BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum

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A Project of the Aleph Society
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

Said Rabbi Meir: 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 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. 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?
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 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 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 One: The “Ugly Man” and His Craftsman (20 minutes)
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.

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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.

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**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.”
Ask:

1. How do you understand Tosafot’s statement, “If they hated beauty they would have been more intelligent”? How/why would a hatred of beauty indicate or cause greater intelligence?
2. How is that similar to or different from the literal translation: “Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned”?
3. Why might Tosafot be uncomfortable with a correlation between ugliness and intelligence/wisdom?

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.
The Ugly Vessel and the Craftsman

Ask:

1. According to this text, how does external beauty correlate with wisdom and morality?
2. Does this text stand in opposition to the previous texts in this unit, which seem to suggest that there is a relationship between beauty and wisdom? Why or why not?

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?
The Ugly Vessel and the Craftsman

Introduction


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