BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum
**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.


> וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹהֵ֣ים אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹֽהִים־בָּרָ֣א אֹת֔וֹ זָכָ֥ר וּנְקֵבָ֖ה 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. 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,\(^6\) 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.
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.


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.
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 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.
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?
Looking Beyond the Surface
(Middle School)

Part One: In the Image of our Creator and Craftsman


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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 said to him: Worthless [reika] person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? 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 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.
Part Two: Inner vs Outer Beauty


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

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.

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Conclusion

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