BEAUTY
AND
UGLINESS

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum

NOV 12, 17
www.theglobalday.org
A Project of the Aleph Society
We Salute

The Matanel Foundation

For their generous support of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s Talmud project and all of his worldwide efforts.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

We are pleased and honored to acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, in its critical partnership in the Global Day of Jewish Learning in memory of Ralph Goldman and in its help in advancing Jewish learning worldwide.

Genesis Philanthropy Group

Growing engagement of RSJ communities has been made possible with the generous support of Genesis Philanthropy Group. Genesis Philanthropy Group is committed to supporting and launching projects, programming and institutions that are focused on ensuring that Jewish culture, heritages, and values are preserved in Russian-speaking Jewish communities across the globe.
We dedicate the Global Day of Jewish Learning to the memory of Ralph I Goldman, z”l.

There was only one title that Ralph Goldman claimed for himself: “civil servant of the Jewish people”. During his 100 years of life, Ralph both served and led the Jewish people, most notably at the helm of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. More than almost anyone, he helped steer the course of 20th century Jewry.

Ralph worked under Teddy Kollek (later the legendary Mayor of united Jerusalem) as a purveyor of ships, arms and goods during the War of Independence. He then served David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, in securing American support for the newly-created Jewish State.

In later years, Ralph raised the funds to establish Israel’s high school system and its community centers. He promoted Israeli artists, writers and musicians. His wisdom and foresight — and his many communal connections — were key in establishing the Israel Museum. As the leader of the Joint, he created channels for Soviet Jews to emigrate and helped to lead the exodus of Ethiopian Jewry. Under Ralph’s aegis, the Joint expanded its work in Israel, Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Ralph adored the Jewish people — and profoundly loved its heritage. Steeped in the Bible, he would quote its verses in conversation. He opened cultural centers in the former Soviet Union. At a critical moment for the monumental endeavor of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud — when a funding shortage threatened the entire enterprise — Ralph understood the enormous importance of this asset of Jewish culture and persuaded the JDC’s leadership to step in and make it accessible to every Jew.

We will always miss — we can never replace — Ralph’s shock of white hair, his dapper bow ties and his huge, huge grin. But as we name the Global Day of Jewish Learning in his memory, we are inspired by his life and lifted by his legacy.
“Grandchildren are the crown of their elders, and the glory of children is their parents.”
– Proverbs 17:6

In honor of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren: their lives burnish the glory of those who perished in the Shoah.

For my parents, Benjamin and Charlotte Gottesfeld z”l, these children are the greatest reward…

- Chana Hanina
- Galia Hanina
- Joseph Nathan Warren

**Children of Shira and Steve Stein**
- Simcha Meir
- Tamara Yocheved
- Elyahu Aryeh
- Eitan Yosef
- Rayna
- Talia

**Children of Aliza and Zev Ganz**
- Shmuel Yoel
- Atara Rina
- Daniel Yomtov
- Yosef
- Rachel

**Children of Tamar and Josh Heller**
- Joseph Noah
- Yakira Eliyana
- Gavriella Talia
- Yehuda Meir
- Sarah Avigayil

**Children of Laura and Adam Hanina**
- Samuel Azriel
- Charlotte Eliora
- Lucy Yael

**Child of Sarah Rose Warren Siebold and Mike Siebold**
- Noah Wilbur
- Yitzchak Binyamin

And in tribute to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, whose work has opened the doors of Jewish learning to our generation and those to come.

– Fanya Gottesfeld Heller
Preface

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz has laid down a challenge to Jews everywhere: “To take a step ahead in Jewish learning and commitment.”

The Global Day of Jewish Learning is the collective response — a most successful one — with some 500 communities in 43 countries participating in 2016.

Initiated in 2010 to celebrate the completion of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s monumental translation and commentary on the Talmud, the Global Day has become an internationally recognized annual event. As the study of Torah is one of the few things that the entirety of our people can share, the Global Day is a day for all Jews to celebrate and cherish.

The Global Day is the work of many hands, internationally and in communities large and small. We appreciate the work being done on the ground to organize events in synagogues, JCCs, Hillels, Federations, and other community organizations all around the world. The success of the Global Day is due to all of your collective efforts. Thank you.

The Aleph Society, which spearheads the Global Day of Jewish Learning, is an affiliate of the Shefa Institute, which promotes the work of Rabbi Steinsaltz. We are grateful to Rabbi Menachem Even-Israel for his guidance and creativity.

Several agencies and individuals were instrumental in the planning and outreach for the Global Day. Our deepest thanks go to our key international partner, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and to our organizing partners, the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life. We are excited to again have JAFI’s Partnership2Gether join us as a community partner. We are grateful to our 20+ supporting partners, including the rabbinic bodies of all the denominations, for promoting the Global Day to their constituencies. This is truly a collaborative effort.

We greatly appreciate PJ Library and its work to prepare family engagement ideas for learning about beauty.

Thank you to Yaffa Epstein, Rabbi Alex Israel, Devorah Katz, Rabbi Meir Klein, Sandra Lilienthal, and Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan for contributing units to this curriculum. We appreciate Devorah Katz for serving as Senior Educator and Danny Drachsler and Josh Pernick for being Educational Advisors. A special thank you to Lily Meyer for wearing many hats to support all our work and to Macha Fogel. We also appreciate the input of Yakov Ellenbogen, Howard Hirt, Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez, and Yael Smoocha.

We wish you a wonderful day of learning on Sunday, November 12th and hope that the study of Beauty and Ugliness will offer us new insights into Jewish texts and our own lives.

Margy-Ruth Davis and Karen Sponder
The Aleph Society
Curriculum 2017 — Beauty and Ugliness

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FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS

1. Appreciating Beauty and Art
There is a rich and varied tradition of Jewish art rooted in our history, culture, and religion. How can art enhance our relationship with Judaism? What doors are opened? Whether in the Mishkan, ancient synagogues or modern homes, the beauty of Jewish art can connect us with the human experience and open our eyes to see beyond the object.

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- Sourcesheet for Participants .........................9

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- Facilitator’s Guide ........................................13
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3. The Good and the Beautiful
We use the words “beautiful” and “good” in our everyday lives, but when we try to define them we are less certain of their meanings. We’ll take a close look at the story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and find ways to see these concepts in a fresh light.

- Facilitator’s Guide ........................................26
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4. Hiddur Mitzvah: Beauty, Awe and Action
In performing mitzvot (commandments) one can abide by the letter of the law, or act in a way that shows special reverence to God. The Talmud urges us to do mitzvot the latter way — beautifully, even if simply. This is known as hiddur mitzvah: beautifying the mitzvah. Discover how beauty connects to the Divine, through individual actions.

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Exodus records a strange donation to the Mishkan: a set of women’s mirrors. Who were the women behind this unusual gift and what is their story? Why did Moses want to reject their donation? This session addresses the place of beauty in society, and asks whether sexuality and sanctity can coexist.

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The Aleph Society’s Mission & Ventures

The Aleph Society was founded in 1990 to further Rabbi Steinsaltz’s mission to “Let My People Know”. The Rabbi’s network of publishing ventures, scholarly work and schools spans the globe. After completing a 45-volume Hebrew translation and commentary on the Talmud, he oversees translations of this masterwork into English, French, Russian, Italian and Spanish. He has written more than sixty books that have been translated into a dozen languages. Thousands of students in Israel — from kindergarten to those in post-army advanced studies — have studied in institutions under his aegis. All of the Rabbi’s affiliate organizations are under the umbrella of the Shefa Institute; its website, www.hashefa.com, offers a wealth of digital classes and lectures by the Rabbi and his colleagues.

The American-based Aleph Society sponsors informal education programs that reach a world-wide audience. The Global Day of Jewish Learning, now in its seventh year, is celebrated in over 500 communities, from Singapore to San Francisco and from Dallas to Djerba. Many, many thousands of Jews join together to study the same foundational texts, inspired to “take a step ahead” as Rabbi Steinsaltz has challenged us. A variety of materials are available at new.steinsaltz.org, including essays, videos and information about Rabbi Steinsaltz’s work.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz is internationally regarded as one of the leading scholars and rabbis both of this century, and of the last. As described in Newsweek, “Jewish lore is filled with tales of formidable rabbis. Probably none living today can compare in genius and influence to Adin Steinsaltz, whose extraordinary gifts as scholar, teacher, scientist, writer, mystic and social critic have attracted disciples from all factions of Israeli society.”

Born in 1937 to a secular family, Rabbi Steinsaltz has authored more than 60 books and hundreds of articles on Jewish mysticism, religious thought, sociology, biography, and philosophy. The best known of these is his interpretation of the Talmud, the seminal work of Jewish culture. His *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* is considered a modern classic of Jewish mysticism.

He is the first person since the medieval sage Rashi to have completed a full translation of and commentary on the Babylonian Talmud. This historic achievement was commemorated in 2010 by the inaugural Global Day of Jewish Learning, which has since become an annual international event in over 40 countries.

Over 30 volumes of the *Koren Talmud Bavli*, an English edition of the Steinsaltz Hebrew Talmud, have been published to date and the debut volumes garnered a 2012 National Jewish Book Award.

Other honors include Israel’s inaugural Israeli Presidential Award of Distinction, the Israel Prize and the French Order of Arts and Literature. Renowned as an original and open-minded thinker, Rabbi Steinsaltz has lectured and taught in hundreds of communities around the world.
Introduction for Facilitators & Educators

The theme of “Beauty and Ugliness” offers important material for any Jew to explore. At the same time, we do not expect every Global Day participant to feel the same way about these ideas. Therefore, facilitators are challenged to approach the text with nuanced perspectives and to lead a pluralistic conversation, allowing participants to express their ideas. How can a facilitator manage this?

- Opening the text for conversation, rather than offering an authoritative interpretation
- Allowing for different ideas to co-exist in the classroom, including different understandings about this theme
- Encouraging all involved to keep an open mind and allow themselves to be challenged by the ideas in the room and on the page
- Encouraging participants to learn from each other

The facilitator will also benefit from:

- Asking questions of participants; opening up questions for conversation; after reading a text, asking participants for reactions and questions
-Stepping back and calling on participants, rather than continually offering ideas
-Allowing silence; letting people sit with ideas and mull over their thoughts
- Ensuring that those in the room know each other's names and use them; attributing ideas to those who first raise them.

Leading Global Day conversations requires a balance between facilitation and teaching. Those leading these conversations “facilitate” when they make room for participants to speak their minds and ensure that the conversation has order. Teaching is also necessary. Through the Global Day, we hope that participants develop a commitment to and interest in Jewish texts, as well as an understanding that such texts are relevant to us today. We hope that they see that Jewish text-based conversations can enrich community life, that any of us can access texts — that they are not so intimidating — and that Jewish study links each of us to the Jewish people as a whole. Facilitators are responsible for conveying these ideas to participants.

Facilitators can convey these ideas in a variety of ways:

- Facilitators can begin conversations by asking: Has anyone studied texts like this before? What is it like? What are our associations with Jewish text study? What would it mean to study more? Facilitators can also close conversations in this way, helping participants to debrief the experience and to validate each other’s positive experiences or concerns.
- Particularly if the group has relatively little experience studying Jewish texts, the facilitator can say directly: Studying Jewish texts is not so scary!
- Facilitators should feel comfortable sharing their own experiences with text study.
- If the group includes community agency leaders, or individuals who are leaders in their own synagogues, the facilitator might lead a conversation about how each person might introduce more text study into their different organizations.

Facilitators should keep in mind these educational goals, asking participants questions and challenging them in ways that will help them think about these ideas. The hope is that these goals will be realized, and that the Talmud and Jewish texts will have gained thousands of students as a result of this great day.
Editor’s Note: Terminology and Translation

Throughout the curriculum we refer to God as “He.” We transliterate certain Hebrew words. Please feel free to adapt these and any other terminology to that which is most fitting for your community.

This curriculum uses English translations of the Bible from the JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh and in select units The Steinsaltz Bible, forthcoming from Koren Publishers Jerusalem.

Please note that in some excerpts from the Talmud, the words like אלקינו appear in their original form.

The Sessions

To delve into the theme and to help participants see Jewish texts and narratives as relevant to their lives, the sessions address significant questions related to Beauty and Ugliness.

Each unit reviews primary ideas in different areas, and the units complement each other.

We have chosen texts that will challenge participants, raise key questions and help us to develop a richer understanding of beauty and ugliness in different forms, in ways that were relevant to the rabbis and will be relevant to us today. Each class contains a variety of texts that shed light on the theme — including texts from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, medieval and modern commentators.

Session format:

- Facilitators’ guides contain background information, texts, conversation questions and directions to help you structure and frame each class.
- Sourcesheets for the participants immediately follow the facilitator’s guide in each unit.
- A breakdown of the sessions’ timing is provided to facilitators. While we outline 60 minutes for the adult sessions with some units offering additional content/time, we expect the facilitator to abridge or lengthen these sessions based on time allotted and/or the participants’ interests.

As you put together your outline for the conversation that you will lead, keep in mind:

- Don’t feel compelled to use each text and activity. Rather, use what makes sense and feels natural to you.
- Connect one text to the other. Often, the hardest part of these conversations is making the links between texts. Before leading the conversation, create a mental outline of how one text leads to the next, and of the points you are trying to make in teaching and leading.
- Feel free to share some of your own ideas and personal stories. Bringing yourself into the conversation helps participants see you as a genuine role model.
- Don’t be afraid to share your own questions about the texts. By sharing our questions, we assure students that one can live a rich Jewish life even with — and maybe only with — questions.

These texts have been chosen for their relevance to human experience. In the end, the true purpose of the day is to increase participants’ familiarity with and appreciation for Jewish text study and what texts can teach us about beauty and ugliness, as well as to foster connections with Jewish tradition and insights for our lives. Each text is rich with nuance, and a serious reckoning with the text will certainly yield new perspectives and meaning.
Beyond a text-by-text class discussion, here are some alternative formats you might consider:

- Have the students prepare together in chavruta pairs, discussing the texts with questions you provide. Give them 20 to 30 minutes to prepare the sources and then bring them back together to share their insights. Monitor their progress so you know how many sources they have covered. Often you will find that they say they didn’t have enough time to review all the sources (this is a good thing!).
- Divide the class into small groups and assign a source or two to each group. Give each group 10 to 15 minutes to work together and then reconvene the entire class and ask each group to share their insights.
- Divide the class into small groups and have the entire class learn one or two sources (depending on the length) for five to seven minutes. Then bring them back for a debriefing which will also be five minutes at most. Do that for all the sources, leaving time for a 5 to 7 minute summary at the end.

**Video Classes: Global Day ON AIR**

To supplement this year’s curriculum, there are video classes from educators teaching on the theme and, in some cases, from specific curricular units. Facilitators are encouraged to view the videos as inspiration for their own sessions – the interpretations and conclusions of the video sessions are by no means the only “right” ones.

Consider these pairings:

- Sandra Lilienthal teaching from “Beauty, Power and Temptation”, the unit she authored
- Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan’s video “Beauty and the Rabbis” with either “Hiddur Mitzvah” or “Appreciating Beauty and Art”
- Rabbi Alex Israel teaches a class on “The Mirrors of the Women”, which was adapted into our unit, “Beauty, Desire and the Divine”
- For a learning experience involving Kabbalah, Arthur Kurzweil’s video “Tiferet” can enrich discussion of “The Good and The Beautiful”

These videos are being produced monthly in 2017 in order to build a library of interactive material that facilitators and participants can access before November 12. This will allow for more time to plan the use of videos, as well as offer opportunities for “flipped classroom” learning.

Video sessions can also be used as they are, in full, on November 12, as though the speakers in the videos were there with you, guiding the learning. This may be especially helpful to communities with fewer educators available to teach or lead on the day. Live videos broadcast on November 12 can also be streamed live, if your event venue allows for a large screen or a projector.

Questions addressed in the video classes include:

- What is the relationship between beauty and goodness, or ugliness and evil?
- What role does beauty play in our lives?
- How are beauty and desire connected, and what effect does that have on our behavior?
- Can doing things beautifully enrich our experience of the sacred?
The supplemental curriculum videos are available in the Toolbox section of the Global Day website.

The Global Day ON AIR is a series of live webcasts of Jewish learning from around the world. Both leading up to and on November 12, renowned Jewish educators, rabbis, artists and thinkers ask the big questions in real time. Bring a featured speaker to your Global Day event with the Global Day ON AIR - no plane ticket necessary!

Visit www.theglobalday.org/videos to learn more.

**Using the Curriculum for All Learning Levels**

**Beginning Adult Learners**

- **Study “The Ugly Vessel and the Craftsman”,** as this session is intended to be an especially accessible starting point for new learners.
- **Close a session by asking participants about their experience of text study, debriefing and helping participants look forward to studying again.**

**Middle School Students**

The Middle School unit reflects on how outward appearances do not always indicate inner qualities, and how our behavior can also be ugly or beautiful. For facilitators or educators sensitive to how “Beauty and Ugliness” may be a difficult topic for Middle School students, the texts and questions presented in this unit can easily be adapted or substituted in order to create the most appropriate unit for pre-teens and young adults at different ages.

**Elementary School Students**

This unit includes activities around appreciating beauty in the world around us. Elementary school students vary greatly by age and educational needs, so this unit may need to be tailored to best fit the participating students.

**PJ Library**

PJ Library provides family engagement ideas for learning about beauty in our world and ourselves. They invite you to select a theme, choose a book, craft meaningful discussion prompts, and mix and match activities to create a family program for explorers aged 2-8 and their parents or grandparents.
Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

In this session we will explore connections between Jewish visual art and perceptions of beauty. Humans in all cultures use art to capture experiences of beauty, though different cultures’ aesthetics and customs may vary. Judaism is no exception. There is a rich variety of Jewish art available to us, which helps us connect to our history, culture and religion. Today we will look specifically at Jewish religious art, using Jewish texts to discover more about how the making of art connects with beauty.

Ask:

1. What varieties of Jewish art have you encountered?
2. What Jewish art do you have in your home? How does it enhance your home? Do you consider it beautiful?
3. Have you ever been inside a beautiful synagogue? What made it beautiful?
4. Do you feel that all art is beautiful?

Part One: Beautiful Spaces (20 minutes)

There is a tradition of sacred artistic creation that goes back to the description of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) in the Book of Exodus. The Mishkan was God’s dwelling place among the Israelites in the desert and the “place of meeting”. This detailed chapter of Exodus further spells out every single measurement required to build the Mishkan. This text is significant because it is a blueprint for production of ritual objects and of a sacred space.


וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּ֥ן תַּעֲשֶׂ֖ה עֶ֣שֶׂר יְרִיעֹ֑ת שֵׁ֣שׁ מָשְׁזָ֗ר וּתְכֵ֤לֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן֙ וְתֹלַ֣עַת שָׁנִ֔י כְּרֻבִ֛ים מַעֲשֵׂ֥ה חֹשֵׁ֖ב תַּעֲשֶׂ֥ה אֹתָֽם׃

And you shall make the Tabernacle, within which you shall place the aforementioned vessels, of ten curtains made of spun white linen (see Yevarot 4b; Ibn Ezra on Exodus 25:4), and with it shall be twined woolen threads dyed sky blue wool, and reddish-purple wool, and scarlet wool. With artfully worked likenesses of cherubs shall you make them, the curtains. Craftsmanship was required to ensure that the form of cherubim appeared on every curtain. According to some opinions, there was a different picture on each side of the fabric of the curtains (see Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 8:2; Yoma 72b; Rashi and Ibn Ezra ad loc).

Ask:

1. Why should the Mishkan look beautiful?
2. How might art be seen as an act of devotion in Judaism?
Let’s look at some examples of how Jews throughout history and in different countries have made religious art in order to carry on this tradition of beautiful spaces that began with the Mishkan itself.

» Ask participants to look at the following images together 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, look carefully at the pictures and guiding questions that follow.

Facilitator’s Note: Feel free to enhance this set of images with your own examples.

Left: Hamat Tiberias (4th century CE)

Above, and detail: Recreation of the Gwoździec synagogue in Warsaw, Poland (17th century).
Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin1
Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin2
Appreciating Beauty and Art

Samples of the inscriptions in the images from the Gwoździec Synagogue:

➢ “Reish Lakish says one who has a synagogue in his city and does not go there to pray will be esteemed as a bad neighbor.” (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 8a)
➢ “Whenever God comes to a synagogue and God does not find ten men, God immediately becomes angry.” (Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 6b)
➢ “Who is among you that is in awe of the LORD, that obeys the voice of His servant?” (Isaiah 50:10)
➢ “One who says, ‘Amen,’ in this world will merit to respond, ‘Amen’ in the world to come.” (Deuteronony Rabbah 7:1)

Discuss these questions in chavruta:

1. What do you see? Are you surprised by what is depicted in any of these images?
2. What are some of the similarities and differences between the art of these two synagogues?
3. Do you think they are beautiful? Why or why not?
4. What is the most beautiful place where you have prayed? What made it beautiful?
5. How might artwork or beautiful surroundings enhance your relationship with Judaism?

Bring the group back together and ask a few chavruta pairs to share their answers.

The mosaic floor of the synagogue in Tiberias, Israel, dates from the 4th century CE. One of the earliest excavated examples of ancient Jewish art, it survives intact to this day. The mosaic depicts a central zodiac resplendent with the four seasons, a depiction of the Ark of the Covenant with menorahs, and text in ancient Greek. The detail of the figures and text speaks to the skill of those ancient craftspeople.

The synagogue at Gwoździec was built in the 1640s in Poland (now Ukraine). It survived damage during WWI but was burned down in WWII. The recently-completed recreation is part of the permanent exhibition at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. The ceiling and bimah (the central raised platform where the Torah scroll is read) are richly decorated, with carved and painted animals amid detailed scroll-work. The texts painted in the borders and corners include quotes from Midrash and Talmud.

Imagine you are inside the Gwoździec synagogue. When you look up and read the inscriptions from the Bible and Talmud, imagine how you would feel about the texts while in those beautiful surroundings. Seeing the texts there, you might even read them as a narrative. You might think, “I am a good neighbor!” or “I am in a minyan. The heavens are happy!” You might feel that you are in awe and one with the will of God, and that you have a place in the world to come. The text inscriptions are part of the beautiful space, and the beauty of the space imbues the texts there with a more personal sense of meaning.

Echoes of the ancient synagogue are found in the 17th century synagogue in its representations of zodiacs, ritual objects and sacred texts. There is a deep connection between the presence of religious text in beautiful spaces and the sacredness of that space.

The roots of Judaism’s relationship with artistic works is complicated by the Second Commandment, which prohibits idolatry (making or worshipping idols). Some interpreted this commandment as prohibiting some forms of artistic expression, especially sculpture. This makes the Jewish approach to visual art very different from the other major world cultures, especially the Western aesthetic tradition.
Part Two: Does Beauty Have Boundaries? (15 minutes)

In Text #2 we read the Second Commandment.

- Ask a participant to read Text #2 aloud.


3 The previous declaration leads to the demand for exclusivity: You shall have no other gods before Me, i.e., together with Me. There is no other God but Me. 4 Furthermore, faith alone is not enough. You shall not make for you an idol to worship, nor any item that is an image of that which is in the heavens above, or that which is on the earth below, or that which is in the water beneath the earth, i.e., anywhere on earth. The phrase: “That which is in the water beneath the earth,” might also allude to large creatures or primeval sea monsters, which were considered powerful beings that people would worship... 20 Since you did not see any sort of image in your encounter with Me, You shall not make with Me or for Me gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves. Do not attempt to represent Me by means of an image or a bodily form. However, it is permitted to worship God through a ritual that involves physical objects, but only if these fulfill specific conditions...

In Text #3, Maimonides offers a further explanation of the prohibition from the Bible. Maimonides (also known as Rambam) lived in Spain and Egypt in the 12th century; he was a physician and philosopher whose extensive works have been an essential influence within Judaism.

- Ask a participant to read Text #3 aloud.


אסור缕צעות זרות乐园, לא 즐וף לברחת פְּסֵלָה בקְצֶמֶם שֶׁאֵין אֵין נַעַר לָעַד כִּי אֵינוּ עֲבֹדַת כּוֹכָבִים. וְאֵין אִסּוּר לָצוּר לְנוֹי אֶלָּא צוּרַת הָאָדָם בִּלְבַד. לְפִיכָךְ אֵין מְצַיְּרִים לֹא בְּעֵץ וְלֹא בְּסִיד וְלֹא בְּאֶבֶן צוּרַת הָאָדָם. וְהוּא שֶׁתִּהְיֶה הַצּוּרָה בּוֹלֶטֶת כְּגוֹן הַצִּיּוּר וְהַכִּיּוּר שֶׁבַּטְּרַקְלִין וְכַיּוֹצֵא בָּהֶן וִיאִם צָר לוֹקֵה. אֲבָל אִם הָיִיתָה הַצּוּרָה מֵשִׁקַעַת אוֹ צוּרָה שֵׁל סִימָנִין כִּגוֹן הַצּוּרוֹת שֶׁרוֹקְמִין בָּאָרִיג הֲרֵי אֵלּוּ מֻתָּרוֹת:

It is prohibited to make images for decorative purposes, even though they do not represent false deities, as [implied by Exodus 20:20]: “Do not make with Me [gods of silver and gods of gold].” This refers even to images of gold and silver which are intended only for decorative purposes, lest others err and view them as deities.

It is forbidden to make decorative images of the human form alone. Therefore, it is forbidden to make human images with wood, cement, or stone. This [prohibition] applies when the image is protruding — for example, images and sculptures made in a hallway and the like. A person who makes such an image is [liable for] lashes.

In contrast, it is permitted to make human images that are engraved or painted — e.g., portraits, whether on wood or on stone — or that are part of a tapestry.
Appreciating Beauty and Art

1. What is the fear motivating this prohibition? How might Jewish art be affected by this prohibition?
2. How does this explanation by Maimonides change your understanding of the Biblical text? What concern is Maimonides expressing?

While the Second Commandment prohibits a “sculptured image”, Maimonides clarifies the prohibition as regarding the “human form.” Maimonides’ concern is that by making such images we — the observers — might be tempted to worship them.

In the Mishnah we encounter this related story about a rabbi, Rabban Gamliel, using a bathhouse decorated with a statue of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and love.


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.”

Ask:

1. What surprises you about this text?
2. How do you find yourself distinguishing between decoration, beautiful art, and things you should avoid?
3. Do you think Rabban Gamliel found the statue beautiful even if it didn’t hold religious significance for him?

In this colorful story, the text is making a very significant distinction between a beautiful bathhouse made for Aphrodite and the bathhouse that uses Aphrodite for the beauty of the bathhouse. The intention of the sculptor and purpose of the sculpture determine whether art is idolatrous or decorative regardless of its beauty. In contrast to many other religions that include sculptures of human forms in art and worship, cultural Judaism has traditionally produced fewer images of people in any medium. Nevertheless, Judaism has largely embraced a strong artistic culture, enhancing and beautifying many aspects of our religion.
Part Three: Appreciating the Beauty of Art (15 minutes)

Jewish philosophers and commentators had a great deal to say about appreciating beauty and art. The following texts address the boundaries of the Second Commandment.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook (1865-1935) was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel, one of the founders of Religious Zionism, and a renowned scholar. In Text #5 we read an excerpt of a letter that he wrote in 1907 to the founders of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, Israel's national school of art.

Read Text #5 aloud.


The very sight of our talented brothers, masters of aesthetics and art is heartwarming, as they establish their rightful position in the broad, central highway of world culture, carried by a divine spirit to Jerusalem.

They beautify our holy city, a capital that is as a seal upon the national heart, with aesthetics, design, dignity and splendor which will also be a source of blessing and benefit…

The whole area of ornamentation, beautification and painting is permitted to Jews. There is only one limit, one line...long in its quality and not its quantity. This limit conveys much spiritually but does only minimal harm to craftsmanship and art for all the power of its noble purpose. “All visages are allowed, save the face of man.”

Ask:

1. What do you notice about Rav Kook’s enthusiasm for art and beautification? What concerns him?
2. Why is it significant that Rav Kook had to offer this kind of encouragement to an art school at the time of its founding?

In Text #6, Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz offers this comment on beautiful Jewish and other symbols and art in one’s home. 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.

Read Text #6 aloud.


...While the great Rabbis of every generation have cautioned our people against excessive self-adornment, they have encouraged the decoration and beautification of ritual objects. The prayer book, the Kiddush cup, the etrog box, the vessels of Havdalah — all have inspired artists and artisans. No set form is imposed, nor is there any need to adhere to the aesthetics of earlier generations. One can, of course, retain the traditional forms if so inclined. But throughout Jewish history, our people have usually adhered to certain motifs while modifying the technique and application according to the period and locale. In any case, beautiful ritual objects are part of the making of a Jewish home.
The issue of decoration also has a negative aspect: Just as there are objects and symbols that breathe a Jewish spirit — for example, the ancient symbol of the mizrah, a paper or cloth hanging indicating the direction of Jerusalem — there are also objects that negate a Jewish spirit. Symbols or artistic motifs associated with other religions and cultures are probably not permissible in a Jewish home. The owner may not be interested in the meaning of such objects but only in their beauty; nevertheless, when they are prominently displayed they are bound to have an effect, however subtle, on those who see them. There is a place for such things in albums, perhaps, but not on walls or otherwise in permanent view.

Ask:

1. From your experience, what does Rabbi Steinsaltz mean when he writes that, “Beautiful ritual objects are part of the making of a Jewish home”?
2. How might the beautiful objects we see or surround ourselves with affect us or our behaviors?
3. Can we appreciate the beauty of the sacred object without considering its sacred character?

According to both of these texts, there is a spiritual value, beyond the aesthetic, to having beautiful objects. Although there have been historical concerns about the boundaries of idolatry, Jewish tradition also encourages the creation of art, because of its great potential for spiritual value.

Ask:

1. Is beauty in art always linked to the sacred? How?
2. What do we gain from possessing beautiful objects?
3. What are some examples of beautiful objects or art in your life that are not used in rituals?

Beauty arouses in us emotions that cause us to treasure the source of those feelings. This makes us more invested in an object and enhances the other feelings we have towards an object (or a person or a place).
Conclusion (5 minutes)

In our final text, Rabbi Steinsaltz encourages us to consider that there are different ways of seeing an object and experiencing its beauty.

Read Text #7 aloud.

Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. In the Beginning.

To penetrate further into the nature of the two kinds of knowing, let us recognize that an emotional grasp is also a way of wholeness, a way of seeing an object in a certain entirety for oneself, while the objective or scientific comprehension is being certain about the details, knowing what it is made of. The difference between the poet who gazes at a flower, admiring its beauty, and the botanist who counts the petals is a difference in what one is looking at as well as in the emotional diversity.

Ask:

1. According to Rabbi Steinsaltz, what are some ways in which we can “gaze” at a thing?
2. Does turning one’s gaze onto a thing make it beautiful? How might this influence those standing in a synagogue or in the Mishkan?

Recognizing that things can be beautiful — that beauty does exist — is part of how we attribute value to objects we encounter. The physical beauty of objects made or designed artistically serves to capture the emotional and symbolic significance of experiences in our lives. We create art and consume art as part of a very deep human impulse to express ourselves and share our experiences with others. Whether in the Mishkan, in ancient synagogues or in our homes today, Jewish art can connect us with beauty and perhaps even with awe.
Part One: Beautiful Spaces


And you shall make the Tabernacle, within which you shall place the aforementioned vessels, of ten curtains made of spun white linen (see Yevamot 4b; Ibn Ezra on Exodus 25:4), and with it shall be twined woolen threads dyed sky blue wool, and reddish-purple wool, and scarlet wool. With artfully worked likenesses of cherubs shall you make them, the curtains. Craftsmanship was required to ensure that the form of cherubim appeared on every curtain. According to some opinions, there was a different picture on each side of the fabric of the curtains (see Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim 8:2; Yoma 72b; Rashi and Ibn Ezra ad loc).

Examples of Jewish Art

Right, and detail: Recreation of the Gwoździec synagogue in Warsaw, Poland (17th century).

Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin1
Image source: bit.ly/gdjl-polin2
Appreciating Beauty and Art

Above: Hamat Tiberias (4th century CE)
Appreciating Beauty and Art

Part Two: Does Beauty Have Boundaries?


3 The previous declaration leads to the demand for exclusivity: You shall have no other gods before Me, i.e., together with Me. There is no other God but Me. 4 Furthermore, faith alone is not enough. You shall not make for you an idol to worship, nor any item that is an image of that which is in the heavens above, or that which is on the earth below, or that which is in the water beneath the earth, i.e., anywhere on earth. The phrase: “That which is in the water beneath the earth,” might also allude to large creatures or primeval sea monsters, which were considered powerful beings that people would worship…20 Since you did not see any sort of image in your encounter with Me, You shall not make with Me or for Me gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves. Do not attempt to represent Me by means of an image or a bodily form. However, it is permitted to worship God through a ritual that involves physical objects, but only if these fulfill specific conditions...


It is prohibited to make images for decorative purposes, even though they do not represent false deities, as [implied by Exodus 20:20]: “Do not make with Me [gods of silver and gods of gold].” This refers even to images of gold and silver which are intended only for decorative purposes, lest others err and view them as deities.

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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.”

Part Three: Appreciating the Beauty of Art


The very sight of our talented brothers, masters of aesthetics and art is heartwarming, as they establish their rightful position in the broad, central highway of world culture, carried by a divine spirit to Jerusalem.

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...While the great Rabbis of every generation have cautioned our people against excessive self-adornment, they have encouraged the decoration and beautification of ritual objects. The prayer book, the Kiddush cup, the etrog box, the vessels of Havdalah — all have inspired artists and artisans. No set form is imposed, nor is there any need to adhere to the aesthetics of earlier generations. One can, of course, retain the traditional forms if so inclined. But throughout Jewish history, our people have usually adhered to certain motifs while modifying the technique and application according to the period and locale. In any case, beautiful ritual objects are part of the making of a Jewish home.

The issue of decoration also has a negative aspect: Just as there are objects and symbols that breathe a Jewish spirit — for example, the ancient symbol of the mitzrah, a paper or cloth hanging indicating the direction of Jerusalem — there are also objects that negate a Jewish spirit. Symbols or artistic motifs associated with other religions and cultures are probably not permissible in a Jewish home. The owner may not be interested in the meaning of such objects but only in their beauty; nevertheless, when they are prominently displayed they are bound to have an effect, however subtle, on those who see them. There is a place for such things in albums, perhaps, but not on walls or otherwise in permanent view.

Conclusion

Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. In the Beginning.

To penetrate further into the nature of the two kinds of knowing, let us recognize that an emotional grasp is also a way of wholeness, a way of seeing an object in a certain entirety for oneself, while the objective or scientific comprehension is being certain about the details, knowing what it is made of. The difference between the poet who gazes at a flower, admiring its beauty, and the botanist who counts the petals is a difference in what one is looking at as well as in the emotional diversity.
Facilitator’s Note: This session is really more powerful (pun intended) if taught as a complete 90-minute session, with more time for discussion. If you have time constraints, however, it can be taught in 60 minutes by skipping Part Three.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will explore how beauty and power are intertwined, by studying select stories of biblical characters. Our perceptions of the value of beauty and its relationship with power vary, based on our own cultural backgrounds and subjective experiences. By looking more closely at Jewish source texts we may be better able to understand beauty, power and their temptations.

There are over twenty biblical characters — both men and women — described as being beautiful or handsome. Many of these beautiful characters are also found in positions of power. Through close readings of source texts and commentaries from Jewish sages, we may begin to understand the ways in which beauty and power intersect, and the consequences of that combination of forces.

Facilitator’s Note: Depending on your participants’ familiarity with the source texts, feel free to add or expand background information about any of the biblical characters discussed in this unit.

Ask:

1. Is being beautiful a requirement to achieve positions of power? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the ways beauty can help one achieve power?
3. Can beauty be a disadvantage? How?

Part One: A Pathway to Power (25 minutes)

Royalty or political power is an obvious form of power in the Bible. Let us read together the stories of three royal characters of noted beauty: Saul, David and Esther.

Choose three members of the group and ask each person to read one of the following texts aloud.

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

וּשְׁמוֹ קִ֣ישׁ בֶּן־אֲבִיאֵ֞ל בֶּן־
[ואני קיוסון, 2007: 106] מִבִּנְיָמִ֗ין
וַיֹּ֨אמֶר ה׳ אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל֙ שְׁמַ֣ע בְּקוֹלָ֔ם וְהִמְלַכְתָּ֥ לָהֶ֖ם מֶ֑לֶךְ וַיֹּ֤אמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל֙ אֶל־אַנְשֵׁ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל לְכ֖וּ אִישׁ לְעִירֽוֹ׃ וַֽיְהִי־אִ֣ישׁ מבן־ימין
צְר֧וֹר בֶּן־בְּכוֹרַ֛ת בֶּן־אֲפִ֖יחַ בֶּן־אִ֣ישׁ יְמִינִ֑י גִּבּ֖וֹר חָֽיִל׃ וְלוֹ־הָיָ֨ה בֵ֜ן וּשְׁמ֤וֹ שָׁאוּל֙ בָּח֣וּר וָט֔וֹב וְאֵ֥ין אִ֛ישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל ט֣וֹב מִמֶּ֑נּוּ מִשִּׁכְמ֣וֹ וָמַ֔עְלָה  גָּבֹ֖הַּ מِכָּל־הָעָֽם׃

Beauty, Power and Temptation

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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.

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.”


The king’s [Ahasuerus] servants who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. 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:


וַיֹּ֨אמֶר הֲעַמֹּ֣ד בְּאֵֽינֵיכָּ֔כֵי אִם־יָזֵ֖ם אֶל־הַנַּֽעַרְתֵּֽךְ מְאַ֖סְתִּ֣יהוּ כִּ֥י לֹֽא־אֲשֶֽׁר־יִרְאֶֽה הָאָדָֽם כִּ֤י הָֽאָדָם֙ יִרְאֶ֣ה לַעֵינַ֔יִם וַהֲדוֹרֵ֥ב יִרְאֶֽה לַלֵּבָֽב׃

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:

...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 when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside.” 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; but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside.” 18 When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, “Thus and so your slave did to me,” he was furious. 19 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.

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.


ויהי יוסף יפה תואר — כֵּיוָן שֶׁרָאָה עַצְמוֹ מוֹשֵׁל, הִתְחִיל אוֹכֵל וְשׁוֹתֶה וּמְסַלְסֵל בְּשַֹעֲרוֹ אָמַר  הַקָּבָּ“ה:  אָבִיךָ מִתְאַבֵּל, וְאַתָּה מְסַלְסֵל בִּשְֹעָרֶךָ, אֲנִי מְגָרֶה בְּךָ אֶת

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.
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.

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, 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.” 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. The woman conceived, and she sent word to David, “I am pregnant.” Thereupon David sent a message to Joab, “Send Uriah the Hittite to me”; and Joab sent Uriah to David...

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?” 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!”...

In the morning, David wrote a letter to Joab, which he sent with Uriah. 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.” So when Joab was besieging the city, he stationed Uriah at the point where he knew that there were able warriors. 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.


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.

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.

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.”


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.


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.”

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 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.
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).


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.

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.

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.
Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

We use the terms “good” and “beautiful” all the time, and we seem to know what the words mean. Try to define them, however, and we are less certain. In the first part of this session we will analyze the story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as we try to understand the concepts “good” and “beautiful” in a fresh light. In the second part, we examine the concept of “beauty” and its relationship to the concept of “good”, through a close reading of Talmudic uses of these terms.

Let’s begin by looking at our assumptions about the words, “good” and “beautiful”.

Activity: The Spectrum of Good and Beauty

Facilitator’s Note: The following activity can be done as a group, individually or in pairs. Feel free to adapt the activity to suit the tools you have in your learning environment and time constraints. You may also print out the worksheet included at the end of this unit if you are doing the activity individually.

Preparation

Draw a grid with an x and y axis on an erasable board, or on poster paper, large enough for everyone to see. At one end of the first axis, write the word “Good”; write “Bad” at the opposite point. Do the same with “Beautiful” and “Ugly” at opposite ends of the second axis.

Optional: cut a few strips of paper on which you can write words that the group will free-associate and suggest. Have some tape, magnets or sticky-tack, or any means of adhering the paper to the grid on display. You may also write the words directly onto the grid.

Doing the Activity

Ask the group to think of the first things that come to mind when they hear “beauty” and “ugliness” – these can be places, things, feelings, food, celebrities, historical figures, etc... These attributes can be visual, intellectual, behavioral, even smells or sounds. Include or suggest whatever range of nouns you feel is appropriate for your group to use in this discussion. You may also give suggestions to prompt the free-association, such as “sunset”, “spiders”, “chocolate”, “modern art”, “cities”, “makeup”, “classical music”, etc…

Write these suggestions on the slips of paper, or in a list.

Next, taking the list or slips, ask the group where they would place/write each word on the grid, relative to how beautiful, good, ugly or bad they think each thing is. Stick the paper slips onto the grid, or write the words directly onto the grid, depending on the materials you are using. Some items will be in the far corner of a quadrant, others clustered closer to the middle.

The subjective value of each term will show how certain things can be good and beautiful or bad and beautiful, and so on. Leave the grid up during the session. We will come back to it at the end of the discussion, and observe how one’s thinking may change as we study the texts in this unit.
Part One: The Garden of Eden — Where Good Equaled Beautiful, and Beautiful Equaled Good (25 minutes)

The words “good” and “evil” appear more than once in the story of Adam and Eve. Indeed, the forbidden tree is called “The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”. Within the same story, the concept of “beauty” is also referred to repeatedly.


The Good and the Beautiful

2:9 The Lord God grew from the ground every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, and the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...

16 The Lord God commanded the man, saying: From every tree of the garden you may eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat; for on the day that you eat of it you shall die...

3:1 The serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman: Did God actually say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden? 2 The woman said to the serpent: You are not saying that God knows that on the day you eat of it, your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as God, knowers of good and evil. 3 but from the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, God said: You shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die. 4 The serpent said to the woman: You will not die; 5 For God knows that on the day you eat from it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as God, knowers of good and evil. 6 The woman saw that the tree was good for eating, and that it was an enticement to the eyes, and that the tree was attractive to apprehend; she took from its fruit and ate; she also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 The eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; they sewed fig leaves, and made themselves loincloths.

Ask these questions, and in answering, ask participants to avoid using the words “good”, “bad”, “evil” and “beautiful”. Notice what other words jump out in the responses:

1. What are some of the words used to describe the forbidden tree? Based on those descriptions, how would you characterize the tree and its fruit?
2. What, in your opinion, does “the tree was good for eating” mean?
3. Genesis 3:6 says the tree was “an enticement to the eyes” and “attractive to apprehend”, emphasizing the way the tree looks. When Adam and Eve eat the fruit in 3:7, “The eyes of both of them were opened,” which led to them knowing of their nakedness. In your opinion, what is the significance of sight/visual sensation in this story?
4. How do you think the tree looked to Eve before the serpent spoke with her? After the serpent spoke with her?

5. Why do you think Eve did not eat from the tree before her conversation with the serpent? Why did she take and eat from the fruit of the tree after that conversation?

Even though the shape of the tree and its fruit did not change, Eve’s perception of its appearance shifted. What was strange and deadly before began to look nutritious, ripe for picking, and useful. Eve seems to see the tree anew, and takes a risk in doubting God’s prohibition. Once she and Adam had eaten the fruit, they “knew that they were naked” even though nothing about their bodies had physically changed.

The text says their eyes were opened, but that does not mean to say they were literally blind before eating. Sight is a basic, primal function of human bodies, but it is when our minds ascribe meaning to what we sense with our eyes that our moral senses come forward. Why?

Let’s consider the ideas in Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz’s commentary on the story. 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.


The tree was good for eating — One who is attracted to evil assumes that there are forms of good in this world that do not necessarily fall within the rigid category of the morally good. Such forms of good include that which is beautiful, that which is pleasant, or that which is effective. Before the woman gazed upon the tree, the various forms of good, i.e., aesthetics, pleasure, utility, and morality, were all united. The discovery that the forbidden tree was good for eating shattered this unity between the different forms of good. Suddenly, there was a choice that, while not morally good, as it entailed a rebellion against the command of God, nonetheless incorporated an abundance of all the other aspects of the good (see Sforno, Genesis 2:9: Minha Belula).

Ask:

1. In your own words, how does Rabbi Steinsaltz explain the meaning of “good” and “beautiful” before Eve’s conversation with the serpent? What about after the conversation?

2. Do you agree with Rabbi Steinsaltz’s assessment that there are many layers of “good” that are not necessarily “within the rigid category of morally good”? Is moral goodness really a rigid category?

3. Why do you think Eve ate from the tree: did she believe the serpent or did she act on what she perceived with her own eyes?

Rabbi Steinsaltz suggests that in the Garden of Eden before Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, the concepts of “beautiful”, “effective”, “pleasant” and “appropriate” were unified in a way that was no longer possible after the eating of the fruit. All things that were “good” were beautiful, and therefore also inherently effective, pleasant, and appropriate; if something was appropriate, then it was also inherently beautiful, effective, and pleasant, and so on. It would have been
impossible for something in the Garden of Eden to be unpleasant but appropriate (such as a rebuke), or inappropriate yet effective (like physical violence).

Rabbi Steinsaltz describes a moment of discovery for Eve, when she begins to separate the layers of “good” according to her aesthetic perceptions, and in doing so, ate the fruit and severed the connection of the layers of goodness. Eve suddenly sees that something can be inappropriate (“you shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it”) yet effective (“good for eating”), pleasant (“an enticement to the eyes”), and beautiful (“attractive to apprehend”). Let’s next consider some of the most important implications of this new awareness for humanity.

Our next text is the commentary by Sforno on Genesis 3:7. Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno (c.1475-1550) was an Italian rabbi, commentator, philosopher and physician. He is noted for his mixture of new interpretations and comments from earlier rabbis, while remaining faithful to the original texts.


And they knew that they were naked: They knew that it is fitting to cover the genital area, since now most of its activity is directed toward repulsive and harmful pleasures.

Ask:

1. Once Adam and Eve ate the fruit, Sforno tells us “they paid attention to every pleasing and pleasurable thing.” What do you think they paid attention to before they ate the fruit?
2. Why do the biblical text and Sforno’s commentary focus on the role of Adam and Eve’s eyes?
3. Consider Sforno’s final statement. Why does he believe that, after “the eyes of both of them were opened,” the genital area is focused on “repulsive and harmful pleasures”? What do you think of that association?
4. Both the Sforno and Rabbi Steinsaltz note an essential shift in human nature. How do these changes in human behavior shape your understanding of the terms, “good” and “beautiful”?

The following commentary of Rabbi Steinsaltz on this verse might help us address some of the concerns the Sforno raises.
Partaking of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil injected something new into their consciousness: A separation of the various forms of good, namely, aesthetics, pleasure, utility, and morality. This new awareness does not mean that until this point they were unaware of their sexuality. However, before eating of the fruit of the tree, they engaged in the sexual act as animals do, with complete innocence and unselfconsciousness. Now they became aware of the unique nature of human sexuality, and into their world was introduced a new sort of inclination. Unlike the sexual drive of animals, which is part of their biological compulsion and limited by objective factors of need and satiation, the human sexual urge is based on a potentially boundless erotic desire. The man and woman were suddenly faced with their ability to choose to what extent to indulge these newly discovered inclinations, and thus found themselves before a gaping chasm. Consequently, they sewed fig leaves, and made themselves loincloths. Since their nakedness was no longer a neutral state but a source of provocation and temptation, it was not to be publicly displayed; they therefore hurried to cover themselves.

Ask:

1. How would Rabbi Steinsaltz respond to Sforno’s final statement — that, after the eating of the fruit, the genital area is focused on “repulsive and harmful pleasures”?

2. What might be the dangers — or the opportunities — of living in a world in which sexual “inclination [is] dependent on desire alone”??
Part Two: Defining Good and Beautiful (20 minutes)

In this new world — our world — in which something “beautiful” is not necessarily “good”, these words and their opposites (i.e., “ugly” and “evil”) can be applied in unexpected contexts. These uses of the terms can help us more deeply understand their possible meanings.

Split the group into chavruta pairs. 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.

Read Text #5 and #6 with your chavruta, and discuss the questions that follow. Texts #5 comes from Midrash Tanhuma, 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 speaks about Moses’s wife, Tzipporah.

Text #5: Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Tzav 13.

יש לך אשה נאה ביופיה ואינה נאה במעשיה או נאה במעשיה ואינה נאה ביופיה, וזו נאה בכל.

There is a woman who is pleasant in her beauty but not pleasant in her deeds; and one who is pleasant in her deeds but not pleasant in her beauty; but this one is pleasant in all regards.


שמונה – רובן קשה ומיעוטן יפה, ואלו הן: דרך, ודרך ארץ, עושר, ומלאכה, יין, ושינה, חמין, והקזת דם.

Eight actions are difficult for the body and the soul to handle in large amounts and are beneficial (lit. beautiful, “yafeh”) in small amounts, and they are: Traveling on the road, engaging in the way of the world, i.e., engaging in sexual intercourse, having wealth, work, drinking wine, sleep, hot water, and bloodletting.

Discuss the following questions in chavruta:

1. Considering our discussion so far, what are some of the synonyms for the words “good” and “beautiful” suggested by Texts #5 and #6? What about for “ugly” and “bad”?

2. Which of those synonyms for “good” or “goodness” could also be synonyms for “beautiful” or “beauty”? Are there synonyms for “beauty” that could substitute for “good”? Likewise, are there words that cross over between “ugly” and “bad”? What are some words that are synonymous with “good” and “ugly”, or “beautiful” and “evil”?

3. Given the fuzzy boundaries of words like “beautiful” and “beneficial”, what do you make of the list in Text #6 of eight actions that are beneficial only in small amounts? What would your list of eight actions include? Why?

4. What do the relationships between these words and their seemingly-contradictory meanings tell us about our cultural associations between the concepts of good, beauty, ugliness and evil?
We learn from these texts that the meanings of the words “good” and “beautiful” are slippery, and not necessarily symmetrically aligned with the definitions of their supposed antonyms, “evil” and “ugly”. In the case of Text #6 the opposite of “beautiful” is not even “ugly” — it is “difficult”. The Talmud frequently uses yafeh (beautiful) to mean “good,” “suitable,” “effective,” “valuable,” “moral,” or “pleasant.”

This relates back directly to that separation of the layers of good that Rabbi Steinsaltz pointed out earlier in our discussion. We are able to connect “opposing” concepts linguistically, psychologically and culturally. Beyond that, we are able to find ways in which the “good” and the “beautiful” can be separated. There is a complex web of relationships between moral goodness, appearance, satisfaction, and the intellectual idea of “good”.

**Ask:**

1. In Text #5, deeds are referred to as “pleasant”, and that pleasantness is understood to be both a desirable and important aspect of behavior. Is “pleasant” identical to “good” here? In your opinion, what is “good” about “pleasant”? Do you agree with the text?

2. Think back to the conversation between Eve and the serpent, in which she is able to separate “good” from “beautiful”. Of all the possibilities opened up by that distinction, which one is the most surprising to you?

3. Can we ever have a thing that is fully good, as in the Garden of Eden, where all the layers are joined together, and beauty equals good equals appropriate equals pleasant? If yes, what are some examples? If not, why?

4. The interchangeability of many of these words is complicated but deeply ingrained in our language and cultural understanding of their many-layered meanings. What is the significance of that fact to you? How does it affect the way you perceive or feel things?

**Conclusion (5 minutes)**

In this unit we dealt with the concepts of “good” and “beautiful,” and discussed how they are used in Jewish sources. We discovered that what is “good” and what is “beautiful” can be clouded by the concept of “desire”. We explored how the ways and situations in which we use language can lead to vastly different understandings of the same words. Let us return to the grid(s) we made in the beginning of the session.

**Ask:**

1. Consider the relative positions of things you considered “good” and “beautiful. Would you move any of them? Why?

**Move the words according to any suggestions from the participants, or have participants make changes to their own grids.**
Activity: The Spectrum of Good and Beauty
Part One: The Garden of Eden — Where Good Equaled Beautiful, and Beautiful Equaled Good


The tree was good for eating — One who is attracted to evil assumes that there are forms of good in this world that do not necessarily fall within the rigid category of the morally good. Such forms of good include that which is beautiful, that which is pleasant, or that which is effective. Before the woman gazed upon the tree, the various forms of good, i.e., aesthetics, pleasure, utility, and morality, were all united. The discovery that the forbidden tree was good for eating shattered this unity between the different forms of good. Suddenly, there was a choice that, while not morally good, as it entailed a rebellion against the command of God, nonetheless incorporated an abundance of all the other aspects of the good (see Sforno, Genesis 2:9: Minha Belula).

Partaking of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil injected something new into their consciousness: A separation of the various forms of good, namely, aesthetics, pleasure, utility, and morality. This new awareness does not mean that until this point they were unaware of their sexuality. However, before eating of the fruit of the tree, they engaged in the sexual act as animals do, with complete innocence and unselfconsciousness. Now they became aware of the unique nature of human sexuality, and into their world was introduced a new sort of inclination. Unlike the sexual drive of animals, which is part of their biological compulsion and limited by objective factors of need and satiation, the human sexual urge is based on a potentially boundless erotic desire. The man and woman were suddenly faced with their ability to choose to what extent to indulge these newly discovered inclinations, and thus found themselves before a gaping chasm. Consequently, they sewed fig leaves, and made themselves loincloths. Since their nakedness was no longer a neutral state but a source of provocation and temptation, it was not to be publicly displayed; they therefore hurried to cover themselves.


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Part Two: Defining Good and Beautiful

Text #5: Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Tzav 13.

There is a woman who is pleasant in her beauty but not pleasant in her deeds; and one who is pleasant in her deeds but not pleasant in her beauty; but this one is pleasant in all regards.


Eight actions are difficult for the body and the soul to handle in large amounts and are beneficial (lit. beautiful, “yafeh”) in small amounts, and they are: Traveling on the road, engaging in the way of the world, i.e., engaging in sexual intercourse, having wealth, work, drinking wine, sleep, hot water, and bloodletting.
By Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan

Introduction (2 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will take a closer look at how beauty is present in acts of devotion and ritual, and how that beauty enhances those acts.

In performing mitzvot (commandments) one can simply abide by the letter of the law, doing mitzvot appropriately but in a plain manner, or one can do mitzvot in a way that shows special reverence to God. The Talmud urges us to do mitzvot in this latter way — beautifully, even if simply. This concept is known as hidur mitzvah — literally, enhancement or beautification of the mitzvah.

So what exactly does hidur mitzvah look like? How can you beautify an action? How does beauty connect us with the Divine? Can human actions and human intent be divine at all? Let us begin with the origins of hidur mitzvah.

Part One: Understanding Hiddur Mitzvah (25 minutes)

Hiddur Mitzvah appears in the Talmud in tractate Shabbat, where several examples of mitzvot are listed.

➢ Read Text #1 aloud.

Text #1: Babylonian Talmud 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 [anveithu], the Lord of my father and I will raise Him up.” The Sages interpreted anveithu homiletically as linguistically related to nei, beauty, and interpreted the verse: Beautiful yourself 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 sukkah, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, 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.
Ask:

1. How do the sages of the Talmud make the connection between the biblical text (“I will glorify Him”) and their own interpretation (“Beautify yourself before Him in mitzvot”)?
2. What do the objects called “beautiful” in this passage have in common?
3. Besides the linguistic connection between anveihu (“glorify him”) and noi (“beauty”), why perform a mitzvah with beautiful objects? Is it not the action that matters, rather than the appearance of the objects involved?
4. What distinguishes a sukkah from a “beautiful sukkah”, or ink from “beautiful ink”? How does an experience change when you put the adjective “beautiful” before it?

The Talmudic sages draw a connection between the Hebrew word for “glorify Him” (Exodus 15:2) — וּוְאַנְוֵ֔ה — and a Hebrew word for “beauty” — נאה. (These words share the root nun-aleph-hey.) They suggest that the way to glorify God is to “beautify yourself before Him in mitzvot” by performing mitzvot as beautifully as possible. In this excerpt of Talmud the Sages emphasize that the ritual objects themselves should be beautiful. A beautiful sukkah or beautiful ink can be made beautiful through our intentions, our care, or by in some other way being made unique. When we add beauty to the sukkah or the ink, we are investing more of ourselves into the mitzvah.

Let’s turn to another commentary that presents a similar, yet alternative, way to glorify God through beautifying mitzvot.

Text #2 is from the Mechilta, a 3rd century commentary on Exodus; it is a shirata (commentary on the Song of the Sea). The Mechilta, along with the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah (a collection from the 5th to 7th centuries) are the primary textual sources for the rabbinic tradition which encompasses the aesthetics of beauty.

Text #2: Rabbi Ishmael. Mechilta. Translated and compiled by H.S. Horowitz and I.A. Rabib.

“זֶה קָלִי וַאַנְוֵהוּ. וַאַנְוֵהוּ, ר’ ישמעאל אומר ‘וַאֲלֹהֵי נֶפֶשׁ, וַאֲלֹהֵי נֶפֶשׁ.’ א’ אִישׁ לָלֹא נַעֲדוּ. אֶת הָעֵצֶם, אֶת הָעֵדוֹת, הָאֵשׁ, הָנָר, אָלוֹם הָעֵדוֹת. אֶת הָעֵצֶם.”

“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 tzitzit, and beautiful tefillin.”

Ask:

1. Is it possible to beautify God? What could that mean?
2. How is Rabbi Ishmael’s suggestion slightly different from that of Text #1?
3. What might it mean for someone to “be beautiful before God”?
4. What does it mean to you to observe the commandments in a beautiful way?
5. How does the act of making something beautiful change your relationship to it?
6. How might hiddur mitzvah change or enhance our understanding of what is meant by “beautiful”?

Hiddur mitzvah is to make a mitzvah — which is already an action that has purpose and transcendent potential — as beautiful as possible. In doing so we evoke a sense of wonder and of awe, adding intention to the actions required to fulfill the commandments.
It is perhaps no accident that beautification evokes a sense of wonder. Let’s examine the context of the biblical verse [Exodus 15:2] that the Talmudic sages quote as the source for the requirement of performing mitzvot beautifully. This context will help deepen our understanding of the concept of beauty itself.

Part Two: An Origin of the Impulse to Beautify (15 minutes)


14:21 Moses extended his hand over the sea and the Lord moved the sea with a mighty east wind the entire night and it rendered the sea dry land and the water split. 22 The children of Israel came into the sea on dry land; and the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left…

27 Moses extended his hand over the sea and the sea returned to its vigor before morning and Egypt was fleeing toward it and the Lord shook up the Egyptians in the sea. 28 The water returned and it covered the chariots and the horsemen, all the host of Pharaoh that came after them into the sea; not one of them remained. 29 And the children of Israel walked on the dry land in the sea and the water was a wall for them on their right and on their left. 30 The Lord saved Israel on that day from the hand of Egypt and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31 Israel saw the great power that the Lord wielded against Egypt and the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in Moses, His servant.

15:1 Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord and they said, saying: I will sing to the Lord, as He is exalted; a horse and its rider he cast into the sea. 2 The Lord is my strength and song and He has become my salvation; this is my God and I will glorify Him; my father’s God and I will exalt Him. 3 The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is His name.
Ask:

1. Explain the context for the phrase, “This is my God and I will glorify [יָשָׁבֶת] Him” — who speaks it? Where? When? Why?
2. What emotions does the text explain these people were feeling? How do those emotions lead to the desire to glorify God?
3. How does this text help us understand the connection the rabbis made between glorifying and beautifying?
4. What have you experienced that has made you want to create something beautiful? Why do you think you had that response to the experience?

We see in this text that the statement, “I will glorify [God]” — which the sages of the Talmud cite as the source for hiddur mitzvah — was uttered by Moses and the Israelites when they experienced one of the greatest of all miracles: God’s splitting of the sea, which allowed them to escape Egypt once and for all. There must be a link between the urge to glorify/beautify and the overwhelming experience of the Divine.

Part Three: What Does Beauty Do? (15 minutes)

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes evocatively of the connection between beauty and the sublime. Rabbi Heschel was a Polish-born American rabbi, theologian and philosopher in the 20th century.

Read Text #4 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. Discuss the following text and questions with your partner.

Text #4: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. God In Search Of Man.

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.

Ask:

1. In your own words, summarize Rabbi Heschel’s main idea.
2. Where do you find and perceive beauty?
3. How do Rabbi Heschel’s thoughts about beauty help to explain the reasoning behind the concept of hiddur mitzvah?

Bring the group back together and ask a few chavruta pairs to share their insights with everyone.

Whether you experience beauty in nature, in people’s faces, in your work, or otherwise, beauty seems to be something that points beyond itself. As Rabbi Heschel explains, beauty seems to be a way we can experience something “greater than ourselves”, even if that experience is only a “silent allusion” to the divine.
Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz expresses a variation on this theme, while making additional observations about beauty and about the holy. 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 #5: 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.

**Ask:**

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz writes that, “The holy must somehow emanate upon one.” How does this inform your interpretation of Rabbi Heschel’s statement about experiencing the sublime?
2. How do Rabbi Steinsaltz’s explanations of the two categories of interpretation of “Zeh Eli ve’Anvehu” stretch your understanding of this text and concept? What do you find more compelling? Why?
3. Rabbi Steinsaltz describes “perfect” in relationship to other values including “conduct, existence, and beauty.” What connection have you experienced between beauty and perfection?
4. How do you think beauty might enable us to “glance at holiness from a distance”?

**Conclusion (3 minutes)**

Something beautiful captures the eye, the heart, and the mind. Before we know it we are carried through to something greater than the beautiful thing we are experiencing. Thus, beauty combines what is visible and what cannot be seen, what we see and what we imagine that we are seeing. *Hiddur mitzvah* is a way of using the power of beauty to connect us to the ultimate invisible, greater thing: God. Whether our focus is on the appearance of the ritual objects used in *mitzvot*, or on the way we ourselves are changed by creating and using these objects, the practice of *hiddur mitzvah* allows us to recapture a visceral sense of wonder and gratitude.
Part One: Understanding Hiddur Mitzvah

Text #1: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 133b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-IsraelSteinsaltz 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 noi, beauty, and interpreted the verse: Be **a beautiful su**ⅰka, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, 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: The Mechilta of Rabbi Ishmael. Translated and compiled by H.S. Horowitz and I.A. Rabib.

“**This is my God and I will beautify** (read midrashically from beauty, “**nun-vay 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 su**ⅰka, beautiful tza**ⅰtit, and beautiful te**ⅰ**ⅰl**ⅳ**.

Part Two: An Origin of the Impulse to Beautify


The text about the **b**ridegroom of blood for circumcisions: “He shall surely circumcise” (Genesis 17:13). Us**ⅰlled in a verse pertaining to the circumcision of the son of the husband’s deceased wife, it states: “Make before Him a beautiful su**ⅰka, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, 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.”

A baraita of Abba Shaul (Rambam Hilkhot Shofar VeSukka VeLulav 1:6). Anan ben Beroka, as it was taught: “As it was taught in the Gemara answers: I am, indeed, a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric. As long as one is engaged in the circumcision, he may return for shreds that do not invalidate the circumcision in it in His name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.”

The Gemara as per the statement of Abba Shaul (Rambam Hilkhot Mila 1:6).
14:21 Moses extended his hand over the sea and the Lord moved the sea with a mighty east wind the entire night and it rendered the sea dry land and the water split. 22 The children of Israel came into the sea on dry land; and the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left...

27 Moses extended his hand over the sea and the sea returned to its vigor before morning and Egypt was fleeing toward it and the Lord shook up the Egyptians in the sea. 28 The water returned and it covered the chariots and the horsemen, all the host of Pharaoh that came after them into the sea; not one of them remained. 29 And the children of Israel walked on the dry land in the sea and the water was a wall for them on their right and on their left. 30 The Lord saved Israel on that day from the hand of Egypt and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. 31 Israel saw the great power that the Lord wielded against Egypt and the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in Moses, His servant.

15:1 Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord and they said, saying: I will sing to the Lord, as He is exalted; a horse and its rider he cast into the sea. 2 The Lord is my strength and song and He has become my salvation; this is my God and I will glorify Him; my father’s God and I will exalt Him. 3 The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is His name.

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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.
**Introduction (10 minutes)**

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

This session will explore the place of beauty and desire within Judaism. Today’s discussion begins with the building of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), God’s dwelling place among the Israelites in the desert and the “place of meeting”. The *Mishkan* was built primarily using donated materials. During the Torah’s discussion of sacred vessels used in the *Mishkan*, we are introduced to the copper laver. This water basin was made of copper and used by the priests to wash their hands and feet before they performed their service. There is an unexpected detail in the description of the raw materials donated to create this copper laver, which was crafted by Bezalel, the chief artisan of the *Mishkan*.

» Read Texts #1 and #2 aloud.


> וַיְדַבֵּ֥ר הֲוֹדֶ֣ר אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֥ה לֵּאמֹֽר׃  וְעָשִׂ֤יתָ כִּיּוֹר נְחֹ֣שֶׁת וְכַנּ֔וֹ נְחֹ֖שֶׁת לְרָחְצָ֑ה וְנָתַתָּ֣ אֹת֗וֹ בֵּֽין־אֹ֤הֶל מוֹעֵ֙ד֙ וּבֵ֣ין הַמִּזְבֵּ֔חַ וְנָתַתָּ֥ שָׁ֖מָּה מָֽיִם׃  וְרָחֲצִ֣ו אַהֲרֹ֥ן וּבָנָ֖יו מִמֶּ֑נּוּ אֶת־יְדֵיהֶ֖ם וְאֶת־רַגְלֵיהֶֽם׃  בְּבֹאָ֞ם אֶל־אֹ֧הֶל מוֹעֵ֛ד יִרְחֲצוּ־מַ֖יִם וְלֹ֣א יָמֻ֑תוּ א֣וֹ בְגִשְׁתָּ֤ם אֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּ֙חַ֙ לְשָׁרֵ֔ת לְהַקְטִ֥יר אִשֶּׁ֖ה לַֽהֲוָ֣דָר

17 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 18 You shall make a Basin of copper and its base of copper, for washing; you shall place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar and you shall put water there. 19 Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet from it. 20 Before their entry into the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water, and they will not die; or before their approach to the altar to serve, to burn a fire offering to the Lord.


> וַיַּ֗עַשׂ אֵ֚ת הַכִּיּ֣וֹר נְחֹ֔שֶׁת וְאֵ֖ת כַּנּ֣וֹ נְחֹ֑שֶׁת בְּמַרְאֹת֙ הַצֹּ֣בְאֹת אֲשֶׁ֣ר צָֽבְא֔וּ פֶּתַח אֹ֥הֶל מוֹעֵֽד׃

He [Bezalel] made the basin of copper and its base of copper, with the mirrors of the women who assembled at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

It is interesting to note that Text #2 specifies the source of the materials donated to the laver, something that is not mentioned with other *Mishkan* vessels.

**Note:** Mirrors in ancient times were not made of glass but of burnished metal or polished onyx, to create a reflective surface. Copper, silver, gold and bronze were beaten into thin sheets and worked to flatness until you could see your face reflected in them.
Ask:

1. Why do you think the Bible mentions that the copper came from mirrors?
2. Does it make a difference from which mirrors the copper came? Why do you think the Torah specifically mentions that the mirrors came from this group of women?
3. Do you associate mirrors with something positive or negative? Why?

Part One: Vanity or Holiness? (20 minutes)

The copper of the mirrors came from “the women who assembled at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting”. Who were those women? Why did they donate their mirrors? Were their mirrors appropriate for use in a sanctuary?

Let’s compare the explanations two commentators offer to address these questions, and highlight the potential connection between vanity and holiness.

Rashi suggests that there is a deeper cultural history being described. 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.


"The Mirrors of the Women": Beauty, Desire and the Divine
For when their husbands were tired through the crushing labour they used to bring them food and drink and induced them to eat. Then they would take the mirrors, and each gazed at herself in her mirror together with her husband, saying endearingly to him, “See, I am handsomer than you!” Thus they awakened their husbands’ affection and subsequently became the mothers of many children...And it was for this reason that the laver was made of them (the mirrors) — because it served the purpose of promoting peace between man and wife.

Ask:

1. According to Rashi, what were the mirrors used for?
2. What do you think of Moses's rejection of the mirrors for use in making a holy object? Why do you think he reacted the way he did?
3. Rashi tells us that God said, “These are dearer to me than all the other contributions.” How does that change your impression of Moses’s response? How does it change your view of the mirrors’ purpose?
4. Consider Rashi’s story of the mirrors’ purpose in Egypt. What does this tell us about the function of beauty?

According to Rashi, Moses says that the mirrors were used for vanity and are therefore inappropriate for the Mishkan. God says to accept and cherish them because these mirrors were essential to the survival of the Jewish people. This text praises the women for using their beauty for the good of the nation.

Let us look at a completely different explanation from Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain), the great medieval commentator, philosopher and scholar.


And the reason that the Torah says “הצובאות”, these crowds of women, is because women habitually look in the mirror — made of copper or glass — every morning to put their headdress into shape...Now, amongst the Israelites were certain women, dedicated to the service of God, who distanced themselves from worldly desire. They donated their mirrors to the Mishkan, as they had no further use for beautification. These women would come each day to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to pray and to hear the details of the mitzvot. And these crowds near the entrance of the tent are the “הצובאות” referred to in the Torah.

Ask:

1. According to Ibn Ezra, why did the women wish to donate their mirrors?
2. What are some other reasons why the women might have donated their mirrors?
3. How do Rashi and Ibn Ezra’s interpretations compare?
4. Which reason — Rashi’s or Ibn Ezra’s — makes more sense to you?
Ibn Ezra says that there was a group of women who lived an ascetic existence, dedicating their lives to God. These women distanced themselves from beauty and worldly desires; they therefore no longer needed their mirrors. They gave up their mirrors, which were melted down in order to create a holy object, as an expression of their aspirations for a more holy existence.

Rashi and Ibn Ezra agree that the mirror is a tool of beauty, and that beauty is rooted in worldly, human desires. They differ on the purpose of that desire, and that difference opens up the complicated subject of the nature of desire. Taking Rashi’s view, beauty triggers desire, which is a necessary part of procreation. From Ibn Ezra’s perspective, concern with one’s own beauty — or vanity — is something to overcome or transcend in service of the divine. Both commentators understand that the impulses associated with the desire for beauty are part of the human condition. Sometimes we put our desires to holy/positive uses, while other times we may control or deny our desires in order to approach the holy. Regardless, we struggle with the pull of beauty and its resulting desires.

Part Two: The Good of the “Evil Inclination”? (20 minutes)

Let’s look more closely at the ways Judaism addresses desire.

Read Text #5 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.

Text #5 is from the Babylonian Talmud. In it, the sages discuss a “fight” with two incarnations of “evil inclinations” — one for idol worship and the other for sinful sexual relations. They manage to kill the first one. Let’s look at what happens when they apprehend the second one. Read the text with your chavruta partner and discuss the questions together.

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

When they saw that the evil inclination for idol worship was delivered into their hands as they requested, the Sages said: Since it is an auspicious time, let us pray also concerning the evil inclination for sin in the area of sexual relationships. They prayed, and it was also delivered into their hands.

Zechariah the prophet said to them: See and understand that if you kill this evil inclination the world will be destroyed because as a result there will also no longer be any desire to procreate. They followed his warning, and instead of killing the evil inclination they imprisoned it for three days. At that time, people searched for a fresh egg throughout all of Eretz Yisrael and could not find one. Since the inclination to reproduce was quashed, the chickens stopped laying eggs. They said: What should we do? If we kill it, the world will be destroyed. If we pray for half, i.e., that only half its power be annulled, nothing will be achieved because Heaven does not grant half gifts, only whole gifts. What did they do? They gouged out its eyes, effectively limiting its power, and set it free. And this was effective to the extent that a person is no longer aroused to commit incest with his close relatives.
"The Mirrors of the Women": Beauty, Desire and the Divine

Ask:

1. What do the two “evil inclinations” have in common? How are they different?
2. Do you think this story supports Rashi’s view or Ibn Ezra’s view of beauty and desire? Why?
3. The text makes a point of distinguishing between different “evil” inclinations. Why is it important that we don’t assign “evil” to all human desires/inclinations?
4. What does it mean to “gouge out its eyes” when referring to the representation of sinful sexual behavior? Why are the eyes so important in this particular case?

Bring the group back together and ask a few chavruta pairs to share their answers.

This is a remarkable story about the “death” of human inclinations to do things they shouldn’t, which the sages call upon God to help them vanquish. God transforms those inclinations into a physical form which can be captured and killed. While idolatry seems easy enough to dispose of, removing the inclination for sinful sexual activity is more complicated. Killing it would mean also killing the desire to procreate, without which the human race would be finished. This seems to be consistent with Rashi’s comment that there is a necessary role played by desire and sexuality.

Ask:

1. Is there a place within the spiritual for sexuality?
2. Given the unintended “side-effect” of removing one of the “evil inclinations”, can humans be made holy? Can humans ever reach holiness or can we only aspire to it?

Desire is not inherently positive or negative — our impulses are kept in check by our self-awareness and by laws. We agree on what is appropriate behavior, and examine the undercurrents of temptation and sin in our own actions. Having impulses but not acting on them is not the same as removing those impulses all together.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University (from 1941–1986) and one of the greatest scholars of the 20th Century, provides insight into “forces” like those described in Text #5.


When God engraved and carved out the world, he did not entirely eradicate the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, from the domain of his creation. Rather, he separated the complete, perfect existence from the forces of negation, confusion and turmoil and set up cosmic boundaries, eternal laws to keep them apart. Now Judaism affirms the principle of creation out of absolute nothingness. Therefore, the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, the relative nothingness must all have been fashioned by the Almighty before the creation of the orderly, beautiful, majestic world.

...However, the forces of relative nothingness at times exceed their bounds. They wish to burst forth out of the chains of obedience that the Almighty imposed upon them and seek to plunge the earth back into the chaos and the void. It is only the law that holds them back and bars the path before them.
God created many primal forces, like the force of the ocean. Wherever there’s creativity, even holiness, there are forces that might not quite be controlled. Jewish laws and protocols can help us to establish and maintain boundaries. Law can help us create a civil, even holy, society.

**Conclusion (10 minutes)**

Rabbi Soloveitchik shows that laws help us contain the forces within ourselves. Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz goes a step further, noting that laws do not exist simply to quell or quash the forces of human nature, but instead leave room within the constraints of laws for those forces to be beneficial. 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. Here, he writes about the challenges of acknowledging beauty:


*Tsni’ut* (modesty of dress) does not mean monasticism. It does not require that a woman make herself ugly, nor does it presume lack of beauty to be a virtue...[We] sometimes misunderstand the verse “Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a God-fearing woman shall be praised” (Proverbs 31:30) as a manifesto against pleasantness of appearance, or at least against the effort to look good. Beauty and grace are “in vain” in the sense that they are transient things, and there is more to life than the preoccupation with them. But inherently they are not bad...Beauty is a gift of God, and *tsni’ut* should not be understood as a denial of it. Rather it is a way of showing special appreciation for this gift as something precious and delicate that is not to be wasted by being paraded in the public eye.

**Ask:**

1. Is there room for an emphasis on beauty within our service of God? How?
2. Do you think human desire can be sanctified and elevated, or is there a level of Godliness that can be reached only by rejecting one’s desires?

Do the mirrors have a place in the *Mishkan*? We could be led to think that beauty, desire and sexuality are good in our homes, but still inappropriate in the *Mishkan*. We think of the *Mishkan* as a place where we strive to be above any distraction and just focus on God. We may believe that physical impulses should remain outside the realm of connecting to God. Yet, Rashi points out that God does not see it that way. For God, sexuality is an important part of our lives and therefore is not to be banned from our religious selves. Sexuality can represent the sanctified life force of Judaism — for example, in the form of the persistence of Jewish women who used their sexuality to ensure the continuation of the Jewish people — does indeed belong in the *Mishkan*.

This gives us room to think about the world we are in and what we restrict and what we don’t restrict. Sexuality can be difficult to talk about. Hopefully, discussing sexuality and desire here within the context of beauty will allow us to think more clearly about it and consider how it applies to our own lives.
**Introduction**


17 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 18 You shall make a Basin of copper and its base of copper, for washing; you shall place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar and you shall put water there. 19 Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet from it. 20 Before their entry into the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water, and they will not die; or before their approach to the altar to serve, to burn a fire offering to the Lord.


He [Bezalel] made the basin of copper and its base of copper, with the mirrors of the women who assembled at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

**Part One: Vanity or Holiness?**

**Text #3: Rashi. Commentary on Exodus 38:8.**

כמראת הנבואה במשנה, שנינו, אsubtotal בכסף רימיות של אחרים נקטבしく, ואתה לא עשו מחלף ימים שלקרב, ויהיה מאה ליה יפניים בידות קרב, אך אם לא תכין הכסף, ויהיה עליך עליך, שתהיה ממיתני ואשה בתקבוק. ויהיה מחלף ימים שלקרב, ואשתו הוא במקצת המילים, ויהיה ממיתני ואשה בתקבוק. ויהיה מחלף ימים שלקרב, ואשתו הוא במקצת המילים, ויהיה ממיתני ואשה בתקבוק. ויהיה מחלף ימים שלקרב, ואשתו הוא במקצת המילים, ויהיה ממיתני ואשה בתקבוק.

"The Mirrors of the Women": Beauty, Desire and the Divine

For when their husbands were tired through the crushing labour they used to bring them food and drink and induced them to eat. Then they would take the mirrors, and each gazed at herself in her mirror together with her husband, saying endearingly to him, “See, I am handsomer than you!” Thus they awakened their husbands’ affection and subsequently became the mothers of many children...And it was for this reason that the laver was made of them (the mirrors) — because it served the purpose of promoting peace between man and wife.

And the reason that the Torah says “the women,” these crowds of women, is because women habitually look in the mirror — made of copper or glass — every morning to put their headdress into shape...Now, amongst the Israelites were certain women, dedicated to the service of God, who distanced themselves from worldly desire. They donated their mirrors to the Mishkan, as they had no further use for beautification. These women would come each day to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to pray and to hear the details of the mitzvot. And these crowds near the entrance of the tent are the “mitzvot women, dedicated to the service of God, who distanced themselves from worldly desire. They donated their mirrors to the chamber of the Holy of Holies.

Part Two: The Good of the “Evil Inclination”?

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

When they saw that the evil inclination for idol worship was delivered into their hands as they requested, the Sages said: Since it is an auspicious time, let us pray also concerning the evil inclination for sin in the area of sexual relationships. They prayed, and it was also delivered into their hands.

Zechariah the prophet said to them: See and understand that if you kill this evil inclination the world will be destroyed because as a result there will also no longer be any desire to procreate. They followed his warning, and instead of killing the evil inclination they imprisoned it for three days. At that time, people searched for a fresh egg throughout all of Eretz Yisrael and could not find one. Since the inclination to reproduce was quashed, the chickens stopped laying eggs. They said: What should we do? If we kill it, the world will be destroyed. If we pray for half, i.e., that only half its power be annulled, nothing will be achieved because Heaven does not grant half gifts, only whole gifts. What did they do? They gouged out its eyes, effectively limiting its power, and set it free. And this was effective to the extent that a person is no longer aroused to commit incest with his close relatives.


When God engraved and carved out the world, he did not entirely eradicate the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, from the domain of his creation. Rather, he separated the complete, perfect existence from the forces of negation, confusion and turmoil and set up cosmic boundaries, eternal laws to keep them apart. Now Judaism affirms the principle of creation out of absolute nothingness. Therefore, the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, the relative nothingness must all have been fashioned by the Almighty before the creation of the orderly, beautiful, majestic world.

...However, the forces of relative nothingness at times exceed their bounds. They wish to burst forth out of the chains of obedience that the Almighty imposed upon them and seek to plunge the earth back into the chaos and the void. It is only the law that holds them back and bars the path before them.
Conclusion


Tsn’ut (modesty of dress) does not mean monasticism. It does not require that a woman make herself ugly, nor does it presume lack of beauty to be a virtue...[We] sometimes misunderstand the verse “Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a God-fearing woman shall be praised” (Proverbs 31:30) as a manifesto against pleasantness of appearance, or at least against the effort to look good. Beauty and grace are “in vain” in the sense that they are transient things, and there is more to life than the preoccupation with them. But inherently they are not bad...Beauty is a gift of God, and tsni’ut should not be understood as a denial of it. Rather it is a way of showing special appreciation for this gift as something precious and delicate that is not to be wasted by being paraded in the public eye.
By Rabba Yaffa Epstein and Karen Sponder

Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will explore different ideas of how to assess beauty, ugliness and their sources. Together we will discuss some interesting, and perhaps even humorous, stories that challenge us to look beyond the surface.

Read Text #1 aloud.


וֹבּ שׁ רַבִּי אוֹמֵר, אַל תִּסְתַּכֵּל בַּקַּנְקַן, אֶלָּא בְּמַה שֶּׁיֶּ

Rabbi Meir said: Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains.

Ask:

1. Do you have possessions that you value purely on the basis of their appearance? For example, have you ever purchased a bottle of wine because of the design of the label? Why?
2. Have you ever found Rabbi Meir’s advice to be challenging when meeting new people? How?
3. Is there value in appreciating both the vessel and what it contains? What could be an example of that?

Read Text #2 aloud.


וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹקים׀ אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹקים בָּרָ֣א אֹת֑וֹ זָכָ֥ר وּנְקֵבָ֖ה בָּרָ֥א אֹתָֽם׃

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Ask:

1. Does the idea that humankind is created in the image of God affect the way that you view yourself and others? How and why?
2. Usually, we understand the “image of God” as a source for human dignity. Does the concept of the “image of God” also teach us about a person’s physical appearance? How?
3. In light of this idea, do you think that all people must, therefore, be beautiful? Or can people, made in the image of God, be ugly? What does this mean to you?
Part One: The “Ugly Man” and His Craftsman (20 minutes)

The first story from the Talmud we will explore builds upon the concept of humankind being made in the image of God, and challenges our understanding of it.

Text # 3: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 20a-b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Sages further taught in praise of the reed: A person should always be soft like a reed, and he should not be stiff like a cedar. An incident occurred in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi’s house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: Worthless [reika] person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel that you made. When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned and insulted this man merely on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me. The man said to him: I will not forgive you go until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel that you made.

He walked behind the man, trying to appease him, until they reached Rabbi Elazar’s city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi? They said to him: To this man, who is walking behind you. He said to them: If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people. They asked him: For what reason do you say this? He said to them: He did such and such to me. They said to him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.

He said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this. Immediately, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, entered the study hall and taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar, as one who is proud like a cedar is likely to sin. And therefore, due to its gentle qualities, the reed merited that a quill is taken from it to write with it a Torah scroll, phylacteries, and mezuzot.
The Talmud tells this story to illustrate more than the dangers of judging a person by his or her appearance. It is brought within the context of flexibility — “A person should always be soft like a reed” — so it is a commentary on our behaviors towards others. Indeed, it shows that our behaviors, when inflexible, can be ugly.

At the beginning of the story, Rabbi Elazar thinks very highly of himself — he is “swollen with pride.” He calls the “ugly man” he meets “reika”, which means empty or worthless. Rabbi Elazar realizes that his behavior is incorrect and literally gets off of his “high horse” and spends the rest of the story apologizing for what he said.

There is a moment of understanding for Rabbi Elazar as he realizes just how deeply he has offended the other man. This connects with the element of flexibility, and how the Torah Rabbi Elazar had just studied might help him recognize when he has made a mistake, and encourage him to ask for forgiveness. The Torah itself must be written with a flexible instrument.

The “ugly” man invokes God to convey that although human beings are judgmental, God does not care about appearances; no matter how one looks, a person is a creation of God. The insulted man calls God a “craftsman”, someone who makes beautiful useful things, and tells Rabbi Elazar to take his insult to the Craftsman who made him as he is. The insulted man then challenges the title of “rabbi” when castigating Rabbi Elazar. At this point, the insulted man is himself obstinate and dismissive, perhaps even judgmental in the same way Rabbi Elazar was with him.

Let’s look at a commentator who offers an explanation of the phrase, “How ugly is that man.” Rabbi Jacob ben Joseph Reischer (1661–1733) was an Austrian rabbi and halakhist. He is often referred to by the title of his most famous work, the Iyyun Ya’akov, from which we will read in Text #4.

Text #4: Iyyun Ya’akov. Commentary on Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 20a.

שתיה פותעה ביתה מ挓רָבָף שאינו ולא חכמה התורה, כי “חכמה לא תאיר פניו” (קהלת ח:א). גם הרגיש בו שאין בו דרך ארץ, כי זעירא “לכד שלתי לרבא” (ירושלמי ברכות יג.) בחוריו. כי “[ד”ר] אמר לו ‘אכלה בלשון תקשב תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו דלך ארץ הוא ולא יידעו中式いくפי הלכותו. ולפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תקשב תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו דלך ארץ הוא ולא יידעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר ל”א רבי כוונא על דבר לקדש תʿאתו’ (ברכות ד.). זה ידוע מי ידיעו中式いくפי הלכותו. לפי “[ד”ר] אמר L
The Ugly Vessel and the Craftsman

He (Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon) happened upon an ugly person: At first glance he determined that this person had no Torah knowledge, as the verse says (Ecclesiastes 8:1), “A man’s wisdom lightens up his face” and this man was physically unattractive. He also had a sense that the man had no manners, as the Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakhot 13a) teaches that Rabbi Zeira did not ask about the well-being of his teachers out of courtesy (so that they would not need to trouble themselves to respond to him). For this reason Rabbi Elazar did not respond to this man’s greeting and referred to him as worthless. Afterwards he changed his mind, thinking, “It could be that from birth that he’s ugly as a result of the town that he’s from, even though he does have wisdom in him. The fact that he responded to my question by saying ‘I don’t know’ indicates that he has good manners, as he is following the advice from Berakhot 4a, ‘Teach your tongue to say, ‘I don’t know’.” When the man continued by saying “go to my Creator and ask Him (why I am ugly)”, Rabbi Elazar immediately regretted his initial comment [and sought forgiveness].

Ask:

1. According to the Iyyun Ya’akov, what did Rabbi Elazar assume about the man from his appearance?
2. How do you react to the Iyyun Ya’akov’s explanation of Rabbi Elazar’s motivation to insult the man?
3. Let us suppose that the man really was “morally corrupt”. Would that change your reaction to Rabbi Elazar’s behavior toward the man? Why or why not?

The Iyyun Ya’akov wonders whether Rabbi Elazar is referring only to the physical ugliness of the man or if he is reacting to something else. According to this commentary, Rabbi Elazar insults the man as being ugly because he lacks knowledge or manners. Consider the different possible understandings of the insult “ugly” — how do they influence your reading of the original story? However, regardless of the motivations, Rabbi Elazar regrets his behavior and makes a great effort to apologize for it.

Part Two: The “Ugly Vessel” (20 minutes)

Our next story from the Talmud provides us with an interesting exploration of looking beyond the outer vessel.

Read Text #5 aloud.

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7a-b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Gemara cites a related incident: This is as the daughter of the Roman emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, who was an ugly man: Woe to glorious wisdom such as yours, which is contained in an ugly vessel. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to her, in a seemingly unrelated response: Does your father keep his wine in simple clay vessels? The emperor’s daughter said to him: Rather, in what, then, should he keep it? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to her: You, who are so important, should put it in vessels of gold and silver.
The emperor’s daughter went and said this to her father.

He put the wine in vessels of gold and silver and it turned sour. When his advisors came and told the emperor that the wine had turned sour, he said to his daughter: Who told you to do this? His daughter responded: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya. The emperor summoned him and said to him: Why did you say this to her? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to him: Just as she said to me, so I said say to her, to demonstrate to her that fine material is best preserved in the least of vessels. The emperor said to him: But there are handsome people who are learned.

Rabbi Yehoshua replied: Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned. Alternatively, the Torah is likened to water, wine, and milk because just as these three liquids are spoiled only by diversion of attention, so too, are Torah matters forgotten only through diversion of attention. If water, wine and milk are guarded, they will not spoil or have dirty objects fall into them.

Ask:

1. What does the Emperor’s daughter seem to believe about a person’s external appearance?
2. What is Rabbi Yehoshua’s response? Do you think Rabbi Yehoshua was insulted? Why or why not?
3. What is Rabbi Yehoshua’s message to the Emperor?
4. Why does Rabbi Yehoshua believe that “Had they [i.e., handsome learned people] been ugly, they would have been even more learned”?
5. What about this story to do you find most challenging? Why?

This text alludes to a basic philosophical debate: do people’s outward appearances indicate their inner natures? The Roman princess judges Rabbi Yehoshua’s merit by his outward appearance, or is at least dismayed when the wonderful contents of his mind are not matched by a “vessel” that is also beautiful.

Rabbi Yehoshua says that wonderful or beautiful things need not be stored in a beautiful vessel. In fact, he says, modest or even ugly vessels may better suit the fine contents. In this instance, he is saying that his ugly appearance enables him to focus his attention on his learning; he is not diverted by consideration of his appearance. Here wisdom and wine are both described as better suited to be contained in modest vessels.

Our next text is taken from Tosafot. Tosafot is a collection of medieval commentaries on the Talmud. In this passage they offer an explanation of the Talmud’s statement that “Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned.”

Text #6: Tosafot. Commentary on Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7b.

“‘If they would have been ugly, they would have learned more’: This phrase really means to say, ‘If they hated beauty they would have been more intelligent.’
Tosafot is telling us that the physical ugliness or beauty of a person does not influence his or her learning, but rather that person’s attitude toward the physical.

Whether or not Rabbi Yehoshua is insulted by the princess’s comments, he defends his appearance as being better-suited to containing the beauty of learning. Perhaps his ugliness affords him extra time to devote to learning instead of to personal grooming, or his appearance means other people aren’t distracted by his beauty. Whatever the effect of his ugliness on his learning (both the princess and the Talmud note that he was an ugly man), Rabbi Yehoshua’s response was a good one: The outside of a vessel does not indicate the quality of its contents. Just as an ugly vessel may contain wonderful things, a beautiful vessel may even spoil its contents.

It is interesting to learn that the spoiling of the contents described in this story is scientifically accurate. Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz describes this in his note on this story within the Koren Talmud Bavli. 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 #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Note on Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7a.

Wine cannot be stored in metal vessels because the acid contained in the wine has a somewhat corrosive effect on most metals, including copper and silver. Furthermore, many compounds of these metals are poisonous, which not only spoils the taste of the wine but also places the drinker’s health at risk.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Beauty can refer to both inner content and outer appearances, as can ugliness. Rabbi Steinsaltz offers us this explanation of the complexity of what is considered “good”, which may help us better understand these ideas.

Read Text #8 aloud.

Text #8: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Good.” Simple Words.

Each one of the various kinds of good — the aesthetic, the functional, and the moral — has a different set of rules with its own compelling inner logic, and unfortunately, the categories are not interconnected. Thus, beauty can be morally wrong, impractical, or even dangerous. Most poisonous mushrooms, for instance, are much more beautiful than the edible ones. Conversely, something that violates the laws of aesthetics is not necessarily immoral: an ugly person can be deeply righteous.
Our texts draw different connections between beauty, ugliness and wisdom. The *Iyyun Ya'akov* seems to indicate that beauty is an indicator of wisdom; ugliness is an absence of wisdom and manners. The story from Text #5 describes ugliness as being more conducive to wisdom, yet Rabbi Steinsaltz challenges us by claiming that there is no correlation whatsoever between beauty and wisdom.

**Ask:**

1. Which of the texts in this session do you find most challenging to your life experiences and understanding? Why and how do they challenge you?
2. While we might like to believe that the outside doesn’t matter, are there ways in which it does? What can these texts teach us about how to move past those realities?
3. How has today’s discussion informed your thinking about the relationship between beauty/ugliness/outward appearance and what is on the inside/wisdom?
Introduction


Rabbi Meir: Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains.


God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Part One: The “Ugly Man” and His Craftsman

Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 20a-b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Sages further taught in praise of the reed: A person should always be soft like a reed, and he should not be stiff like a cedar. An incident occurred in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi’s house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: Worthless [reika] person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made. When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned and insulted this man merely on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me. The man said to him: I will not forgive you go until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made.
He walked behind the man, trying to appease him, until they reached Rabbi Elazar’s city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi? They said to him: To this man, who is walking behind you. He said to them: If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people. They asked him: For what reason do you say this? He said to them: He did such and such to me. They said to him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.

He said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this. Immediately, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, entered the study hall and taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar, as one who is proud like a cedar is likely to sin.

And likewise, Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, but you calling my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. He happened to trouble themselves to respond to him. For this reason Rabbi Elazar did not respond to this man’s greeting and referred to him as worthless. Afterwards he changed his mind, thinking, “It could be that from birth that he’s ugly as a reed merited a quill to write with it a Torah scroll, phylacteries, and mezuzot.”

Text #4: Iyyun Ya’akov. Commentary on Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 20a.

He (Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon) happened upon an ugly person: At first glance he determined that this person had no Torah knowledge, as the verse says (Ecclesiastes 8:1), “A man’s wisdom lightens up his face” and this man was physically unattractive. He also had a sense that the man had no manners, as the Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakhot 13a) teaches that Rabbi Zeira did not ask about the well-being of his teachers out of courtesy (so that they would not need to trouble themselves to respond to him). For this reason Rabbi Elazar did not respond to this man’s greeting and referred to him as worthless. Afterwards he changed his mind, thinking, “It could be that from birth that he’s ugly as a result of the town that he’s from, even though he does have wisdom in him. The fact that he responded to my question by saying ‘I don’t know’ indicates that he has good manners, as he is following the advice from Berakhot 4a, ‘Teach your tongue to say, ‘I don’t know.’” When the man continued by saying “go to my Creator and ask Him (why I am ugly)”, Rabbi Elazar immediately regretted his initial comment [and sought forgiveness].
Part Two: The “Ugly Vessel”

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7a-b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Gemara cites a related incident: This is as the daughter of the Roman emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, who was an ugly man: Woe to glorious wisdom such as yours, which is contained in an ugly vessel. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to her, in a seemingly unrelated response: Does your father keep his wine in simple clay vessels? The emperor’s daughter said to him: Rather, in what, then, should he keep it? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to her: You, who are so important, should put it in vessels of gold and silver.

The emperor’s daughter went and said this to her father. He put the wine in vessels of gold and silver and it turned sour. When his advisors came and told the emperor that the wine had turned sour, he said to his daughter: Who told you to do this? His daughter responded: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya. The emperor summoned him and said to him: Why did you say this to her? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to him: Just as she said to me, so I said say to her, to demonstrate to her that fine material is best preserved in the least of vessels. The emperor said to him: But there are handsome people who are learned.

Rabbi Yehoshua replied: Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned. Alternatively, the Torah is likened to water, wine, and milk because just as these three liquids are spoiled only by diversion of attention, so too, are Torah matters forgotten only through diversion of attention. If water, wine and milk are guarded, they will not spoil or have dirty objects fall into them.

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“If they would have been ugly, they would have learned more”: This phrase really means to say, “If they hated beauty they would have been more intelligent.”
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Wine cannot be stored in metal vessels because the acid contained in the wine has a somewhat corrosive effect on most metals, including copper and silver. Furthermore, many compounds of these metals are poisonous, which not only spoils the taste of the wine but also places the drinker’s health at risk.

Conclusion

Text #8: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Good.” Simple Words.

Each one of the various kinds of good — the aesthetic, the functional, and the moral — has a different set of rules with its own compelling inner logic, and unfortunately, the categories are not interconnected. Thus, beauty can be morally wrong, impractical, or even dangerous. Most poisonous mushrooms, for instance, are much more beautiful than the edible ones. Conversely, something that violates the laws of aesthetics is not necessarily immoral: an ugly person can be deeply righteous.
Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we’ll learn more about beauty and ugliness by looking closely at Jewish texts, which will challenge us and expand our understanding of what it means to be beautiful or ugly.

Let’s do a short writing activity. Write down the words “beauty” and “ugliness”. Take a few minutes to think about these words and come up with your own definitions for them. Hold on to your notes — at the end of our session we’ll look back at what we wrote.

Part One: In the Image of our Creator and Craftsman (20 minutes)

We learn in Genesis that human beings were all created in God’s image.


God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Ask:

1. How do you understand the idea that humankind is created in the image of God? What does it mean to you personally, about yourself and how you view others?
2. Having read this piece of Genesis, do you think that all people must be beautiful? Or can people, made in the image of God, be ugly?

The Talmud brings a story that may challenge how we think about these ideas. Let’s do a close reading of the story 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.

Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 20a-b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Sages further taught in praise of the reed: A person should always be soft like a reed, and he should not be stiff like a cedar. An incident occurred in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi’s house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.
He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: Worthless [reika] person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made. When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned and insulted this man merely on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me. The man said to him: I will not forgive you go until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made.

He walked behind the man, trying to appease him, until they reached Rabbi Elazar’s city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi who is walking behind you. He said to them: If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people. They asked him: For what reason do you say this? He said to them: He did such and such to me. They said to him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.

He said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this. Immediately, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, entered the study hall and taught: A person should always be like a cedar, as one who is proud like a cedar is likely to sin. And therefore, due to its gentle qualities, the reed merited that a quill is taken from it to write with it a Torah scroll, phylacteries, and mezuzot.

**Chavruta discussion questions:**

1. What do you find surprising about this story? Why?
2. Is there a hero in this story? If so, who do you think it is, and why? If not, what does that tell you about the characters?
3. The man who is called ugly replies to the insult by saying, “You should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made.” What does he mean by this reply?
4. Do you think Rabbi Elazar was wrong because he thought the other man was ugly, or because he said so out loud? What is the difference?
5. Do you think the other man should have forgiven Rabbi Elazar like the villagers asked him to, or was he right to stay offended? Can you compare his behavior to Rabbi Elazar’s?

**Ask a few chavruta pairs to present their answers.**
At the beginning of the story Rabbi Elazar is full of pride in himself. He meets a man whom he calls “empty”, meaning “worthless”, and ugly. When he realizes his behavior was wrong, Rabbi Elazar spends the rest of the story apologizing for what he said.

The “ugly man” tells Rabbi Elazar that he has no control over how attractive he is, since he was created by God — God is his “craftsman” who made him look the way he does. The insulted man refuses to forgive Rabbi Elazar, despite all the apologies. He is unfairly harsh to Rabbi Elazar, and refuses to see that Rabbi Elazar has learned his lesson. The Talmud tells us this story to teach the importance of being “flexible like a reed”, warning us that refusing to accept an apology may be just as ugly a behavior as insulting someone.

**Part Two: Inner vs Outer Beauty (25 minutes)**

In the story we just read, a man describes himself as a vessel. Vessels, or containers, are a good metaphor for the outside of a thing or a person. Just like a container, what matters is usually what is held on the inside. Let’s read two texts that encourage us to look beyond the surface.

**Ask a participant to read Text #3 aloud.**

**Text #3: Ethics of Our Fathers 4:20.**

Said Rabbi Meir: Look not at the vessel, but at what it contains.

**Ask**

1. What lesson is Text #3 teaching us? Restate it in your own words.
2. How can we apply this idea to the way we look at people? What would it mean to look at what a person “contains”?

This text teaches us an important lesson: We shouldn’t judge something on the way it looks on the outside, but rather on what it contains within. In other words, a person should not be judged on his or her appearance but by what he or she “contains”, such as his or her values, intentions, and actions.

The Talmud has an interesting story about a rabbi who is called ugly. Let’s read it closely to see what else we can discover about beauty and ugliness, and about the connection between inner and outer beauty.
Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 7a-b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Gemara cites a related incident: This is as the daughter of the Roman emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya, who was an ugly man: Woe to glorious wisdom such as yours, which is contained in an ugly vessel. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to her, in a seemingly unrelated response: Does your father keep his wine in simple clay vessels? The emperor's daughter said to him: Rather, in what, then, should he keep it? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to her: You, who are so important, should put it in vessels of gold and silver.

Rabbi Yehoshua replied: Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned. Alternatively, the Torah is likened to water, wine, and milk because just as these liquids are spoiled only by diversion of attention, so too, are Torah matters forgotten only through diversion of attention. If water, wine and milk are guarded, they will not spoil or have dirty objects fall into them.

Ask:

1. What does the emperor's daughter mean when she says, “Woe to glorious wisdom such as yours, which is contained in an ugly vessel”?
2. Why does Rabbi Yehoshua tell the princess to put the royal wine in vessels of gold and silver instead of in simple clay vessels?
3. According to the commentary, Rabbi Yehoshua's lesson is that “fine material is best preserved in the least of vessels.” What does he mean by “the least of vessels”? What is he saying about beauty/ugliness?
4. What point is the emperor trying to make when he says, “But there are handsome people who are learned”? What do you think of Rabbi Yehoshua's response to this challenge?

Does a person's outward appearance tell you something about his or her inner nature? The Roman princess seems disappointed that the wonderful contents of Rabbi Yehoshua's mind are not matched by a “vessel” that is also beautiful.

Does a person's outward appearance tell you something about his or her inner nature? The Roman princess seems disappointed that the wonderful contents of Rabbi Yehoshua's mind are not matched by a “vessel” that is also beautiful.
Rabbi Yehoshua shows the emperor's daughter that a beautiful container may actually spoil its contents. Rabbi Yehoshua defends his appearance by saying his “humble vessel” is better suited to containing the beauty of learning. To demonstrate his point, he causes the princess to spoil the royal wine. Since the wine is the important product and not the vessel, Rabbi Yehoshua teaches that one should prioritize the function of the vessel over its appearance. A vessel being made of gold or silver does not mean it is the best material to use for storing wine; a beautiful person isn’t more or less able to hold wisdom and knowledge.

**Conclusion (10 minutes)**

In both of the stories from the Talmud we read today, the person who called someone “ugly” learns that they would have been better off not sharing their opinion out loud. We can understand that their behavior was itself ugly.

Beauty and ugliness can apply to both inner content and outer appearances. Let’s take a look at one explanation of this complicated connection between beauty and what is “good”. Read this comment from Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. 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 #5: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “Good”. Simple Words.**

Each one of the various kinds of good — the aesthetic, the functional, and the moral — has a different set of rules with its own compelling inner logic, and unfortunately, the categories are not interconnected. Thus, beauty can be morally wrong, impractical, or even dangerous. Most poisonous mushrooms, for instance, are much more beautiful than the edible ones. Conversely, something that violates the laws of aesthetics is not necessarily immoral: an ugly person can be deeply righteous.

**Ask:**

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz uses poisonous mushrooms as an example of something that is aesthetically good (they are nice to look at) but is in fact bad (they’re dangerous to eat). What are other examples of things that are “beautiful” but “wrong, impractical, or even dangerous”?
2. Rabbi Steinsaltz also says that a person who “violates the laws of aesthetics” (is not pleasing to look at) can be righteous and good. What are other examples of something that is “ugly” but moral or useful?
3. What do all these examples teach us about the meaning of the words “beauty” and “ugliness?”

Look again at the definitions of beauty and ugliness you wrote down at the beginning of our session. Take a moment to consider whether you would make any changes, and update your definitions. Keeping in mind your definitions, try writing one sentence that uses both the words “beauty” and “ugliness”.

**Ask:**

1. In your opinion, what is the relationship between beauty and ugliness?
2. What relationship do you now see between good and beauty?
3. How do you now understand the relationship between bad and ugliness?
4. Based upon what you’ve learned from the texts we’ve studied today, did you revise your definitions? Why?
Part One: In the Image of our Creator and Craftsman


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The emperor’s daughter went and said this to her father. He put the wine in vessels of gold and silver and it turned sour. When his advisors came and told the emperor that the wine had turned sour, he said to his daughter: Who told you to do this? His daughter responded: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya. The emperor summoned him and said to him: Why did you say this to her? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananya said to him: Just as she said to me, so I said to her, to demonstrate to her that fine material is best preserved in the least of vessels. The emperor said to him: But there are handsome people who are learned.

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Conclusion

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Each one of the various kinds of good — the aesthetic, the functional, and the moral — has a different set of rules with its own compelling inner logic, and unfortunately, the categories are not interconnected. Thus, beauty can be morally wrong, impractical, or even dangerous. Most poisonous mushrooms, for instance, are much more beautiful than the edible ones. Conversely, something that violates the laws of aesthetics is not necessarily immoral: an ugly person can be deeply righteous.
Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today, we are exploring beauty in our world. Let's look together at how Judaism and beauty connect.

Ask:
1. What is something beautiful that you own? What makes it beautiful to you?
2. What is something beautiful that you cannot own?

Part One: Beauty in Nature (15 minutes)

When God created the world, he made the Garden of Eden. He put so many beautiful things in it, and he was very proud of his garden. There were many different types of trees, plants and flowers in the Garden of Eden. There were many rivers running all through it.

In our first source there is a conversation between God and Adam. It is from Ecclesiastes Rabbah, a collection of comments (midrashim) on the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Read Text #1.

Text #1: Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13.

When God created Adam, God led him around all the trees in the Garden of Eden. God said to him, “See how beautiful and praiseworthy all of My works are? Everything I have created has been created for your sake. Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy my world; for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you.”

God is pleased to show Adam around the Garden of Eden, but He has some strong words for Adam.

Ask:
1. What does God warn us against?
2. How are we told to keep our world?

God believes He has given us a great and beautiful present — the Earth. But then God tells us that it is our responsibility to take care of the Earth.
Embracing a Beautiful World (Elementary School)

Ask:

1. What are some ways that you can help take care of the planet?

Anne Frank was a teenage girl during the Holocaust. She kept a diary while she and her family were in hiding from the Nazis. You might expect Anne to see the world in a very sad way, but she had an inspirational outlook.

Text #2: Diary of Anne Frank.

Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy.

Ask:

1. How do you think Anne is able to look at the world and still find beauty?

Part Two: Blessing the Beautiful (20 minutes)

There are so many unexpected places to find beauty.


The Sages taught: One who sees an elephant, a monkey or a vulture (Rashi) recites: “Blessed…Who makes creatures different.” One who saw beautiful or otherwise outstanding creatures or beautiful trees recites: “Blessed…Who has such things in His world.”

Ask:

1. Did you know that in Judaism we have special blessings to say over animals or trees? Does that surprise you? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think the Talmud is telling us to bless things that are different or beautiful?

Activity: Create a Blessing

Create your own blessing! What is something you think deserves a blessing? It could be a good friend or your favorite sport. Write a blessing for it.
Ask students to share their blessings with the class.

Activity: Stop and Smell the Roses

We’re often taught the value of “stopping to smell the roses”. Imagine that you are walking through a park — you might be trying to get from one end to the other as quickly as you can. But stopping to smell the flowers makes you appreciate the park more, even if it means pausing for a minute or two. The idea is that while living such a busy life we shouldn’t forget to enjoy the small pleasures all around us.

Preparation

Either before class or as a class activity, create sensory smell stations. Spray a little scent on cotton balls and put them individually into small jars, or place items that have unique scents into jars. Some ideas may be vanilla, peppermint extract, lavender, orange, cinnamon, rosewater, flowers etc... Give your students time to take a deep breath at each jar and make notes or drawings inspired by what they smell.

Ask:

1. Which is your favorite scent and why?
2. What do you think about when you’re smelling each scent?

Saying a blessing over something is like stopping to smell the roses. It is taking a minute out of your day to stop and show appreciation for the world around you. This is like what you did with our “smell stations”: you stopped and took the time to really think about what each of those scents was, and to appreciate the thoughts and pictures those smells brought to your mind.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

Let’s look at how mindfulness can change the way we do everyday things.

Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 133b. English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Ask:

1. What do you think is the difference between just doing what is asked of you, and doing something beautifully?
Let’s say your parents ask you to clean your room. You can go and clean your room as quickly as you can, so that you can say you’re done. But you can also go and clean your room and make it beautiful, by lining up your toys nicely and arranging your books — you can turn your room into something beautiful. There is a difference between doing what is asked of you and doing it beautifully.

That is what this piece of Talmud is telling you. There are all sorts of mitzvot (commandments) that are asked of us, and there is a simple way to do them. The text is letting us know that sometimes you can go beyond what is simply asked of you and make it beautiful.

**Ask:**

1. Can you think of a time where you added beauty to your world?
2. Who else do you think adds beauty into the world?
**Part One: Beauty in Nature**

**Text #1: Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13.**

When God created Adam, God led him around all the trees in the Garden of Eden. God said to him, “See how beautiful and praiseworthy all of My works are? Everything I have created has been created for your sake. Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy my world; for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you.”

**Text #2: Diary of Anne Frank.**

Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy.

**Part Two: Blessing the Beautiful**

**Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 58b.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

The Sages taught: One who sees an elephant, a monkey or a vulture (Rashi) recites: “Blessed...Who makes creatures different.” One who saw beautiful or otherwise outstanding creatures or beautiful trees recites: “Blessed...Who has such things in His world.”

**Conclusion**

**Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 133b.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

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 suka, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, 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.
Teaching it to our children means also making them partners in what is so very important.

— Rabbi Steinsaltz

PJ Library Curriculum

GLOBAL DAY OF JEWISH LEARNING

NOV. 12 - 17

PJ Library
JEWISH BEDTIME STORIES and SONGS
**Hiddur Mitzvah**

Books that show how beautiful objects are used (or created) to enhance the performance of a mitzvah or the celebration of a holiday

*Biscuit’s Hanukkah* (age 2)
Hanukkah is all about sharing fun, food, and festivity with family and friends — even the furry ones. Isn’t that right, Biscuit?

*Hanna’s Sabbath Dress* (age 3)
When Hanna helps an old man carry a heavy bundle of coal, her new Shabbat dress becomes dirty and stained. The moon rewards Hanna for her kind deed, changing the stains into shimmering diamonds of light.

*A Mezuzah on the Door* (age 4)
Noah hasn’t had a good night’s sleep since moving from his noisy apartment in the city to a quiet house in the suburbs. That all changes after his parents invite former neighbors to a Hanukkat Habayit, the dedication of their new house as a Jewish home.

*Mrs. Moskowitz and the Sabbath Candlesticks* (age 4)
An elderly woman is unable to enjoy her new residence until her rediscovery of a pair of memory-filled Sabbath candlesticks turns an apartment into a home.

*The Shabbat Box* (age 4)
When Ira loses his class’s precious Shabbat Box in a snowstorm, he learns valuable lessons about honesty, trust, and eventual good outcomes.

*The Eighth Menorah* (age 5)
Sam loves celebrating Hanukkah with his family - and especially his grandma. But when his class makes menorahs in school, he’s worried — his family has a lot of menorahs. He comes up with a plan so that this new menorah has the best home ever.

*Nonna’s Hanukkah Surprise* (age 5)
Rachel’s Italian grandma, Nonna, doesn’t celebrate Hanukkah, so Rachel plans to bring Hanukkah to her house. When her plans go awry, Nonna makes it all okay.

*Joseph’s Sabbath Fish* (age 6)
Joseph always welcomes guests to his Sabbath table, while his neighbor Judah scoffs at Joseph’s generosity. Even as his fortunes decline, Joseph’s door remains open. Times change and Judah turns to Joseph for help. A very special fish helps save the day.

*Lotty’s Lace Tablecloth* (age 7)
In a 19th-century Viennese shop, Lotty, a lace-maker, displays her most prized possession: a tablecloth she has created to help welcome the Sabbath Queen each week. Empress Elizabeth sees the tablecloth and wants it. How will Lotty react?

*The Always Prayer Shawl* (age 8)
A prayer shawl makes its way from grandfather to grandson in this poignant story of tradition and love passed along from one generation to the next.

**The Beauty of Individual Differences**

Books that celebrate individual differences, highlighting the unique characteristic found within each person/creature

*The Littlest Pair* (age 2)
There isn’t one animal happy to see a pair of termites come aboard their temporary floating home. When things aboard the ark get slippery and uncomfortable and the little termites have a solution to their problem, all those creatures quickly change their tune.

*Estie the Mensch* (age 3)
Estie does not always know how to be around other people and sometimes when her grandmother reminds her to be a mensch, she’d rather not. She’d prefer to be a turtle or a seagull. Eventually, something happens that shows her grandmother and Estie herself what a mensch the girl can really be.

*Beautiful Yetta* (age 4)
Yetta the chicken escapes from the farmer’s cage. But what is a country hen to do in big, unfamiliar Brooklyn?

*The Only One Club* (age 4)
As the only Jewish child in her class, a young girl not only learns that each person is unique but is able to share this understanding with her classmates.
**How Kindness Creates Beauty**

Books in which acts of kindness make beauty appear

**Hanna’s Sabbath Dress** (age 3)
When Hanna helps an old man carry a heavy bundle of coal, her new Shabbat dress becomes dirty and stained. The moon rewards Hanna for her kind deed, changing the stains into shimmering diamonds of light.

**Grandma Rose’s Magic** (age 4)
Grandma Rose stitches a little something extra into everything she makes. To thank her for her kindness, the recipients of Grandma Rose’s gifts reward her with a beautiful set of Shabbat dishes.

**Gathering Sparks** (age 5)
A grandfather teaches his granddaughter how every kind deed restores a spark of beauty to the world.

**How Dalia Put a Big Yellow Comforter Inside a Tiny Blue Box** (age 5)
Dalia and her classmates create beautiful tzedakah boxes. With the money they save in their boxes, they purchase materials that help brighten and beautify an old woman’s world.

**One Good Deed** (age 5)
A street that was once grey and dreary becomes more beautiful as the neighbors begin to help one another.

**Gabriel’s Horn** (age 7)
With each act of kindness performed by a family, a tarnished horn begins to shine more brightly, eventually being transformed into a gleaming new horn.

**The Mysterious Guests** (age 7)
As a reward for graciously welcoming guests into his sukkah, a poor man’s sukkah is transformed, with the fruits and vegetables magically being turned into gold and silver.

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**How Dalia Put a Big Yellow Comforter Inside a Tiny Blue Box** (age 5)
Dalia and her classmates create beautiful tzedakah boxes. With the money they save in their boxes, they purchase materials that help brighten and beautify an old woman’s world.

**The Chameleon that Saved Noah’s Ark** (age 6)
Noah’s Ark didn’t just hold animals - it held food for all those animals to eat. But the chameleons were very picky eaters! No one could have guessed how this problem would be solved.

**Jumping Jenny** (age 6)
Jenny loves to jump, but when her energetic jumping gets her into trouble, she decides to retire her pogo stick. Then her school decides to hold a fundraising fair, and she discovers that her skill can be used for a good cause.

**The Peddler’s Gift** (age 7)
Shnook the Peddler isn’t known for being very bright — so Leibush, a young shtetl boy, figures he can get away with swiping one of his dreidels. But it turns out Leibush doesn’t enjoy the stolen dreidel much as he thought he would — and Shnook is wiser than he looks.
**Hiddur Mitzvah:** Books that show how beautiful objects are used (or created) to enhance the performance of a *mitzvah* or the celebration of a holiday

**How Kindness Creates Beauty:** Books in which acts of kindness make beauty appear

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**Read the PJ Library Book**

**Hanna’s Sabbath Dress**

*By Itzhak Schweiger-Dmi’el*

*Illustrated by Ora Eitan*

*Published by Simon & Schuster*

**Synopsis**

Hanna is delighted when her mother makes her a beautiful new Shabbath dress. Hanna tries to keep her new dress spotless, but when she sees an old man struggling with a heavy bag of charcoal, she rushes to help him, soiling her dress in the process. Just when Hanna fears that her dress is permanently ruined, the moon comes to her aid, rewarding Hanna’s kindness with a special moonlit kindness of its own.

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**Discuss the Jewish values and vocabulary**

- **Acts of loving kindness** — *ge-mi-lut cha-sa-dim* — *גְּמִלוּת חֲסָדִים*
- **Welcoming the Shabbath** — *Ka-ba-lat Sha-bat* — *קַבָּלַת שַׁבָּת*
- ** Beautifying the commandment** — *hi-dur mitz-vah* — *הִدوּר מִצְוָה*

- **Acts of loving kindness / gemilut chasidim.** Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Ancestors) — a collection of rabbinic sayings — notes, “The world rests upon three things: Torah, avodah (work or prayer), and gemilut chasidim (acts of loving kindness)” [Chapter 1:2]. Our ancient sages felt that the world depended not only on our learning the right things to do, but putting our reflections into action through kind deeds. Attempting to clarify the definition of *gemilut chasidim* or *chesed* (kindness), the Talmud, a book of Jewish law and custom, explains that *chesed* is an all-encompassing term. It involves helping others by offering kind words, a helping hand, a listening ear, and/or financial and material assistance [Babylonian Talmud Sukkot 49b].

- **Welcoming the Shabbath / Kabalat Shabbat.** Jewish poems, prayers, and songs often describe Shabbat as a queen or bride, as a way of showing how much the coming holiday is revered and anticipated. During the 1500’s, Kabbalistic (mystical) Jews usually dressed in white and went out into the fields to dance, sing, and joyously welcome Shabbat into their midst. It is still common to wear white on Shabbat, just as Hanna does in this book. The well-known song *Lecha Dodi Likrat Kallah* (“Come my beloved, to meet the Shabbat bride”) was composed during this time period as a way to usher in the Shabbat queen. The song is sung in many homes and synagogues today, with hundreds of variations on the melody. As the last line, “bo-i kallah” (“enter bride”), is sung, it is customary to turn toward the door and bow to greet and joyously welcome the arrival of Shabbat.
Beautifying the commandment / hiddur mitzvah. The Jewish concept of hiddur mitzvah (beautifying the mitzvah) means that when people set out to do a mitzvah (a commandment or good deed), they should try to perform the action enthusiastically, using the most beautiful materials available. For example, the Talmud states that when a person builds a sukkah (a temporary structure for the holiday of Sukkot), he or she should try to decorate it as beautifully as possible, and a Torah scribe should use the finest ink and the finest pen [Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 133b]. Many families engage in hiddur mitzvah as they get ready for Shabbat by cleaning their homes, cooking their tastiest dishes, and beautifully preparing the table with cloth, lovely dishes, and artistically designed ritual objects.

Imagine your community living these Jewish values

How would your classroom change? How will families be involved?

In the Classroom / Centers

- **Loving kindness:** Create a kindness/chesed book for your classroom library. Snap photos of children acting kindly towards one another, and ask the children to help you describe kindness for the caption on each page. Parents can add to the book as they notice kindnesses at home.

- **Loving kindness:** At morning meeting create a list of school helpers, such as the truck driver who delivers juice and snacks, the custodian, or the school secretary. Brainstorm ways in which you could thank those people, such as baking cookies, writing thank-you notes, or making a kindness medal to wear. Try to carry out one act of kindness for one school helper each week.

- **Welcoming Shabbat:** Increase children’s anticipation for Shabbat by having them begin to prepare early in the week. For example, bake special treats at the beginning of the week, but save them for your Friday Shabbat celebration. Creating room and table decorations such as “Shabbat Shalom” cards or napkin rings might always be an art choice. Ask the children to help you display the decorations on Fridays. Perhaps after school they can then decorate their own homes.

- **Welcoming Shabbat:** Choreograph a Kabalat Shabbat dance during large motor skills time. Pick a lively piece of Shabbat music, and elicit children’s suggestions for gestures and movement that symbolize welcoming a friend, bride, or queen into the house.

- **Hiddur mitzvah:** Invite your class to work together to create a beautiful “Shabbat Shalom” banner for the room. Consider using silk or other beautiful fabrics to make this banner extra special. Create a classroom ritual of singing a song and hanging the banner in the room every Friday morning. You might choose to recite havdallah (separation ritual) before removing the banner on Mondays.

- **Hiddur mitzvah:** Your Friday job chart might reflect Shabbat preparation tasks, such as straightening blocks, washing placemats, organizing the bookshelf, and setting the Shabbat table. Set a timer and ask the class to engage in a ten-minute pre-Shabbat cleaning race to see if they can make the classroom the cleanest ever.
Bridging Home and School

**Kindness Snacks To-Go**
Have a snack bag assembly line ready at pick-up or drop-off times. Provide brown paper bags and markers or crayons to decorate them. Families can choose a combination of healthy pre-packaged snacks to put into their bags, such as juice packs or applesauce containers. Perhaps one or several families would volunteer to deliver the completed snack bags to a local food pantry, homeless shelter, or afterschool program for disadvantaged families.

**Kabalat Shabbat Picnic**
Organize a Kabalat Shabbat picnic for your classroom. Choose a park, select a meeting time, and invite families to bring a picnic dinner to the park. After everyone has eaten and the children have had ample time to explore the playground equipment, ask the children to teach their parents some of their favorite Shabbat songs.

Family Engagement at Home

**Kindness Challenge**
Ask families to make a list of people who might benefit from a friendly phone call. Challenge families to Skype or call at least one person on their list each week.

Share your stories and experiences

**What happened? How can the learning go deeper?**

**Tell us a story about eagerly awaiting Shabbat**
Share how the children in your class joyously prepare for Shabbat. For example: On Fridays, our children adore singing Shabbat songs as they march down the hall to the lobby of our school. We help the director light Shabbat candles. It feels almost magical. We then invite all of the adults who are in the lobby to join us as we hold hands and perform a Shabbat dance. We love Shabbat!

Share your story with all of us in our private Facebook group! http://pjfor.me/pjgts-facebook

More resources and websites for inspiration

- Easy acts of kindness for children: http://pjfor.me/kindness
- Simple silk banners/scarves-sponge painting: http://pjfor.me/silk-painting
The Beauty of Individual Differences: Books that celebrate individual differences, highlighting the unique characteristic found within each person/creature

Book-Based Family Program

The Only One Club
BY JANE NALIBOFF

Program Focus
Age group: Ages 4–6
Time frame: 45–60 minutes
Central value: Uniqueness (B’Tzelem Elohim), Appreciating Diversity

Synopsis
When Mrs. Matthew’s first grade class starts to make Christmas decorations, Jennifer is allowed to make Hanukkah decorations because she is Jewish. As a result, Jennifer decides to create and become the sole member of “The Only One Club.” However, she is resistant when her classmates want to join. As the unique qualities of her classmates are revealed, Jennifer realizes that each of her classmates is also “the only one” at something, too! This wonderful story encourages children to embrace their own uniqueness and to actively look for special qualities in others beyond race or culture.

Goals
- Highlight and connect the major themes of this book to daily life.
- Promote ways in which children are able to see themselves as both very similar to and very different from others, in a positive way.
- Encourage children and adults to consider individual differences among family members, friends, communities, and beyond to celebrate the marvels of diversity.

Discuss the Jewish values and vocabulary

Each person is unique — א-דאם יא-ﭺיד — אדם יחיד
Community — ק-ה-مؤسسات — קהילה
Introducing the value of the uniqueness of every person: *adam yachid*

**From Jewish Teachings**

One tenet of Judaism is that within every person there is something unique only to them. The Biblical story of Creation notes that God made the first human *b’z’lem elokim*, in God’s image (Genesis 1:26). Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, a contemporary religious thinker, notes that being created in God’s image means that, like God, every person has infinite value and uniqueness; we are therefore all on equal footing.

**For the teacher**

1. What do you consider your most unique attributes?
2. What aspects of you are reflected in your classroom?
3. How do you set up your classroom to meet the needs of a diverse student population?
4. What policies, customs, or changes to the classroom environment have evolved that take into account students’ unique talents and challenges?

**Questions for children**

1. Let’s talk about some of the things that make you special. We can start by thinking about the things you like to do and the places you like to go. (Teachers may want to write the children’s answers down so their responses can be used in the “I’m thinking of someone who…” guessing game described in the Classroom/Centers section of this resource guide.)
2. Is there an area of the classroom or an activity that makes you feel the most like “you?”

Introducing the value of community: *Kehillah*

**From Jewish Teachings**

Jewish tradition strongly encourages every person to “give back” to their community. The Talmud teaches that we are responsible for one another, and notes that within 30 days of moving to a new community, a person must begin to contribute to the community’s soup kitchen. Within a year of joining a community, the new resident must help with the community’s clothing and charity drives, and must assist with the repair of the community’s structures [Babylonian Talmud *Bava Batra* 8a].

**For the teacher**

1. What can you do to foster students’ sense of belonging to — and contributing to — the school community? Keep in mind that your classroom may be the first experience your students have with community outside of their family.
2. What are some of the aspects of community that you would like to convey to the children in your classroom?
3. What steps can you take to help the families feel like they are part of the community?
Questions for children

1. A community can be a neighborhood you live in or a group that you belong to, such as a team. What groups or communities do you belong to?
2. Why is it good to be part of a community?
3. In what ways do you help your community and the people in it?

Plan in advance

Prepare: “UNIQUE” thumbprint poster

MATERIALS
- White poster board
- Several washable ink-pads of various colors
- Markers
- Wet-wipes
- Pushpins or tape to display poster when complete
- A nametag for each participant, if desired

ADVANCE PREPARATIONS
1. Prepare poster board with the word UNIQUE written in large letters.
2. Have ink-pads, markers, and wet-wipes (and nametags if using) at a table near the entry.

Prepare: “The Only One Club” badges

MATERIALS
- 3” round oak-tag or heavy-weight paper circles
- Washable markers or crayons for writing and decorating the badge
- Pin backings to affix to each badge (one for each badge, and glue to attach them); or rolled masking tape to (temporarily) stick the badge to child’s clothing
- Any small decorative stickers, puffy paints, or glitter glue for decorating
- A nametag for each participant, if desired

ADVANCED PREPARATIONS
1. Neatly print the words “The Only One Club” on each badge, making sure you have extras.
Prepare: “Only One” family mobile

MATERIALS

- Poster board in a variety of colors
- Scissors
- Stencils (roughly 3” x 5” in size) of different shapes (Jewish star, dreidel, etc.)
- Colored markers
- Stickers
- Glitter and jewels
- White labels for writing on
- The words ‘Happy Hanukkah’ and חנוכה שמח (Hanukkah Sameach) to use as guides
- Wire clothes hangers
- String or yarn
The Beauty of Individual Differences

Prepare: “The Only One Club” refrigerator list

MATERIALS

- Pencils or pens
- Make copies of the refrigerator list, included at the end of this activity guide

Introduce with an activity

Make Unique Thumbprint Posters

DIRECTIONS

1. Direct adults and children to a table where there is a large piece of white poster board on which the word “UNIQUE” is written in large letters.
2. Have available several washable colored stamp pads, washable markers, and wet-wipes (for cleaning inky fingers).
3. Encourage all (including adults) to use their thumb to tap on the stamp pad and use the print to help fill in the letters of the word. They could also use markers, as some may not want to use the stamp pads.
4. When finished, the leader draws everyone to the reading area.

Introduce the Story

READ THE INTRODUCTION:

Today, we’re going to read a book about a little girl who discovers that in some ways she is very much like her friends but in other ways she isn’t. Do you think that’s true about all of us? Of course! Each of us is different and special. Each of us is unique, one of a kind. I hope you enjoyed helping to fill in the word UNIQUE on our group poster. Did you know that no two people in the world have the same exact thumbprint? That’s one way in which each of us is unique, one of a kind. We’re about to find out many more ways in which children and adults can be unique. Let’s read The Only One Club.

Read the story

PROPS:

Display the UNIQUE poster where it can be easily seen by all.
The Beauty of Individual Differences

Encourage Participation

NOTES:
Gauge how much interaction you want to encourage and act accordingly depending on the number of children involved, the space, the age range, whether other adults are present, the time you have allotted for the reading, etc.

➤ When showing the book’s cover, ask: “What can we tell about the book from the cover?”
➤ After reading the first several pages, ask: “Where are these children?” “What time of year is it? How do you know?”
➤ When the children are making decorations in the book, ask what decorations/objects are used for Hanukkah.
➤ At the full-page illustration of the children dressed for cold weather, ask how the children appear similar and different. Point out that people are different from each other in ways that can’t be seen as well as in ways that are obvious.
➤ Ask how the children think Jennifer felt at the beginning of the book and at the end of the book.

Discussion
There are many ways in which people are “The Only One” that have nothing to do with what we look like on the outside. What ways do you know that people can be different from each other? I hope it makes each of you feel wonderful to know that you aren’t just like anybody else, and that your family and friends love you because you aren’t like any other person in the world. You can be a member of The Only One Club, just like all of the children in Jennifer’s class. Let’s get together in some small groups and talk about ways that we are the Only One.

➤ Make smaller groups of children and parents for a short discussion.

Follow Up activities and resources

Make “Only One Club” Badges

INTRO:
Jennifer gave everyone a badge to show that they were members of The Only One Club. Each of you will also have a badge. Your badge shows that you are one-of-a-kind, the “only one” in very special ways (hold up a badge that you have pre-decorated for the children to see). This is the badge I made for myself. I am The Only One because __________. Now you may use these materials to decorate a badge that you can take home with you.

DIRECTIONS:
1. Have each child decorate a badge with the provided materials.
2. Encourage discussion among the participants as they decorate.
3. As children finish, an adult should attach the pin backing.
4. Allow a few minutes for children to mingle, sharing the appearance of their badges.
Make “Only One” Family Mobile

INTRO:
Jennifer learned that each person in the class, including her, was “the only one” of something. There is a Hebrew phrase for this idea: Adam Yehidi Nivrah. Jennifer and her friends learned to appreciate their differences. Is that a good thing to do? Why? Every family has a lot of things that they share; the way they look, the foods they like to eat, or games they like to play. However, I am sure that everyone in each of your families is “the only one” in some special way. Today, you are going to make “Only One” mobiles for your families that you can take home and hang up as a special Hanukkah decoration. An important thing about Hanukkah is that it teaches us that it’s okay to be different, especially if it also means doing something we believe in.

DIRECTIONS:
1. Cut out a shape for every member of the family (pets can be included if you’d like).
2. Decorate the shapes (on one side only), and remember to leave some space to write the person’s name and what they are the “only one” of.
3. Punch a hole in each shape and thread the string/yarn through.
4. Take a wire hanger and tie the shapes to it.
5. If they wish, they can use the Hebrew or English “Happy Hanukkah” guides to make a sign to put at the top of the hanger.
6. Suggest putting a picture of each family member on the other side of their ‘only one’ shape when they get home.

Make Refrigerator List

DIRECTIONS:
Show pride in the individuality of everyone in your family. Fill out the list (included at the end of this activity guide) for each family member. As new ways present themselves, lengthen each list of things that make each person in your family unique. Have fun!
Resources for parents, teachers, families

**NUDTURING THE FAMILY**

**ADD YOUR NAME TO THE “ONLY ONE CLUB” ONLINE DIRECTORY**

Go to www.flashlightpress.com/onlyoneclub.html where children can add their name to the long list — which includes this book’s author and illustrator! — and tell what makes them unique. It’s a great list to read aloud. Adults can join in the fun as well!

**PLAN A “FAMILY FUN FEST OF FEATURES”**

- Find a really big piece of paper and some color markers, pencils or crayons.
- Take the paper, markers, and the entire family to a spot where everyone can spread out and sit together on the floor.
- Choose a phrase like “The Only One Club” or “Family Fun Fest” — any other phrase that makes you think about how unique people can be - and write it vertically on from top to bottom on the side of the paper.
- This is an “acrostic” — you’ll write across starting with the letter on the left. Everyone brainstorm and go acronym-crazy! Think of words that begin with those letters that make you think of important and unique features of each family member. For example, the letter **C** could stand for “Caring”, **L** might be “Loves to Dance”, **H** can be “Helpful”, etc...You can write as many phrases after each letter as you wish.
- Everyone can suggest positive words or phrases and have a great discussion about what makes us each special. Then, read them all together to see what makes your family a unique group!
### “Only One” Family List

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The Beauty of Individual Differences

The Only One Club
I'm the only one who...
The Beauty of Individual Differences