

BEAUTY AND GRACE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

What does it mean to be perfect? What does it mean to "have never sinned"?

This week's Parsha begins with an accounting of Sarah's life. "Sarah lived 100 years, 20 years, and 7 years. Rashi explains that the breakdown of 127 teaches a fundamental lesson about the unique life of Sarah. "When Sarah died at the age of 127 she was as innocent as she was when she was 20 and as beautiful as when she was 7."

What lesson did the Torah intend by telling us the comparative breakdown of Sarah's life? More so, the association of innocence with being 20 and beauty with being 7 seems reversed. Innocence is usually associated with the young while beauty gains substance and recognition with maturity. Why the unusual reverse associations?

Rav S.R. Hirsch explained that laudable innocence presumes the possibility of innocence lost and the character strength needed to maintain innocence. A seven year old may be innocent; however, her innocence is natural, unassuming, and untested. On the other hand, a twenty year old who is truly innocent is a person who has successfully struggled with who she is, what she is, and the challenges of her society. She has embraced values that are often at variance with societies values and remained resolute. Such a person deserves to be praised as "innocent."

My Grandfather Zt'l explained that Sarah's beauty was compared to a seven year old because beauty in the Torah is tantamount to recognition and quality. The first thing we usually notice about each other is appearances. It is only after we have gotten to know each other that appearances are overshadowed by the quality of character, or lack there of.

Our expectations for children are much less than our expectations for adults. Adults, beautiful in appearance or not, who misbehave are not easily excused or forgiven. On the other hand, a child, especially a beautiful child, who misbehaves, the tendency is to first excuse with such expressions as, "how cute," "how precocious."

My Grandfather Zt'l explained that even as an adult Sarah elicited from others the same reaction as does a beautiful child. No one could find fault in her. Her actions were as beautiful as her being and everyone who met her recognized it.

I would like to suggest that the Torah compared Sarah's beauty to the beauty of a child of seven and her innocence to the innocence of a 20 year old because Sarah accepted her exceptional beauty

with the same unassuming innocence that a beautiful seven year old does.

Beautiful children are mostly unaware of how others react to their beauty. And so it should be! They take their appearance for granted and are as happy to be dirty, disheveled, unbrushed, and unbathed as they are to be dressed, coifed, and primed for a wedding or other "fancy" event. It is the adult who teaches the young, beautiful, and innocent, to realize the manipulative power of appearances. Young children may have natural tendencies toward coyness and "pinky wrapping" but it is we adults and the way we react to beauty that permits the tendency to become an art form.

Sarah never translated her beauty into anything more than the naturalness of the very young. Seemingly unaware of her own beauty, it took Avraham Avinu at the age of 75 to say to his 65-year-old wife, (12:11) "I realize that you are a beautiful woman when the Egyptians see you therefore say you are my sister" Sarah may very well have been exceedingly beautiful mean a whole lot to her. Others may have placed undue value on her beauty, but not Sarah herself. Her beauty was the more complex and profound beauty of a mature woman but her self-image was with the same innocence and humility of a seven year old.

It is strange that the Torah seems to place such value on beauty. Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel, and Yoseph, are but a few of the biblical figures described by Tanach as beautiful or exceedingly handsome.

The Mishnah in Avos (6:8) lists the characteristics of a Tzadik, "Beauty, strength, wealth, honor, wisdom, old and hoary age, and children." At the end of the same Mishnah it states, "R' Shimon ben Menasya said: These seven qualities were all realized in Rebbi and his sons."

Describing the creation of the trees and the formation of Gan Eden the Torah writes, (2:9) "Every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food"

In recording Chava's reaction to the Tree of Life the Torah writes, (3:6) "The woman perceived that the tree was good for eating and delight to the eyes"

Why the emphasis on beauty?

Rav S.R. Hirsch (Bereishis 2:9) writes, "Here the esthetic element, man's feeling for beauty, receives its justification and sanctity. This seems to indicate the higher place intended for man in the scheme of Creation. 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 capacity for enjoying beauty, verifies the importance which 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 it represents a bridge which leads to the stage where he is able to derive pleasure also 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 that allows 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.

Rav Hirsch's approach to esthetics establishes beauty and form as a means toward understanding G-d, His majesty and wisdom. It reflects order and purpose in all that G-d created and focuses us on seeking to emulate the same. Like G-d's total creation, our lives should be ordered in such a manner that all aspects of life integrate within the context of unassailable givens. Morality, service, selflessness, strength, integrity, compassion, trust, belief, sanctity, personal respect, appreciation, value, and family, join beneath the banner of Truth to form a lifestyle of blessing and contentment. This was the message Avraham and Sarah hoped to impart to their students and especially to Yitzchak.

It makes sense that Sarah would be a person whose very being reflected the integration of beauty and character, spirit and body. However, Sarah just didn't happen. She had to face the challenges of her self and her society and discover the purpose and value that would frame and dictate the emergence of her true self as a servant of G-d. In that way Sarah was unique.

Sarah was able to evolve in her maturation bringing along the truths she had discovered and the lessons she had learned at each stage. The untested innocence of her young beauty remained pure because she worked to keep it pure. In time her beauty was tested and she did not falter. She remained the same unassuming and humble servant who recognized her beauty as a gift and a responsibility. Desired and admired by all, Sarah's modesty became the comment of angels and the stuff of legends.

The Talmud in Kedushin (29b) relates the obligation for a man to marry by the age of 20. (The spectrum of opinions in the Talmud range from 18 to 22.) Rav Chisda stated that his personal excellence in Torah above and beyond his contemporaries was due to the fact that he married at 16. He goes on to say that had he married at 14 he could have told the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination), "An arrow in your eye!" (An ancient Babylonian version of, "Go jump in the lake")

Can any of us imagine our children marrying at 16, let alone at 14? Were those early generations so much more mature than our own?

The Talmud does not suggest that we marry off our children at 14, 16, 18, or any other age. It does mandate that we know our children well enough to know when they should get married. It presumes that we are honest enough to recognize the telltale signs of maturation, interest, and need, and that we are prepared to create the environment and support for their emergence into the integrated world of responsible relationships. We do not put them on hold or ice and we certainly cannot abandon them to the embrace of societal norms. We must continue in our G-d given parental responsibility of teaching and training our children. All of us understand the importance of teaching our children to read and write. Why would we assume that just because they turn 20-something they know how to build a family?

Sarah's innocence at the age of 20 reflected the early integration of physicality with maturity,

purpose, and responsibility. We too must do the same for our children. Imagine a world that frames emerging sensuality and need in value and purpose. That was the world of Rav Chisda. His world allowed his maturing self to emerge within the context of a responsible and directed relationship. It did not presume greater maturity than was his due. In fact, it presumed his immaturity and his need for constant attention and direction as he and his spouse discovered the balance between desires and responsibility. It presumed the determination and valor of Sarah who molded herself into a purposeful and accomplished force of goodness. Not by denying who and what she was but by seeking the healthiest and most respected expression for her needs, strengths and obligations.

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