

The Beholder and the Beheld

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Rosh Kollel YU TMT Zichron Dov, Toronto



One form of beauty is external; the beholder is pleased, and responds positively. In one example, the Torah observes that Rachel is “of beautiful form and appearance” before stating that Yaakov loves her. (Bereishit 29:17-18) Yosef is also described thus, when Potifar’s wife approaches him. (ibid. 39:6-7)

Another form of beauty is internal self-realization, when an entity lives up to its ideal nature. The Greeks appreciated this kind of beauty; they called this state *kallos*. This beauty is not about how others respond; it is about existing in one’s ideal, authentic form.

We emphasize beautifying mitzvot in both ways.

On one level, the external form of a mitzvah should be attractive to the onlooker. For example, after overthrowing the Greeks, the Chashmonaim designed a series of new *menorot*. As their wealth increased, they progressed from iron to tin to silver to gold, to create the most appealing image. (Menachot 28a) We do likewise on Chanukah, using clean, attractive menorot. (Sofrim 20:3)

But on the second level, a mitzvah should match its Divinely intended identity – what *Sefer haChinuch* termed the “root of the mitzvah”. For example, the identity of kiddush is recognition that Hashem created the world; the identity of Torah study is intimacy with our Creator’s plan for the universe. These mitzvot are beautiful when performed with intent to realize those roots.

The Talmud (Shabbat 21b) emphasizes both forms of beautification in the act of lighting a menorah. We have each resident of a home light a chnaukiah, generating more light and making the mitzvah externally attractive. And we also light a number of candles that tell the story of the miracle, consistent with the internal intent of the mitzvah.

We might reasonably view the two kinds of beauty as parallel paths of equal value. However, there is a fundamental difference between them: External beauty requires an observer’s validation. As a result, people who value external beauty may be drawn into an unhealthy search for validation by others. This occurs even in the realm of mitzvot; the purchaser of a silver etrog box may not feel fulfillment until others have expressed appreciation, and may feel an unhealthy insecurity if that appreciation is muted or absent. And to take this hazard a step further: Because the item of external beauty is defined by the opinions of others, those others may come to see it as their own, existing for their satisfaction, as Potifar’s wife did with Yosef.

Despite these risks, we are encouraged to pursue both forms of beauty in our mitzvot. Valuing external beauty, we adorn our Shabbat table with a lovely tablecloth, give needy people finery rather than cast-offs, and recite each word of a berachah clearly. And we value the internal vision as well, creating the ideal Shabbat table, the ideal act of chesed, the ideal berachah, by concentrating on the message of each mitzvah. Hopefully, the confidence in our internal beauty will shield us from pursuing validation of our external beauty.

May our mitzvot be blessed with extrinsic and intrinsic beauty alike, this Chanukah and

throughout the year.

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