BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum

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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 hiddur mitzvah — literally, enhancement or beautification of the mitzvah.

So what exactly does hiddur 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 hiddur 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 [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: 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.

זֶהַ קַלַּי וּנְעֵיהוּ. וּנְעֵיהוּ, רַבִּי Исִימָאֵל אָמַר, מִי נָחוּלָה וּרְבָּעִית דְּבָרֵי אֵבוֹרֵל וְיִסְדָּאֵל? אַלּוּ אַלּוּ אַלּוּ, הַגָּם הַגָּם הַגָּם. הַגָּם הַגָּם הַגָּם הַгָּם הַגָּם הַגָּם הַגָּם הַגָּם הַגָּם.

“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 [והנה] 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 Elī 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 Elī 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.
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