

SYMBOLIC PERFECTION

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

What is it like to live as a symbol? The superstars of sports, entertainment, media, politics, and fashion, are all qualified to answer the question. They have become our society's symbols of perfection, power and grandeur. They have been sold to us as heroes and role models. The fact is that most of them are ill equipped to handle the responsibility of being "symbols", and that is why inquiring minds want to know so much about their private lives and public follies. However, we must admit that being viewed as a symbol is not easy. Symbolic living demands sacrifice, commitment, and humility. Being a symbol demands that we must live up to the expectations of others. This is true for the superstars of our culture as well as every parent, teacher, clergyman, and Jew.

This week's Parsha begins with the restrictions associated with the Kehunah - priesthood. A regular Kohain is restricted from attending any funeral, except those of his seven closest relatives. (Father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, wife) The Kohain Gadol - High Priest is restricted from attending even those funerals. A regular Kohain can not marry a convert, a divorcee, a Challalah (a child born from the union of a Kohain and a woman who is forbidden to him), and any woman who was, at one time, intimate with a non-Jewish man. A Kohain Gadol is further restricted from marrying a widow. The laws of purity and impurity are far more stringent for Kohanim and their families than for the standard Yisroel.

The Parsha also details the laws restricting a physically deformed Kohain from performing the service in the Bais Hamikdash, as well as the prohibition against offering any sacrifice that is physically blemished. Nowadays, a Kohain who has deformed hands is restricted from participating in the "Duchaning - priestly blessing."

Why is the Kohain more restricted than the standard Jew? Why does the Torah seem to discriminate against the physically challenged Kohain? What is the difference whether an animal is blemished or not? A blemish can be as seemingly insignificant as a split lip or eyelid! What possible difference could that make to the acceptability of a Korban?

From the very first incident in the Torah, the story of Gan Eden, we find an emphasis on aesthetics and wholeness. The Pasuk says, "G-d caused every kind of tree to grow from the soil, delightful to the sight..." (Ber. 2:9) Sarah is described as, "...you are a beautiful woman to look upon." (Ber. 12:11) Rivkah is described as, "exceedingly good to look upon..." (Ber. 24:16) Rachel is described as,

"...Rachel was beautiful of face and beautiful to look upon." (Ber. 29:17) Yoseph is described as, "...beautiful of form and beautiful to look upon." (Ber. 39:6) Tziporah, the wife of Moshe is called "a dark skinned woman," (Bamid. 12:1) which the Talmud explains to be a euphemism for exceptionally beautiful. In describing Shaul, our first King, the Navi says, "...a choice handsome young man - there was no one more handsome in all Israel. He was a head taller..." (Shm.I - 9:2) In Pirkei Avos (6:5) it lists eight characteristics of a Tzadik, the very first being, "beauty."

Why does the Torah place such an emphasis on physical characteristics? What difference does it make to know that our true heroes and heroines were physically beautiful as well as being spiritually accomplished? Why place any value on the transient and changing nature of physical beauty?

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains in Bereishis (2:9) the importance of esthetics.

"The abundance of beautiful forms which we note among the creatures on our earth and the fact that - as far as we know - man is the only creature endowed with a capacity for enjoying beauty, verifies the importance that the Creator attaches to this capacity in man's spiritual and moral calling. Indeed, the beautiful forms that are scattered throughout creation, along with man's capacity for deriving pleasure from them, represent the principal means for protecting man from becoming completely brutalized. The pleasure man derives from the beauty in nature and from the beautiful forms into which G-d has shaped particularly the world of vegetation, represent a bridge which leads man to the stage where he is able to derive pleasure from things and ideas of spiritual and moral beauty.

In an environment where no attention is given to harmony and beauty, man can easily run wild. The emotion which enables man to derive pleasure from order and harmony is closely akin to man's sense of order and harmony also in the sphere of ethics and morality, so much so that - evil appears as something "broken," a disturbance in harmony in which the whole is no longer ruled by one uniform purpose."

(For further discussion try to apply the concept of esthetics to the relationship between Shem and Yefes, as well as the emphasis we place on modesty and humility.)

Our ability to ignore external appearances and focus on a person's true internal beauty is directly linked to the presence of beauty in the world. The contrast, both positive and negative, between the apparently beautiful, yet, truly ugly; the apparently ugly, yet, truly beautiful; and the apparently beautiful, yet truly beautiful, puts esthetics into its proper perspective.

The verse in Aishes Chayil states, "Charm is deceit and beauty is vain; A woman who fears G-d brings praise upon herself." My Grandfather Zt'l explained it to mean that charm and beauty can be deceitful, but the woman who has charm and beauty, yet is truly G-d fearing, such a woman is worthy of praise.

Beauty and charm are creations of G-d, no different than the rest of G-d's universe. To deny their

obvious attraction would be to deny G-d's intent and purpose in creating beauty in the world. Obviously, no different than the rest of G-d's creation, esthetics in and of itself is transient and meaningless. It must be another means for recognizing the grandeur of G-d and His intent in putting us in this world. Otherwise, we undermine and misuse G-d's creation and pervert the sanctity - Kedusha that is our goal.

The Kohain is a symbol. The Kohanim are the select few chosen to live their lives within the intimate embrace of G-d's manifest presence. The Kohanim are our teachers and role models. They symbolize the ideal relationship between a human and his Creator. They live a life of prescribed sanctity, commitment, and devotion that would have been ours, if not for the sin of the Golden Calf. Their Kedusha is unique; their responsibilities are greater; G-d's expectations for them are more encompassing and circumscribed. Therefore, there are more restrictions imposed upon them.

As symbols, the Kohanim must appear to be perfect. In fact, we want our symbols to be perfect! It is far easier for us to admire the beautiful Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, Yoseph, Tziporah, Shaul, and Queen Esther, and emulate their selfless courage and devotion in serving G-d when we envision them as regal, beautiful, and alluring.

I clearly remember the times that my Mother Shlita described the Lubavicher Rebbe Zt'l to me as, "such a handsome and regal man." In no way did that detract from the extraordinary influence that he had on our world. His righteousness and merit stand on their own, but it certainly enhanced his ability to teach and influence. My own Grandfather Zt'l, although not a physically imposing individual, was exceptionally handsome. His face projected a warmth and nobility that framed his monumental scholarship and righteousness. The pictures of Rav Elchonon Wasserman Zt'l have always struck me with their awesome and regal beauty. He was a man who certainly fulfilled the first criteria listed in Pirkei Avos for a Talmid Chacham. Obviously there were many equally great personalities who were not gifted with physical beauty and left their indelible marks on the soul of our nation. However, in no way should that detract from those whom G-d did favor with esthetic beauty.

Kohanim occupy their unique position within the nation because of G-d's decree. At all times they must be cognizant that they are who they are, not because of their own merit, but because they are the sons of Aharon. The very Bracha that they proclaim before blessing the congregation focuses them on "the sanctity of Aharon." Therefore, their service in the Bais Hamikdash demands strict adherence to the established limits of G-d's instructions - regardless of what we might think, feel, or expect about the value and importance of physical beauty. This is as true for the Kohain as it is for the Korban - sacrifice. Both must be as esthetically pleasing and perfect as the Torah demands.

However, the relative focus on esthetics is only in the realm of symbolism. In the daily world of Torah and Mitzvos, the inner person should be our only focus. Each and every one of us is equally challenged to serve G-d, as we are. Whether beautiful or ugly, perfect or not, we are each the intended creation of G-d. If you do to the extent of your ability and I do to the extent of mine, we are

both doing what we were intended to do. In fact, we must each do everything possible to ensure that everyone has the chance to realize his or her potential. We both need each other to be the best we can be; or else, G-d's intentions will not be accomplished.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
