

JUDGING BY APPEARANCES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Appearances often times deceive the beholder. In this week's parsha this human tendency to rush to judgment on the basis of external appearances and physical circumstances plays an important part in the narrative of the Torah. The brothers of Yosef misinterpret the cloak given to him by their father as a symbol of hatred towards them. "Why should he be allowed to dress differently than we?" is their complaint.

Parents who are fortunate to have a number of children will immediately recognize this situation and the whining that accompanies it. Yet out of this seemingly minor event, a great and historical tragedy and a fulfillment of a dire prophecy emerges. Yosef's attitude and his dreams certainly did not help the situation, but in the judgment of the Torah and its commentators, the brothers misread the situation and badly overreacted.

They would pay a great price for this misjudgment. They would now take every action and statement of Yosef as being a direct threat to them and their roles in founding the Jewish people. He was "different" than they were and "different" people often and regularly have been misunderstood and oftentimes needlessly and wrongfully persecuted in the history of Jewish society.

Yosef's physical beauty, his attention to his appearance and his brilliant and charming personality only intensified the hatred of his brothers towards him. He was far too 'different' than they - and in the words of the Torah itself, the brothers never really recognized Yosef as the great, noble and holy person that he was until very late in their relationship with him.

In the Torah, we are told of the instance where Yehuda sees a woman sitting at the crossroads of a highway. He does not recognize her even though she is his daughter-in-law. She is dressed in a "different" manner and he immediately comes to the conclusion that because of the circumstances, she must be a harlot. He will be eternally and publicly shamed for mistaking Tamar's appearance - and out of this unlikely union the future of the Jewish people will arise - but it is obvious that this was not Yehuda's finest hour. He judged the woman by her appearance and he was mistaken. He will later admit publicly that she was the more righteous one.

Yosef is attractive and charming and well liked by all who come into contact with him. He is entrusted with everything in Potiphar's house. The wife of Potiphar misreads Yosef's appearance and is convinced that he will succumb to her wiles and seductions. The brothers of Yosef, who could not see past his cloak of many colors given to him by their father, will also be unable to see past the

royal garments of Egyptian power that he wears.

Yosef recognizes his brothers but they do not recognize him. They see only a person clothed in the garb of an Egyptian viceroy standing before them. How painful it is and how destructive it is to have to be judged merely by appearance and raiment. In truth, the Torah teaches us that "humans only see physically what appears before their eyes but that the Lord, so to speak, sees into the heart and essence of the person."

Shabat shalom,

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