

# CLASS 31 - VAYEISHEV

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

*"...VaYehi Yosef Yefeh To'ar VeYefei Mar'eh" - "...and Yosef was good-looking, and of pleasant appearance." (Breishis, 39:6)*

In all the Torah, Yosef is the only man described in this fashion.

Is this a factor worthy of praise?

"The daughter of the emperor said to Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chanania: how can such glorified wisdom be contained in such an ugly container? (Rebbe Yehoshua was extremely unsightly)"

"He said to her: your father puts his wine in earthenware kegs."

"In what then should it be stored?"

"You, who are so important, should put your wine in kegs of gold and silver."

"She went, and informed her father, and their wine was poured into kegs of gold and silver. It all went sour. They informed the emperor, who asked his daughter: who told you to do this? Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chanania."

"They called for him, and asked: why did you tell her this?"

"Exactly as she said to me, I said to her."

"But, aren't there good-looking men who are also learned?"

"If they would have been ugly, they would have learned more." (Ta'anis 7a)

Elsewhere, the same Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chanania defeats the elders of Athens, entering their academy to debate the meaning of life. (Bechoros 8b)

It is the homely look of Rebbe Yehoshua that overcomes the beauty of the Greeks.

*"...V'Orrarti Banayich Tzion, Al Banayich Yavan.....and I have woken your sons, Tzion, against your sons, Yavan..." (Zechariah, 9:13)*

Just like Yosef, the Torah refers to Tzion as the repository of beauty - "MiTzion, Michlall Yofi Elokim Hafia - from Tzion, which encompasses all beauty, G-d shines forth." (Tehillim 50:2)

In fact, our Sages directly compare Yosef and Tzion, both of whom are hated and scorned, plotted

against and sold, thrown into empty and dangerous pits.

The Torah has its own measure of beauty.

Let us explain.

1

Alexander the Great, the student of Aristotle, spread the teachings of Yavan throughout the world, conquering faraway lands, expanding the influence of a culture that rules the world to this day.

Throughout his campaign, he is encouraged by a vision, an old man dressed in priestly robes, Shimon HaTzaddik, last of the Anshei Knesses HaGedola. When they finally meet, Alexander the Great descends from his chariot and bows before the Kohen Gadol. To the amazement of his entourage, he publicly acknowledges that Yavan owes its victory to Shimon HaTzaddik.

Chazal teach us that the year of Alexander's rise to the throne was marked simultaneously by the death of Malachi, last of the prophets.

This is true in more than a physical sense. It is the cessation of prophecy that allows for the rise of Yavan, a nation that popularizes Kefirah, denial of G-d.

In a world of prophecy, there was no denying the obvious. Every Navi was a living revelation of the miraculous, expressing a dimension beyond our own. At that heady time, the Yetzer Hara's only option was to push man towards idolatry, maintaining the permanent balance of good and evil.

However, when the Sages destroyed the inclination for Avoda Zara, the world paid a heavy price, the concomitant loss of Nevuah, its balancing counterweight. With the rise of Kefirah, evil of a different sort, a new remedy came to the fore to keep the scales balanced towards good, the form of Shimon HaTzaddik.

The Anshei Knesses HaGedola mark the transition of Torah to a new stage of development - from the open revelation of Torah SheB'Ksav to the undiscovered depths of Torah SheBa'al Peh. Shimon HaTzaddik is the first 'Man D'Amar' in the Talmud, the first to express an opinion of his own. It is this unique wisdom that will do battle with Yavan.

Let us understand: what is the basic claim of those who would deny G-d?

Modern man has been blessed with the wisdom to understand the world around him, defining his environment and conquering the material world, diverting its natural resources for the benefit of economic growth and prosperity. Taken to the limit, this worldview ultimately believes that man has the ability to fathom all of existence, grasping the process of creation and the development of life, denying G-d His rightful place.

Torah is wisdom of a different sort.

Knowing what the world exists of does not define its reality.

It is much more important to understand what it means.

G-d has placed us in a dimension of vast proportion, from the microscopic organisms of molecular biology to the expanding galaxies of time and space. Knowing the age of the universe, or sub-particles of the atom is not the ultimate lesson that G-d wishes to impart, these entities are mere allusions of a deeper reality that cannot be measured. This hidden truth is Torah SheBa'al Peh, the law the Sages extract from the physical existence, utilizing the details of life in an effort to actualize G-d's will.

In a sense then, it is Shimon HaTzaddik and the Oral Law of mortal man who pave the way for Alexander. With the onset of a new means of relating to Hashem, evil as well must take on new form. Whereas in previous generations the test of man was in heavenly spheres, the new world will see a battle for the nature of life, a struggle of the intellect.

The Greek mindset sees the world for what it is, a physical place of sight and sound. The Torah scholar sees the same world as an expression of G-d's will, and a call to heed His word, more than meets the eye.

2

What defines beauty? What characterizes a striking work of art, or a captivating photograph?

Often, it is the posing of two extremes within a harmonious framework that captures attention. A rising snow-capped mountain towering above a crystal- blue lake, or a colorful sunset reflecting off a lonely man eyeing the horizon, these appealing images fire the imagination.

The conductor who directs a symphony orchestra creates beautiful music from the cacophony of fifty different individuals who blow their own horn. It is these sights and sounds that successfully assimilate diverse elements into one organic whole that man finds attractive.

"Yaft Elokim L'Yefes V'Yishkon B'Ohalei Shem" (Breishis 9:27)

Yavan is the heir to the beauty of Yefes, with the power and prowess to harmonize the world. With a culture of wisdom and philosophy, physical and material beauty, they spread their Kefirah to the four corners of the earth.

But what the world finds beautiful, we find disgusting.

The beauty of Israel is the shining face of the Kohen Gadol, his glorious garments - "L'Kavod U'Li'Tiferes".

The charm of physical beauty displays nothing but the splendor of this world, a surface attraction that hides the inner truth. An elegance that distracts man from his true purpose is a hideous distortion, repulsive to the one who seeks a lasting peace.

The Bais HaMikdash was the scene of true glory, the joining of two opposite extremes. Here, Shamayim and Aretz form a new dimension, and the man who entered the Temple was unsure if he was on heaven or earth.

While the beauty of Greece revels in the display of the body, an exhibition that reveals nothing but itself, the honor of Jerusalem is the vision of a parallel beauty, a world far beyond our own, a glimpse of the grandeur that unifies all existence.

"Ki MiTzion Tetzei Torah.." - from Zion comes forth the word that truly harmonizes all of life, the sense of purpose that grants meaning to trivial pursuits.

'Tzion' B'Gimariya = 'Melech Yavan'

It is for this reason that Yavan is defeated at the hands of the Chashmonaim, the family of the Kohen Gadol. Those who enter the Holy of Holies have seen a dimension of everlasting magnificence, and it is this taste of true beauty that subdues the tawdry imitation proffered by the Greek gods.

### 3

Amidst the destruction and defilement of an exile in our own land, Klal Yisrael discovers a Pach Shemen Tahor - sealed with the stamp of the Kohen Gadol.

A small and ugly earthenware jug contains the pure and undiluted light that defeats the vast army of a powerful nation.

What is the secret of Torah SheBa'al Peh?

While the wisdom that defines the physical world attempts to outline the material basis of existence, the Oral Law attempts to transmit lessons of a deeper realm, with no pretension at defining the totality of life.

While the secular wisdom of the natural sciences doubts the presence of a G-d it cannot measure, the Talmudic mind of a Torah scholar never stops with a question. On the contrary, as every student of Gemara knows, every difficult problem is merely an initial stage of conception, sparking the penetrating search for a deeper plane of understanding.

Ugliness is only skin deep.

When difficulties threaten to blacken man's perception, and he valiantly struggles to maintain equilibrium in a flood of turmoil and pain, he finally discovers the inner strength that resolves his pressing need.

Yosef is the man who survives alone, holding on to the distant memory of a family who sent him away. Tempted by sin, and torn in distress, he unlocks the keys of life to rise above his worldly prison, sustaining his family and his people with a beauty that is heaven-sent.

'Yosef' B'Gimatriya = 'Tzion'

It is for this reason that each Shabbos Chanukah we read once again the story of Yosef, father of true beauty.

From the depths of exile, belittled and besmirched, Klal Yisrael discovers one last earthenware jug, sealed by the Kohen Gadol. The pure oil within lights up the world with an eternal beauty that never fades, illuminating the darkness of the long, black night.

"....U'MiNosar Kankanim Na'asah Nes LaShoshanim, Bnei Binah Yemei Shmonah, Kav'u Shir U'Rinanim."

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