Ugly Men and Beautiful Rabbis: What is Beauty in Judaism?

1) Babylonian Talmud Tractate Taanit 7a-7b

The daughter of the Emperor said to Rabi Yehoshua ben Chanania: "How can such glorified wisdom be contained in such an ugly container?"

"In what then should it be stored?"

"You, who are so important, should put your wine in kegs of gold and silver."

She went, and informed her father, and their wine was poured into kegs of gold and silver. It all went sour.

Questions to consider:
- What is troubling to the daughter of the Emperor? What does she believe about a person’s externals?
- What is Rebbe Yehoshua’s message to her? To the Emperor?
- Do you agree with the statement "If they would have been ugly, they would have learned more"? How does beauty impact learning?

2) Babylonian Talmud Babah Metziah 84a

Rabi Yoḥanan said: I alone remain of the beautiful people of Jerusalem.

Questions to consider:
- What do we learn here about the beauty of Rabi Yoḥanan? How does this compare with what we say in source #1?
- According to this text – can beauty and Torah work together? Are they at odds? Why do you think this is?
Our Rabbis taught: A person should be flexible like a reed and not hard like the cedar.

It once happened that Rabi Elazar the son of Rabi Shimon came from his Rabbi’s house in Migdal Gedor, riding on a donkey, traveling by the river. He was extremely happy, very taken with himself after having learned so much Torah.

He came upon a very ugly man. He said to him: “Shalom, Rabbi.”

He did not return his greeting. He said: “You are empty! How ugly that man is! Are all the people of your town ugly like you?”

He said: “I do not know, but why don’t you go and tell the Craftsman who made me ‘How ugly is this thing You have made!’?”

When he himself realized that he had sinned, he got off his donkey and he bowed before him.

He said: I have spoken improperly to you. Forgive me!”

He said: I will not forgive you until you go and tell the Craftsman who made me ‘How ugly is this thing You have made!’

He followed him until he reached his town.

The townspeople came out to greet him, saying: Shalom, Rabbi, Rabbi! Master, Master!”

He said to them: “Who are you calling ‘Rabbi, Rabbi’?”

They said: “This man, walking behind you.”

He said to them: If this is a Rabbi, may there not be more like him in Israel!”

They said to him “Why?”

He said to them “This is what he did to me…. ”

They said to him “Nevertheless, forgive him, for he is a great man of the Torah.”

He said: “For your sakes, I will forgive him, on the condition that he not do this again.”

Immediately, Rabi Elazar son of Rabi Shimon came in and taught: “A person should always be as bending as a reed, not as rigid as a cedar. Therefore has the reed merited to be used for the quills with which we write the Torah scroll, t’fillin and mezuzot.”

### Questions to consider:

- There are several places in the story where the text is ambiguous about who is speaking – how do you understand who is being hurt in this story?
- How does each side come to understand that they have acted badly?
- According to this source – are looks important? How do they play a role in our judgment of another person? Is there any value in using looks to teach us about an individual?

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