

# BODY & BEAUTY IN OUR PHYSICAL WORLD: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE PART II

*by Feige Twersky*

The following class is the second in a three part series examining the relationship between inner spiritual beauty, our physical bodies, and the physical world in which we live. Our previous class established how spirit and body should ideally function as partners. For the individual, this partnership produces a sense of well being, and paves the way for a good life. At odds with this harmony, however, are current standards of physical beauty, which threaten the cohesiveness of body and soul. Beauty and fashion industries place pressure on women, in particular, to focus on appearance and to define themselves according to artificial standards. Admittedly, many women are attracted to beautiful things, and many enjoy a trip to the salon, the clothing store or the jeweler. The problem is that today's culture asks us to invest exclusively in these and other external pursuits, to the detriment of what lies deeper than skin deep.

Judaism advocates balancing inner and outer beauty, by cultivating the relationship between body and spirit. In fact, the Torah gives us female role models whose outer beauty is inextricably bound up with the radiance of their internal landscape. The Torah refers to the matriarch Sarah, for instance as, "a woman of beautiful appearance" (Genesis 12:11). Given that Sarah is one of the three female progenitors of the Jewish people, we know for certain that her outer appearance is only one aspect of her standing as a great beauty. Regarding Sarah, Rashi comments on a Torah verse (Genesis 11:29) that refers to her by the name, "Iscah." Rashi states:

*"[Iscah] is Sarah, because she saw with the Holy Spirit, and because all would gaze at her beauty."*

Thus, the combined spiritual and physical magnificence implied by the name Iscah is central to Sarah's greatness. Another feminine beauty and heroine is Rachav, who demonstrates such inner strength that she merits becoming the wife of Joshua (who leads the Jewish people into Israel following forty years of wandering in the desert). Rachav's story is found in the second chapter of the Book of Joshua. Rachav lives for forty years as a woman of ill repute, dedicating her life to, and misusing her physical beauty. She ultimately reaches a place of clarity and transforms her life into a righteous one.

Avigail is a third feminine figure who exudes outer beauty that is clearly informed by a comparably attractive spirit. Her story appears in the Book of Samuel I, chapter 25, which describes Avigail as both, "intelligent and beautiful." The text tells of how Avigail convinces the future King David to

rethink a current battle strategy that is not in his best interest, and how she later becomes his wife. Given that the Torah connects Avigail's beauty with a story of her righteousness, courage and personal vision, we may conclude that her beauty radiates outward from the inside.

A fourth Jewish heroine reputed to have been a great beauty is Queen Esther of the Purim story, who uses her physical appearance as a means rather than its own end. Esther finds herself married to the gentile king Achashveirosh, in a palace culture that is completely alien to her Jewish views and lifestyle. She is in a unique position as queen to gain her husband's support towards saving the imperiled Jews of her country. Esther is reluctant to approach her husband with her case, until Mordechai reminds her of the fact that perhaps this challenge is the true reason behind her selection as queen (Megillat Esther, 4:14).

Esther's beauty is clearly one of the main reasons Achashveirosh chooses her in the first place. It remains for her to make the most of this asset, by incorporating it into a picture that is more enduring than what Achashveirosh perceives. Esther of course rises to the occasion and saves her Jewish subjects. Thus, she is remembered as a multi-dimensional beauty, rather than as simply the loveliest woman of her day.

The physical radiance of Sarah, Rachav, Avigail and Esther is informed by the inner glow of goodness, fine character and inspiration. Simply stated, theirs is beauty with substance.

For today's Jewish woman in search of both inner and outer beauty, the accomplishments of the Jewish women in Egypt are another example of what happens when body and spirit have a productive working relationship. During the Egyptian enslavement, Pharaoh decrees that all Jewish newborn boys be thrown into the Nile river. In response to this declaration, the Jewish men choose to stop procreating altogether, while the women refuse to give up their hope for a Jewish future. In order to inspire their husbands to continue having families, the women adopt a strategy that incorporates brains, courage and beauty. They dress up and take their copper hand mirrors into the fields where their husbands are working. Peering into the mirrors alongside the men, they encourage their husbands to have children, thereby procuring Jewish continuity. The women of Egypt use their physical beauty for a goal of the highest order - a Jewish future that includes our own today.

Jewish women inherit from their role models in Egypt and throughout Jewish history, the ability to use assets that are both skin deep - and deeper. Amidst this opportunity, however, we face challenges. Beauty and fashion industries work overtime to convince us that our store purchases define our very identity. We may certainly enjoy and take advantage of the myriad products and services that enhance our appearance, but stop short of considering ourselves successes or failures based on industry standards. As Jewish women we need to be put together in a tasteful, attractive manner that identifies us as members of God's chosen people. We must channel our unique inner and outer beauty in appropriate ways, taking care of our physical bodies and protecting them by anchoring outer appearance with inner substance and finding fulfillment in the results.

Lecture by Mrs. Feige Twerski, adapted from "Privacy: Is It a Feminine Trait?" published 1993, in The Jewish Women's Journal. Mrs. Twerski provides insight into the challenges facing the family today, with emphasis on the role of the contemporary Jewish woman. For a listing of her cassette offerings, please call 1-800-878-5000.

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