*Hiddur Mitzvah: Beauty and the Rabbis*

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**Text #1: Shabbat 133b.** English translation [*bold text*] and commentary [*plain text*] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*.

> What is the source for the requirement of: “This is my God and I will glorify Him”? As it was taught in a baraita with regard to the verse: “This is my God and I will glorify Him [anveihu], the Lord of my father and I will raise Him up.” The Sages interpreted anveihu homiletically as linguistically related to *not*, beauty, and interpreted the verse: Be**autify** your**self** before Him in mitzvot. Even if one fulfills the mitzva by performing it simply, it is nonetheless proper to perform the mitzva as beautifully as possible. Make before Him a beautiful sukka, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shefar, beautiful ritual fringes, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in His name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.

**Text #2: Exodus 14:21-22, 27-31, 15:1-3**

> וַיֵּטּוֹ מֹשֶה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיֶּלֹךְ יְהוֹ ה אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרֵוֶתַח קָדֶס עַזֶּה כָּל־הַלַיְלָה וַיָָשֶם אֶת־הַיָָם לֶחָרָבָה וַיְבָקְעָּו הַמָָֽיָם׃ וַיָּבֹאוּ בְּנֵי יִשְּרָאֵל בְּתָוךְ הַיָָם בַּיָּבָשָׁה וְהַמָָּם לָהֶם חֹמַּה מִמֵּימָם וּמִשְּמָאָלָם׃
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> וַיֵּטּוֹ מֹשֶה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיֵּשֶב הַיָּם ל פְּנֵיהֶם לְאֹהֶל לְאִיתָנֵו וּמָצֵּרֵם נָסֵים ל קְרָאתָו וַיָּנַעְרֵר יְהוָה אֶת־מָצֵּרֵם בְּתָוךְ הַיָּם׃ וַיָּשֶׁבוּ הַמָּם וַיְכַסֵּו אֶת־הָרֶכֶב וְאֶת־הַפֶּרֶשָּׁים לְכָל־חָלֵיל פַרְעֹּה הַבָּא אַחֲרֵיהֶם בַּיָּם לָא־נָשַׁר בַּיָּם עַד־אֶחָּד׃ וּבְנֵי יִשְּרָאֵל הָלְכוּ בַּיָּבָשָׁה בְּתָוךְ הַיָּם וְהַמָּם לָהֶם חֹמַּה מִמֵּימָם וּמִשְּמָאָלָם׃ וַיָּרְא יִשְּרָאֵל אֶת־הַיָּד הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשִּׂים יְהוָה בְּמָצֵּרֵם וַיִּרְאֶה הָעָם אֶת־יִשְּרָאֵל אִשֶּׁר נָשִּׂא אֶת־הַיָּם אִשֶּׁר נָשִּׂא לָהֶם פְּנֵיהֶם וְאִשֶּׁר נָשָּׁא לָהֶם מַעֲרֵב׃
14:21 Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the LORD drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, 22 and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

27 Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the LORD hurled the Egyptians into the sea. 28 The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen—Pharaoh’s entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. 29 But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. 30 Thus the LORD delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. 31 And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the LORD had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD; they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses.

15: 1 Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD. They said: I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea. 2 The LORD is my strength and might; He is become my deliverance. This is my God and I will enshrine Him; The God of my father, and I will exalt Him. 3 The LORD, the Warrior— LORD is His name!

Text #3: The Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael

This is my God and I will beautify (read midrashically from beauty, “nun-vav yod”) Him." Rabbi Ishmael says, "Is it possible for a man of flesh and blood to beautify his Creator? It means I shall be beautiful before God in observing the commandments. I will prepare before God a beautiful lulav, a beautiful Sukkah, beautiful tzizith, and beautiful tefillin.
Text #4: Shir Ha-Shirim 1:15.

You are yafeh my love. Ah, you are yafeh, with your dove-like eyes!

Text #5: Shir Ha-Shirim Raba 1:15.

You are yafeh through mitzvot, both positive and negative, yafeh through Loving deeds, yafeh in your house with the heave offerings and the tithes, yafeh in the field by the commands about gleaning, the Forgotten Sheaf and Second Tithe. Na'ah in the law about mixed seeds and tzizith, and about first fruits, and the fourth year planting. Na'ah in the law of brit milah, Na'ah in Tefillah, and in the reading of the Sh'ma, in the law of mezuzoth and the tefillin, in the law of the lulav and the etrog. Na'ah too, in repentance and in good works; Na'ah in this world and beautiful in the world to come.

Text #6: Proverbs 31:30.

Grace is deceptive, Beauty is illusory; It is for her awe of the LORD That a woman is to be praised.

Text #7: Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:4 (Sefaria)

You are yafeh through mitzvot, both positive and negative, yafeh through Loving deeds, yafeh in your house with the heave offerings and the tithes, yafeh in the field by the commands about gleaning, the Forgotten Sheaf and Second Tithe. Na'ah in the law about mixed seeds and tzizith, and about first fruits, and the fourth year planting. Na'ah in the law of brit milah, Na'ah in Tefillah, and in the reading of the Sh'ma, in the law of mezuzoth and the tefillin, in the law of the lulav and the etrog. Na'ah too, in repentance and in good works; Na'ah in this world and beautiful in the world to come.
Proklos son of Plosfos asked Rabban Gamliel [a question] in Akko, while he was bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite. He said to him: "It is written in your Torah (Deuteronomy 13:18): 'And let none of the condemned cling to your hand;' why then are you bathing in the bathhouse of Aphrodite? He said to him: one does not respond [to halakhic questions] in the bathhouse. When he left, he said to him: "I did not come into her territory; she came into my territory. They did not say [when they built this bathhouse]: 'Let us make a beautiful bathhouse for Aphrodite.' Rather, they said: 'Let us make Aphrodite for the beauty of the bathhouse.' Another reason: [even] if they gave you a lot of money, you would not enter before your idolatry naked and defiled and urinating in front of it. Yet she stands on the sewer pipe and the entire nation urinates in front of her. The verse (Deuteronomy 12:3) only applies to "their gods;" that which he treats like a god is prohibited, and that which he does not treat like a god is permitted."

Text #8 : Abraham Joshua Heschel “God In Search Of Man” (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1976) p. 39

The perception of beauty may well be the beginning of the experience of the sublime. The sublime is that which we see and are unable to convey. It is the silent allusion of things to a meaning greater than themselves. It is what things ultimately stand for... It is that which our words, our forms, our categories can never reach.

Text #9: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. In the Beginning.

Zeh Eli ve’Anvehu, "this is my God and I will adorn Him" (Exodus 15:2). This verse has two classical interpretations. According to one, anvehu is interpreted as ani ve’hu - me and Him, what is known in latin as imitatio Dei - imitating God, being like Him in attributes, in actions and in other ways. The second interpretation sees anvehu as derived from beauty - the commitment is to adorn, to make the holy beautiful.

These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they speak about one and the same thing. When one comes in contact - closely or remotely - with the holy, the holy must somehow emanate upon one. This emanation must find expression in ways that are perfect in terms of other values - in terms of conduct, existence and beauty. When these things join together, I am still on the periphery, within the holy; but perhaps then it is possible to glance at holiness from a distance.
In Jewish thought, the concept of beauty is linked to the central Sefira of Tiferet which in itself is actually an expression of several basic elements of existence, each of them manifesting the same fundamental quality in different ways such as: truth, Torah, beauty, compassion. The common denominator may be seen as harmony. And since this apprehension of harmony is so many-sided and variegated, it cannot be reduced to only one aesthetic meaning. Even in the Hebrew language there is a constant interchange and substitution between the concepts of the good and the beautiful, the good being called beautiful and the beautiful good, because both are grasped as a harmony between things. Tiferet is thus the basis of the good, the beautiful, and the true, without ever being manifested or capable of being directly expressed in an “image.”