



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Tetzave: Smells Good!

Do our Jewish institutions need beautiful buildings? Do aesthetics matter in Judaism?

Our *parsha* opens with the lighting of the *menorah* in the Temple “to raise a candle continually”. Why does the Temple need to have candles lit at all times?

This is to enhance the Temple, impressing grandeur and honor in the minds of people who see it. Such is the way of people – to illuminate their homes with candles. And the grandeur of the Temple is to instill dread and humility in those who visit it. (*Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzva #98*)

Likewise, when the Torah mandates the practice of incense in the Temple:

It is impossible to raise something in people’s minds unless the object is experienced in a dignified and noble manner as well as evoking a pleasurable and enjoyable aesthetic. It is well known that an attractive smell acts as a source of contentment to the soul, generating a sense of desire and activating a person’s inner world. (*Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzva #101*)

In other words, engineering an environment that conveys greatness, dignity, aesthetic pleasure, creates a portal to higher spiritual and experiential engagement with God.

The Rabbis talk about the value of *hiddur mitzva*, beautifying a *mitzva*, as enhancing God Himself:

It was taught: 'This is my God and I shall beautify Him' (Ex.15:2) – beautify yourself before Him in regard to *mitzvot*...a beautiful *sukka* and a beautiful *lulav* and a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful *tzitzit*, a beautiful Torah scroll – and write in it for His sake, with beautiful ink, a beautiful pen, an expert scribe, and wrap it in beautiful silks. (*Talmud Shabbat 133b*)

Hence, Jews created ornaments for the Torah and other sacred objects, illuminated *haggadot* and the like. Shabbat and festivals are celebrated by fine foods and special clothing, thereby enhancing and raising the occasion.

Please Discuss:

- Is this true? Do we need beauty and aesthetics to appreciate and internalize a spiritual idea?
- Where has this been true for you?
- Sometimes a Shabbat meal with good food, hospitality, Torah and song can be more religiously inspiring than a prayer service. Why is that?
- Are there times when beauty and aesthetics are a hindrance to spirituality? Why?

As we have seen, beauty and dignity are important, but Judaism has a complex relationship with aesthetics. Even to beautify a *mitzva*, the *Talmud* rules that a person “expend only an extra third” (*Bava Kama* 9a). Shabbat is enhanced by special food and clothing, but only if one can afford it. Otherwise it is marked by freshly laundered clothing and varying the day by altering mealtimes. (See Rambam, *Mishne Torah*, Laws of Shabbat ch.30)

This is because aesthetics is a means rather than an end. If it leads to God, it is welcome; but at times, beauty and aesthetics can become an indulgence and a distraction.

First, beauty can become a god in itself as our threshold for creature comforts rises higher and higher, as we become addicted to beauty and luxury. It distracts us from the ultimate goal.

Second, the aesthetics are only good as long as they carve a path to God. Sometimes looks can be deceiving, and simplicity reveals God more than beauty. When the prophet Samuel tried to identify a king for Israel and saw a candidate, David’s brother, who looked most impressive, God warned him:

Pay no attention to his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. For [God does] not [see] as man sees; man sees only what is visible, but God sees into the heart. (Samuel I 16:7)

A balance must be found.

Or as we find in the *Midrash*:

Rabbi Elazar ben Arach said: If God can speak from on high, why did he address Moses from the midst of a bush? – He chose to humble Himself and speak from the bush to fulfil the dictum: humility brings honor (Proverbs 29:23). (*Mekhilta d’Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 3:1)

Judaism's relationship to aesthetics is complex:

Our nation has always related in a positive and pleasant way to artistic beauty manifest in the human creativity. But [our respect for art] is also limited. Even in the higher, refined disciplines, we must be cautious of intoxication and excess. Virtue is a guiding light, and yet, we read in the holy scriptures: 'Do not be too righteous' (Ecclesiastes 7:16). Wisdom is the light of our lives yet we say: 'Nor make yourselves over-wise' (ibid). 'It is not good to eat much honey' (Proverbs 25:27). This is the principle that embraces all aspects of the eternal nation's life. We will never sell ourselves to one particular idea to the degree that we drown in its depth, to the extent that we lose the capacity to give ourselves a limit and to put a boundary to its dominant influence. (Rav Kook, Letter to the Bezalel Institute, 1907)

So, again, please discuss:

- When do aesthetics enhance our Judaism, and when do they detract from it?

Shabbat Shalom!