׁם בְּבֵית הַסֹּהַר:

...6 He [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph's hands and with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome. 7 After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. 9 He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" 10 And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.

11 One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, 12 she caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. 13 When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, 14 she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. 15 And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside." 16 She kept his garment beside her, until his master came home.

17 Then she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; 18 but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside." 19 When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, "Thus and so your slave did to me," he was furious. 20 So Joseph's master had him put in prison, where the king's prisoners were confined.

➤ Ask:

1. When the story begins, who is in control? Why and how does that person have power over the other?
2. When in the story does the power structure shift? How?
3. Was being handsome helpful to Joseph? In what ways?
4. Was being handsome a detriment to Joseph? How?

This text describes Joseph as making decisions and running a household even though he was a slave. He makes himself indispensable to his master, Potiphar, who rewards him with trust. His beauty gives him some influence over Potiphar's wife, whose infatuation may give him a sort of temporary power over her, but also puts him at risk when he denies her wishes.

One may also wonder whether Potiphar's wife would have noticed him at all if he were still just a slave, or if he came to her attention because he had been promoted within the household. Likewise, would she have been so enamored of him if he weren't so "well built and handsome", and were just the steward of her husband's house?

The power dynamics of this episode shift at the end, when it is Joseph's word against that of Potiphar's wife. For all the trust his master put in him, he has no way to disprove her accusations. Joseph loses the little power he had when he is thrown into prison, and his beauty does not bring him mercy.

➤ Bring the group back together.

Let us look now at commentary from the sages, who point out other potential dangers of being beautiful or handsome, including vanity. Vanity appears in the form of a vulnerability to flattery, of over-attentive grooming, or excessive pride in one's self or appearance.

Text #6 comes from *Midrash Tanchuma*, a collection of discussions of the Torah passed down through the generations and believed to have been compiled around the 16th century in Constantinople, with a later edition published in the late 19th century. Here, it comments on Joseph.

➤ Read Text #6 aloud.

Text #6: *Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev 8.*

כיון שראה רבו כן, מסר לו את כל המפתחות ולא היה יודע אחריו כלום, שכן אומר, הן אדני לא ידע אתי מה בבית. כיון שראה יוסף את עצמו בכך, התחיל אוכל ושותה, מסלסל בשערו, ואומר ברוך הוא, אביך מתאבל עליך בשק ואפר, ואתה אוכל ושותה ומסלסל בשערך, הרי אדונתך מזדוגת לך ומצרה לך. לך כתיב: 'ותשא אשת אדניו.' זוימאן.

When his master became aware of this, he entrusted him with the keys of the household, and concerned himself no longer with any household matters, as is said: *Behold, my master, having me, knoweth not what is in the house* (Genesis, 39:8). As soon as he realized his own importance, he began to eat, drink, and curl his hair, and say: "Blessed be the Omnipotent One who has caused me to forget my father's house." Whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked him, saying: "Your father mourns for you in sackcloth and ashes, but you eat and drink and curl your hair; therefore, your mistress will impose herself on you and will torment you. Hence it is written: *His master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph (ibid., v. 7). But he refused (ibid., v. 8).*

➤ Ask:

1. How does the Midrash characterize Joseph's behavior?
2. The Midrash says that Jacob — Joseph's father — is in mourning, smearing himself with ash and dressing in rags. This is contrasted with Joseph's comfortable life in his new master's house. What do you think the Midrash is telling us about Joseph's vanity?
3. What connections is the Midrash making between vanity and temptation?

Jacob in his mourning for Joseph, who he believes is dead, is in a way "anti-grooming" — making himself dirty and dressing in ugly sackcloth. Joseph, who is actually still alive, is eating well and has time to curl his hair. How can Joseph primp and feast at a time like this? Shouldn't he feel guilty about it? This Midrash shows that it is one thing to be a bit vain, but another to be vain when you know someone else is suffering. According to the explanation in this commentary, Joseph is punished for being overly concerned with his beauty, through being tempted by Potiphar's wife.

Rashi comments on Genesis 39:6. Rashi lived in France in the 11th century. He is the most important commentator on the Bible and Talmud, and one of the most famous scholars in Jewish history.

➤ **Read text #7 aloud.**

Text #7: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 39:6.

ויהי יוסף יפה תואר — כִּי־וַיֵּרָא אֵת עֲצָמוֹ מוֹשֵׁל, הִתְחַיֵּל אֹכֵל וְשׂוֹתָהּ וּמְסַלֵּס בְּשִׁעְרוֹ אָמַר הַקֹּדֶם הָ: אֲבִיד מִתְאַבֵּל, וְאַתָּה מְסַלֵּס בְּשִׁעְרֵךְ, אֲנִי מְגַרָה כָּךְ אֶת הַדּוֹב

AND JOSEPH WAS OF BEAUTIFUL FORM — As soon as he saw that he was ruler (in the house) he began to eat and drink and curl his hair. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Your father is mourning and you curl your hair! I will let a bear loose against you”.

➤ **Ask:**

1. What does Rashi suggest is the source of Joseph’s vanity?
2. Rashi relates a midrash as saying that God will “let a bear loose” on Joseph. What does this mean?
3. According to Rashi, what is Joseph being punished for?

Rashi notes that Joseph is vain about both his beauty and his position in Potiphar’s household. He is afforded a sense of power by being indispensable to his master (“my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands”) and the object of desire for the mistress of the house. He feels a sense of security and position, even though he is still a slave. As a punishment for his vain behavior, God “let a bear loose”, which in this case is a metaphor for Potiphar’s wife. Her desire for Joseph is carnal — literally, for flesh. Joseph is a beautiful man and his primping and grooming makes himself even more tempting to her. Rashi illustrates here that if you spill honey, you should not be surprised to find it has attracted a bear!

At the end of the story in the Bible, Joseph rejects his mistress’s advances. When she realizes that she cannot have him, her flattery ceases and with it, his position of power in the household. His jilted would-be lover takes revenge on him for his refusal by accusing him of doing the very thing he did not do, and has him jailed. Any power, security or advantage he had in Potiphar’s house is lost to him — a slave — when he is imprisoned.

➤ **Ask:**

1. When people use their beauty to achieve something, how do you think they feel internally? Powerful? Valued only on physical characteristics? Low or high self-esteem?
2. How do we balance using our strengths (whether physical or intellectual) with keeping our vanity in check?

There are times when beauty can be used as a tool to acquire or achieve something you desire: Beauty can bring adoration, flattery, even obedience. But power that comes from someone else’s desire is, in many ways, just an illusion. You can sway others with their desire for you, but that power over others can quickly turn to vanity and their desire can turn to anger or jealousy. It is easy to be caught up in vanity, believing we have more power than we actually do, which leaves us open to being taken advantage of — or worse — and losing our power all together.

Part Three: Tempted by Beauty (15 minutes)

Now let us examine another side of the matter, where a powerful person's desire for beauty can have dangerous consequences that affect others who come in contact with it. We will now look at the story of King David's desire for the beautiful Bathsheba.

► **Read Text #8 aloud.**

Text #8: 2 Samuel 11:2-6, 10-11, 16-17.

ב ויהי | לעת הערב ולקם דוד מעל משכבו ויתהלך על-גג בית-המלך וירא אשה רחצת מעל הגג והאשה טובת מראה מאד: **ג** וישלח דוד וידרש לאשה ויאמר הלא-זאת בת-שבע בת-אליעזר אשת אוריה החתי: **ד** וישלח דוד מלאכים ויחקקה ומבוא אליה וישכב עמה ותיא מתקדשת מטמאתה ומשב אל-ביתה: **ה** ותהר האשה ותשלח ומגד לדוד ותאמר הנה אנכי: **ו** וישלח דוד אלי-יואב שלח אלי את-אוריה החתי וישלח יואב את-אוריה אל-דוד:

י ויגדו לדוד לאמר לא-יכרד אוריה אל-ביתו ויאמר דוד אל-אוריה הלא מדרוך אתה בא מדוע לא-יכרדת אל-ביתך: **יא** ויאמר אוריה אל-דוד הלאו וישראל ויהודה ישבים בפסות ואדני יואב ועבדי אדני על-פני השדה חנים ואני אבוא אל-ביתי לאכל ולשתות ולשכב עם-אשתי חלה ותי נפשו אם-אעשה את-הדבר הזה:

יד ויהי בכרך ויכתב דוד ספר אלי-יואב וישלח ביד אוריה: **טו** ויכתב בספר לאמר הבו את-אוריה אל-מול פגי המלחמה והחזקה ושבתם מאתריי ונקה ומת: (ס) **טז** ויהי בשמור יואב אל-העיר ויתן את-אוריה אל-המקום אשר ידע פי אנשי-חיל שם: **יז** וינצאו אנשי העיר ויחטמו את-יואב ויפל מר-העם מעבדי דוד וימת גם אוריה החתי:

2 Late one afternoon, David rose from his couch and strolled on the roof of the royal palace; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, **3** and the king sent someone to make inquiries about the woman. He reported, “She is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam [and] wife of Uriah the Hittite.” **4** David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her — she had just purified herself after her period — and she went back home. **5** The woman conceived, and she sent word to David, “I am pregnant.” **6** Thereupon David sent a message to Joab, “Send Uriah the Hittite to me”; and Joab sent Uriah to David...

10 When David was told that Uriah had not gone down to his house, he said to Uriah, “You just came from a journey; why didn't you go down to your house?” **11** Uriah answered David, “The Ark and Israel and Judah are located at Succoth, and my master Joab and Your Majesty's men are camped in the open; how can I go home and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As you live, by your very life, I will not do this!”...

14 In the morning, David wrote a letter to Joab, which he sent with Uriah. **15** He wrote in the letter as follows: “Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed.” **16** So when Joab was besieging the city, he stationed Uriah at the point where he knew that there were able warriors. **17** The men of the city sallied out and attacked Joab, and some of David's officers among the troops fell; Uriah the Hittite was among those who died.

► **Ask:**

1. In this text, who are the people affected by power's attraction to beauty? How?
2. We've seen that people in positions of power can be especially attracted to beauty. Why do you think that is?
3. How do powerful people use their position to acquire beautiful people or things? What connection do you see here between power, temptation and beauty?
4. How can this behavior by a powerful person be harmful to a beautiful person? How can it be harmful to the powerful person him/herself? To third parties or bystanders?

In this story, David's power as king enables him to command Bathsheba to come to him. He was tempted by her beauty, and he possessed the power to acquire the beauty he desired. David acted upon his temptation, but there were consequences for him, Bathsheba and Uriah. This story illustrates that the combination of power and the desire for beauty can be dangerous; David gives into temptation and misuses his power by having Uriah killed.

In Text #9, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers a comment on overcoming temptation. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Text #9: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *Pebbles of Wisdom.*

It is not possible objectively to compare men in terms of their transgressions, because this is not the correct gauge of worth. One should compare them on the basis of the degree of effort required to overcome temptation.

What for one person is a terrible temptation, on account of his personality or history, is for another of no import whatsoever...For a gambler, playing cards has a different weight than for someone who has never played. It is always easier to tell someone to overcome a wrong impulse. The question is whether I myself can do as much even if I am a very righteous person.

It is not necessarily a matter of correcting conspicuously appalling sin but rather of the ordinary virtuous man's capacity to flee from the passionate urges of his own heart, to avoid the evils of slander and other such seemingly trivial modes of behavior like thoughtless speech and careless dealing in money transactions.

➤ Ask:

1. How does this comment on overcoming temptation influence your understanding of Joseph and King David?
2. Does power — having the possibility to actually get what you want — make it more difficult to resist temptation? How?
3. Having read these stories, do you think that characters who are tempted by beauty redeem themselves by overcoming that temptation?
4. Are characters who are described as beautiful less beautiful in your estimation when they behave badly?
5. Does beauty matter?

We have seen that beauty can be tempting in many ways — tempting because it brings a person power, or because beautiful people are desirable, or because beauty can distract us from the reality of a situation that we may not wish to confront. The true measure of a person, according to the Bible and the sages, is in how they handle their encounter with the temptations of beauty and power. When beautiful people are given power, or when powerful people try to acquire beauty, the consequences of acting on these desires are almost always obscured by the immediate gratification of delight.

A young man is crowned king, but he does not learn what that responsibility is until he fails a test from God. A beautiful girl is made a queen, but her influential position has some limitations. A beautiful slave forgets his peril when he is the object of temporary infatuation. In each of these situations, beauty and power, once granted, are quickly followed by trial or temptation. However much the Bible may seem to associate beauty with the attainment of power or influence, it also shows that beauty can be part of a character's downfall.

Conclusion (5 minutes)

Looking together at descriptions and stories of Saul, Esther, Joseph, and David offers us different perspectives and insights into how the Bible views the complicated relationship between beauty, power and temptation. These examples illustrate that beauty can be a pathway to power, beauty can distract someone from power through vanity, and beauty can be dangerous to a powerful person and to others. Beauty can lead a person into power and into danger. Beauty gives power because people are attracted to the beautiful person, and the beautiful person has power over the desirous ones because they want to own or be near that beauty.

➤ Ask:

1. How do these stories inform how you see the relationship between beauty, power, and temptation?
2. How relevant do you think these stories are in the 21st century? What practical lessons and insights can you learn from the stories we have read today?

Part One: A Pathway to Power

Text #1: I Samuel 8:22-9:2.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלִי וְהַמְלַכְתָּ לָהֶם מֶלֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־אֲנָשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכוּ אִישׁ לְכֹו אִישׁ לְעִירוֹ: וַיְהִי־אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי־מִינִן [מִבְּנֵי־מִינִן] וְשֵׁמוֹ קִישׁ בֶּן־אֲבִיאל בֶּן־זֶרֶר וְגַדְכֹוֹרֶת בֶּן־אֲפִיחַ בֶּן־אִישׁ יְמִינִי גִבּוֹר חָיִל: וְלֹד־הָיָה לוֹ וְשֵׁמוֹ שָׁאוּל בְּחוּר וְטוֹב וְאִינוֹ אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ מִשְׁכֵּמוֹ וְיָמְעָלָה גִבּוֹת מִכָּל־הָעָם:

22 And the LORD said to Samuel, “Heed their demands and appoint a king for them.” Samuel then said to the men of Israel, “All of you go home.” **1** There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminites, a man of substance. **2** He had a son whose name was Saul, an excellent young man; no one among the Israelites was handsomer than he; he was a head taller than any of the people.

Text #2: I Samuel 16:18.

וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶחָד מִהַנְּעָרִים וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנֵנּוּ רְאִיתִי בֶן לְיִשַׁי בֵּית הַלְחֶמִי יָדַע גִּבּוֹר וְגִבּוֹר חָיִל וְאִישׁ מִלְחָמָה וְנָכוֹן דָּבָר וְאִישׁ תָּאֵר וְהִי עִמּוֹ:

One of the attendants spoke up, “I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite [David] who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and the LORD is with him.”

Text #3: Esther 2:2-4; 2:7; 2:16-17.

ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ נְעָרֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ מִשְׂרָתָיו וּבְקִשּׁוֹ לְמַלְכוֹת נְעוּרוֹת בְּתוּלוֹת טוֹבוֹת מְרָאָה: ג וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים בְּכָל־מְדִינוֹת מְלֻכוֹתָו וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת־כָּל־נְעָרֵי־בְּתוּלָה טוֹבוֹת מְרָאָה אֶל־שׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה אֶל־בַּיִת הַנְּשִׁים אֶל־יַד הַנְּגָא סָרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁמֵר הַנְּשִׁים וְנָתַן תְּמָרוֹמֵיהֶן: ד וַהֲנַעֲרָה אֲשֶׁר תֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ תַּחַת וְשָׂתִי וַיֵּיטֵב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן: ... ז וַיְהִי אִמֶּנּוּ אֶת־הַדּוֹסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר בְּתִדּוֹ כִּי אֵין לָהּ אָב וְנָאֵם וַהֲנַעֲרָה יַפְת־תָּאֵר וְטוֹבוֹת מְרָאָה וּבְמֹת אֲבִיהָ וְאִמָּהּ לְקַנְזָה מְרַדְּבָי לוֹ לְבַת: ... טז וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרֹשׁ אֶל־בַּיִת מְלֻכוֹתָו בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַעֲשָׂרִי הוֹאֵר־חֹדֶשׁ טַבָּת בְּשָׁנַת־שִׁבְעַ לְמַלְכוּתָו: יז וַיֵּאָהֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל־הַנְּשִׁים וַתִּשְׂאֵרֶנּוּ וַתְּסַד לְפָנָיו מִכָּל־הַבְּתוּלוֹת וַיִּשָּׂם כְּתֹרֶת מְלֻכוֹת בְּרָאשֶׁיהָ וַיִּמְלֶכָהּ תַּחַת וְשָׂתִי:

2 The king’s [Ahasuerus] servants who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. **3** Let your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege, the king’s eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. **4** And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti.” The proposal pleased the king, and he acted upon it...

7 He [Mordecai] was foster father to Hadassah — that is Esther — his uncle’s daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter... **16** Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. **17** The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Text #4: I Samuel 16:7.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל אַל־תִּבְטַט אֶל־מְרָאֵהוּ וְאֶל־גִּבּוֹתוֹ כִּי מֵאִסְתֵּיהוּ כִּי י: לֹא אֲשֶׁר יֵרָאֶה הָאָדָם כִּי הָאֵדָם יֵרָאֶה לְעֵינַיִם וְהִי יֵרָאֶה לְלֵבָב:

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Pay no attention to his appearance or his stature, for I have rejected him. For not as man sees [does the LORD see]; man sees only what is visible, but the LORD sees into the heart.”

Part Two: Your Own Beauty Can be Dangerous to You

Text #5: Genesis 39:6-20.

ו וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יָפֵה־תָאֵר וַיְפַה מְרָאָה: ז וַיְהִי אַחֲרַיִם הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־עַיְנֶיהָ אֶל־יוֹסֵף וַתֹּאמֶר שְׂכַבָה עִמִּי: ח וַיִּמָּאֵן | וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו הֵן אֲדֹנָי לֹא־נָתַע אֶתִּי מִהַ־בַּיִת וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־נָשְׂלוּ נָתַן בְּיָדִי: ט אֵינְנִי גָדוֹל בַּבַּיִת הַזֶּה מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא־חָשַׁף מִגְּלִי מֵאוֹמֶה כִּי אִם־אוֹתָהּ בְּאִשֶׁר אֶתְּאָשְׁתּוּ וְאִידָה אֲעֲשֶׂה הַרְעָה הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת וְחַטָּאתִי לֹא־לִקְיָם: י וַיְהִי כַּדְּבָרָה אֵל־יוֹסֵף יוֹם | יוֹם וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֶלְהִיָּהּ לְשֹׁכֵב אֶצְלָהּ לַהֲנִיחַ עִמָּה:

יא וַיְהִי כַּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וַיָּבֹא הַבַּיִתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֹאכְתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם בַּבַּיִת: יב וַתִּתְפַּשְׁהוּ בַּבְּגָדוֹ לְאִמֶּר שְׂכַבָה עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיֵּנֶס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה: יג וַיְהִי כַּרְאוֹתָהּ כִּי־עָזַב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיֵּנֶס הַחוּצָה: יד וַתִּקְרָא לְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לֹאֵר רָאוּ הַבַּיִת לָנוּ אִישׁ עֹבֵר לְצַחֵק בָּנוּ כֹּא אֵלַי לְשֹׁכֵב עִמִּי וְאִקְרָא בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל: טו וַיְהִי כִשְׁמֻעוֹ כִּי־הִרְמִיתִי קוֹלִי וְאִקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלַי וַיֵּנֶס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה: טז וַתִּנְחַח בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלָהּ עַד־כּוּבָא אֲדֹנָיו אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ:

יז וַתְּדַבֵּר אֵלָיו כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאִמֶּר כֹּא־אֵלַי הַעֲבַד הַעֲבָרִי אֲשֶׁר־הִבְאֵת לָנוּ לְצַחֵק בִּי: יח וַיְהִי כַּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וַיֵּצֵא בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלַי וַיֵּנֶס הַחוּצָה: יט וַיְהִי כִשְׁמֻעַ אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־דְּבָרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָה אֵלָיו לְאִמֶּר כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה לִי עֲבָדָה וַיִּחַר אַפּוֹ: כ וַיִּקַּח אֲדֹנָי יוֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֶהוּ אֶל־בַּיִת הַסֹּהַר מִקְּדוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אִסּוּרִי [אַסְיִרִי] מִלְּקַדְּ אִסְגָּרִים וַיְהִי־שָׁם בַּבַּיִת הַסֹּהַר:

...6 He [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph's hands and with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome. 7 After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me." 8 But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. 9 He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" 10 And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.

11 One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, 12 she caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. 13 When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, 14 she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. 15 And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside." 16 She kept his garment beside her, until his master came home.

17 Then she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; 18 but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside." 19 When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, "Thus and so your slave did to me," he was furious. 20 So Joseph's master had him put in prison, where the king's prisoners were confined.

Text #6: Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev 8.

כיון שראה רבו כן, מסר לו את כל המפתחות ולא היה יודע אחריו כלום, שכן אומר, הן אדני לא ידע אתי מה בבית. כיון שראה יוסף את עצמו בכך, התחיל אוכל ושותה, מסלסל בשערו, ואומר ברוך הוא, אביך מתאבל עליך בשק ואפר, ואתה אוכל ושותה ומסלסל בשערך, הרי אדונתך מזדוגת לך ומצרה לך. לך כתיב: 'ותשא אשת אדניו.' וימאן.

When his master became aware of this, he entrusted him with the keys of the household, and concerned himself no longer with any household matters, as is said: *Behold, my master, having me, knoweth not what is in the house* (Genesis 39:8). As soon as he realized his own importance, he began to eat, drink, and curl his hair, and say: “Blessed be the Omnipotent One who has caused me to forget my father’s house.” Whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked him, saying: “Your father mourns for you in sackcloth and ashes, but you eat and drink and curl your hair; therefore, your mistress will impose herself on you and will torment you. Hence it is written: *His master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph (ibid., v. 7). But he refused (ibid., v. 8).*

Text #7: Rashi. Commentary on Genesis 39:6.

ויהי יוסף יפה תואר — פניו שראעה עצמו מושל, התחיל אוכל ושותה ומסלטל בשעריו אמר הקב"ה: אביך מתאבל, ואמה מסלטל בשערך, אני מגרה בך את הדוב

AND JOSEPH WAS OF BEAUTIFUL FORM — As soon as he saw that he was ruler (in the house) he began to eat and drink and curl his hair. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Your father is mourning and you curl your hair! I will let a bear loose against you”.

Part Three: Tempted by Beauty

Text #8: 2 Samuel 11:2-6, 10-11, 16-17.

ב ויהי יום י ו לעת הערב ויגם דוד מעל משכבו ויתהלך על-נג בית-המלך וירא אשה רחצת מעל הגג והאשה טובת מראה מאד: ג וישלח דוד וידרש לאשה ויאמר הלא זאת בת-שבע בת-אליעזר אשת אוריה החתי: ד וישלח דוד מלאכים ויקחה ותבוא אליו וישכב עמה ותיא מתקדשות מטמאתה ותשב אל-ביתך: ה ותהר האשה ותשלח ותגד לדוד ותאמר הנה אנכי: ו וישלח דוד אל-יואב שלח אלי את-אוריה החתי וישלח יואב את-אוריה אל-דוד:

י ויגדו לדוד לאמר לא-נרד אוריה אל-ביתו ויאמר דוד אל-אוריה הלא מדרוך אתה בא מדוע לא-נרדת אל-ביתך: יא ויאמר אוריה אל-דוד ה'ארון וישראל ויהודה ישבים בספות ואדני יואב ועבדי אדני על-פני השדה חנים ואני אבוא אל-ביתי לאכל ולשתות ולשכב עם-אשתי חלד ותי נפשוך אם-אעשה את-הדבר הזה:

יד ויהי בבקר ויקרב דוד ספר אל-יואב וישלח בנד אוריה: טו ויקרב בספר לאמר הבו את-אוריה אל-מול' פני המלחמה התנקה ושבתם מאתרו ונקה ומת: (ס) טז ויהי בשמור יואב אל-העיר וימל את-אוריה אל-המקום אשר ג'ע פי אנשי-חיל שם: יז וינצאו אנשי העיר ויגמרו את-יואב ויפל מר-העם מעבדי דוד וימת גם אוריה החתי:

2 Late one afternoon, David rose from his couch and strolled on the roof of the royal palace; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, 3 and the king sent someone to make inquiries about the woman. He reported, “She is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam [and] wife of Uriah the Hittite.” 4 David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her — she had just purified herself after her period — and she went back home. 5 The woman conceived, and she sent word to David, “I am pregnant.” 6 Thereupon David sent a message to Joab, “Send Uriah the Hittite to me”; and Joab sent Uriah to David... 10 When David was told that Uriah had not gone down to his house, he said to Uriah, “You just came from a journey; why didn’t you go down to your house?” 11 Uriah answered David, “The Ark and Israel and Judah are located at Succoth, and my master Joab and Your Majesty’s men are camped in the open; how can I go home and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As you live, by your very life, I will not do this!”... 14 In the morning, David wrote a letter to Joab, which he sent with Uriah. 15 He wrote in the letter as follows: “Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed.” 16 So when Joab was besieging the city, he stationed Uriah at the point where he knew that there were able warriors. 17 The men of the city sallied out and attacked Joab, and some of David’s officers among the troops fell; Uriah the Hittite was among those who died.



Beauty, Power and Temptation

Text #9: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *Pebbles of Wisdom.*

It is not possible objectively to compare men in terms of their transgressions, because this is not the correct gauge of worth. One should compare them on the basis of the degree of effort required to overcome temptation.

What for one person is a terrible temptation, on account of his personality or history, is for another of no import whatsoever...For a gambler, playing cards has a different weight than for someone who has never played. It is always easier to tell someone to overcome a wrong impulse. The question is whether I myself can do as much even if I am a very righteous person.

It is not necessarily a matter of correcting conspicuously appalling sin but rather of the ordinary virtuous man's capacity to flee from the passionate urges of his own heart, to avoid the evils of slander and other such seemingly trivial modes of behavior like thoughtless speech and careless dealing in money transactions.



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