BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum
Based on a class by Rabbi Alex Israel

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.


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.

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.
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.


OF THE MIRRORS OF THE HOSTS — The Israelite women possessed mirrors of copper into which they used to look when they adorned themselves. Even these they did not hesitate to bring as a contribution towards the Tabernacle. Now Moses was about to reject them since they were made to pander to their vanity, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Accept them; these are dearer to Me than all the other contributions, because through them the women reared those huge hosts in Egypt!”
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 headress 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.

**Text #6: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Halakhic Man.**

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:

**Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “The Woman’s Role.” Teshuvah.**

_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.
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