Making Space for God: A Theology OF Beauty

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Introduction

I grew up at a synagogue in Seattle that was built in the traditional Pacific Northwest style. Exposed wooden beams held up a high ceiling made mostly of windows. The choir loft was also flanked by long panes of glass. The design was simple and warm. Nature served as the main ornamentation. Participants gazed out at a hill covered in Seattle's classic evergreen trees. Sunlight streamed in every Saturday morning from behind the choir, and the cantor's voice was almost always accompanied by the pattering of light rain. I learned to associate different rituals with varying phases of light: I remember the fresh morning air of bnai mitzvah ceremonies and the darkness of Neilah. I felt held by the simple beauty of the space.

I took Seattle's natural beauty for granted until I left the Pacific Northwest for the East Coast. Five years later, I found myself working at a Hebrew school at a synagogue on the Upper East Side that formerly operated as a movie theater. As one might expect with a movie theater building, there was not a window in sight, and to make matters worse, the sanctuary was lined with dark brown wood and adorned with iron carvings of violent-seeming biblical scenes. It felt like being on the inside of a coffin. While I still connected to the prayers and melodies, I felt a sense of loss, not only for myself, but for all of the kids who were raised in that synagogue that felt like such a sealed time capsule, absent of seasons and sensations. I began to wonder what role had the physical beauty of my home synagogue and its surrounding nature played a role in my spiritual formation.

Still a few years later, I was working at a different Hebrew school, this time in Westchester. I was teaching a phenomenal group of teenage girls who were preparing for their bnot mitzvah. One day, I overheard them talking about their obsession with the social media

platform, Instagram. I asked them if they would follow a Jewish instagram, and they responded with mild enthusiasm: “I guess...if it was cool.” I decided to start a new Jewish instagram, called Modern Ritual, with my close friend Rabbi Samantha Frank.

Instagram is a primarily visual platform in which people look at, comment on, and like one another’s photographs. The best way to engage people is to provide noticeable, beautiful pictures. On Modern Ritual, then, we work on figuring out what it means to create a Jewish version of this visual vehicle. Our hypothesis in creating the Instragram was that creating beautiful Jewish images would allow people to see that Judaism could fit in to the current aesthetic landscape, which in turn would help people imagine the ways it would fit into their own homes and lives. Samantha and I scoured the internet for compelling photographs of people performing Jewish rituals. For the most part, they simply did not exist. What came up in our Google image searches were tacky 90’s style clip art, cheesy pictures of Israel, and the kind of Judaica that one might buy on Ben Yehuda street, something fit for a cheap bat mitzvah present or a quick tourist gift. I began to wonder why Judaism seemed so unphotogenic, so stuck visually in other time periods. I sensed the power of the visual to connect us to our beliefs, ideas, even God, but I simultaneously wondered whether my project was shallow. Working on a visual platform such as Instagram requires us to pour time, money, and thought into light, color, vibrance, and effect. While it has worked in the sense that our following continues to grow, I worry that overemphasis on physical beauty could easily miss the point of the deeper connection we try to create.

A year ago, I received a phone call from a Jewish woman who works for Martha Stewart and Country Living magazine. She explained that her job was to create and photograph beautiful

images of Christmas all year round. Tired of seeing the same Jewish clip art that she had also found online, she wanted to create something similar to what she was doing in her full time job, for Jews. Having never seen anything like what she was trying to create, she was not sure whether this was "kosher." "Is Judaism allowed to be beautiful?" she asked.

Over time, I formed a three-part hypothesis for why it feels like there is a sense of discomfort around physical beauty in Judaism. The first part is the obvious censure of idolatry in the Jewish faith. Exodus 20:4, the Ten Commandments, state: לֹ֣א תַעֲשֶׂה־לְךָ֣ פֶ֔סֶל וְ֠כָל־תְּמוּנָ֞ה אֲשֶׁ֣ר בַּשָּׁמַ֗יִם וּ מִמַּ֤עַל וַאֲשֶׁר֙ בָּאָ֔רֶץ מִתָּ֖חַת וַאֲשֶׁ֣ר בַּמַּ֑יִם וּ מִתַּ֖חַת לָאָֽרֶץ׃ *You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.*[1] This command, to refrain from worshipping or even interacting with physical idols, created both a Jewish culture and legal system wary of images. A midrash, so famous that many assume it is in the Torah itself, contains the story of Abraham smashing physical idols in order to advocate for a God who cannot be seen or touched.[2] The smashing of the physical God, otherwise known as an idol, is what distinguishes Abraham's belief system from the surrounding Canaanite tribes. The Torah, Talmud, and following texts are aware and vigilant about the ways in which objects or images can easily be worshiped. The question then becomes: are all images and all appreciations of the physical idol worship? If not, how does one create beautiful Jewish physical spaces, images, and art in ways that are not idol worship?

A second reason why there may be such discomfort around physical beauty in Jewish tradition is the historical desire to differentiate from Christianity, which places high emphasis not

[1] All text translations are from the website sefaria.org
[2] B'reshit Rabbah, 38

just on Jesus as God, but also on the beauty of Jesus's body itself and on iconography.[3] In *The Body of Faith* the philosopher Michael Wyschogrod explains:

> Because Christianity embraced a theology of incarnation in which a human being and God are alleged to be one Judaism recoiled to the other extreme and made the absolute incorporeality of God essential. But the God of the Bible enters space by dwelling in the Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem. Judaism must therefore avoid both making God too abstract and too concrete.[4]

Wyschogrod argues for a Judaism that stops defining itself in relation to Christianity, rejects the obsession with incorporeality, and embraces some aspects of the physical.

In *The Artless Jew*, Kalman P. Bland argues that this distinction comes from within and without Judaism, and is intertwined with anti-semitism. He explains that in the twentieth century, Hegel argued that "everything genuine in spirit and nature alike is inherently concrete...therefore, the Jews and the Turks have not been able by art to represent their God, who does not even amount to such an abstraction of the Understanding, in the positive way that the Christians have."[5] Around the same time, Kant wrote that he supported a philosophy that opposes focus on imagery, yet found Judaism to be "lacking in true religion, ethical significance, and universal concern[6]." Stuck between these two philosophers and their criticisms, Kalman argues, German Jews of the 19th century responded in such a way that "when they finished their work, Judaism

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[3] While this thesis is about the concept of beauty, some selected quotes will specifically reference art. This is not to say that they are one and the same- the field of art often seeks to explicitly reject beauty. While they may seem conflated here, they are being used to discuss a general attitude in Judaism towards the visual.

[4] Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election*. (New York: Seabury Pr, 1983). P XV.

[5] Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmation and Denials of the Visual*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 15.

[6] Ibid, p. 16

became fundamentally aniconic, preeminently spiritual, coterminous with ethics, and quintessentially universal."[7] Whether because of a desire to separate ourselves from Christianity, or because of external antisemitic tropes about Jewish belief and truth, the desire to try to distinguish Judaism may have contributed to a general psyche that wants to ignore the particularly physical elements of the religion.

Finally, a third factor that plays into the general Jewish discomfort around imagery can be traced to the Maimonidean tradition that so many Jews have inherited. Maimonides was philosophically disturbed by the physical language used for God, specifically around God's body. He argued that any reference to the physical is entirely metaphorical. Maimonides wanted Judaism to be a primarily intellectual religion through which a connection with God, if possible, largely takes place through the power of human intellect. Wyschogrod wrote: "Maimonides' demythologization of the concept of God is unbiblical and ultimately dangerous to Jewish faith. Jewsh faith cannot survive if a personal relation between the Jew and God is not possible."[8] Maimonides argued that God is so distant and transcendent that most people can barely conceive of the concept of God. Maimonides was so influential that this way of thinking sits at the core of what many believe to be the most "authentic" Judaism.

Despite this history, our texts do allow for the possibility of a theology of beauty. As Wyschogrod points out, the Torah repeatedly describes God's interaction with people in physical terms. What, then, is the role of beauty in the physical world? Unlike Maimonides, I believe that beauty can help us conceive of the possibility of God in the world. Beauty is not God, but the awestruck feeling we have when experiencing something beautiful helps remind us of God's

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election*. (New York: Seabury Pr, 1983), P XIV.

presence. Beauty catches our attention and makes us look beyond ourselves. That act of looking beyond ourselves is a way of conceiving of God. God asks us to care for one another and for the world, and beauty is a helpful motivator.

Of course, there is always the danger of taking beauty too far. The materials that made the *mishkan* are the same materials that made the Golden Calf. Part of the discomfort around beauty in Judaism probably comes from the reality that beauty can easily become dangerous and addictive, much like idol worship. American society often seems sick in its relationship to beauty. Our obsession with what we consider to be beautiful bodies has become so insidious that we conflate beauty with goodness. Social media has only exacerbated that belief, sending millions more people in to plastic surgery and other intense cosmetic procedures.

What is the role of Judaism in all of this? How can Judaism simultaneously keep up with a visual culture while rejecting mainstream beliefs around the role of beauty? I hope that by providing alternative definitions and ideas of beauty that are based on ancient texts and wisdom, Judaism can make use of the extraordinary power of beauty while providing a safe haven from its toxic misuse. This thesis is an attempt to begin that conversation, locating areas in the text that support a role for beauty in Jewish life and placing them in conversation with contemporary ideas about beauty in order to try and articulate a deeper Jewish idea of beauty in a world that is sick in its relationship to beauty.

Chapter 1: The Holy Physiology of Experiencing Beauty

We react physically to beauty: from catching our breath at a gorgeous sunrise to dropping our jaws at mountains, to experiencing something often described as our "hearts stopping," when we see someone we deem particularly attractive. What is the meaning behind our physiological appreciation of beauty and how does it relate to God? Scott Russell Sanders, an American novelist and essayist, tried to answer these questions in the framework of contemplating beauty at his daughter's wedding. He wrote:

> Pardon my cosmic metaphor, but I can't help thinking of the physicists' claim that, if we trace the universe back to its origins in the Big Bang, we find the multiplicity of things fusing into greater and greater simplicity, until at the moment of creation itself there is only pure undifferentiated energy. Without being able to check their equations, I think the physicists are right. I believe the energy they speak of is holy, by which I mean it is the closest we can come with our instruments to measuring the strength of God. I also believe this primal energy continues to feed us, directly through the goods of creation, and indirectly through the experience of beauty. The thrill of beauty is what entranced me as I stood with Eva's hand hooked over my arm while the wedding march played, as it entrances me on these September nights when I walk over dewy grass among the songs of crickets and stare at the Milky Way.[9]

Beauty, as Sanders describes, exists as a reminder of and a connection to the holy energy (also known as God) in the universe. He uses the language of "the thrill of beauty" to describe the way we react or feel around things that are beautiful. That thrill can connect us to God,

[9] Scott Russell Sanders, "Beauty," *Orion* , 1998.

remind us of God, or make us aware of God's presence in the world. The thrill of beauty pushes us beyond ourselves, forcing us to pay attention to our world and surroundings. It helps remind us of an "other," connecting beyond ourselves.

Personal perception drives the experience of beauty, yet one can argue that the feelings we have when we encounter beauty can cause us to look beyond the personal for something greater than ourselves. Some philosophers argue that it is extraordinarily hard to know whether we are anything more than a constructed self, projecting the false images around us (sometimes known as the 'brain in a vat' problem).[10] While it may be impossible to truly know whether or not this is the case, the feeling that goes along with the experience of beauty that continually encourages us to search for something beyond ourselves challenges that theory. God can be described as the possibility that something exists beyond our own perception. Beauty pushes us to engage with that possibility.

Midrash Breshit Rabbah 39:1 explores the ways in which beauty can simultaneously be a personal moment of perception that also pushes us beyond ourselves to seek God. B'reshit Rabbah contains a famous story about the way in which Abram first became aware of God's presence in the world. The midrash describes:

> וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם לֶךְ לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וגו' (בראשית יב, א), רַבִּי יִצְחָק פָּתַח (תהלים מה, יא): שִׁמְעִי בַת וּרְאִי וְהַטִּי אָזְנֵךְ וְשִׁכְחִי עַמֵּךְ וּבֵית אָבִיךְ, אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק מָשָׁל לְאֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה עוֹבֵר מִמָּקוֹם לְמָקוֹם, וְרָאָה בִּירָה אַחַת דּוֹלֶקֶת, אָמַר תֹּאמַר שֶׁהַבִּירָה הַזּוֹ בְּלֹא מַנְהִיג, הֵצִיץ עָלָיו בַּעַל הַבִּירָה, אָמַר לוֹ אֲנִי הוּא בַּעַל הַבִּירָה.

[10] Lance Hickey, "The Brain in a Vat Argument ." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, www.iep.utm.edu/brainvat/.

God said to Abram, "Go forth from your land…" ... Rabbi Yitzchak said: this may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a castle aglow. He said, "Is it possible that this castle lacks a person to look after it?" The owner of the building looked out and said, "I am the owner of the castle."

This translation of בִּירָה אַחַת דּוֹלֶקֶת describes the castle as "glowing." This interaction between Abram and God contains multiple layers relating to the connection between beauty and God. Beauty, in some ways, serves as God's hint that we should look beyond what we can see. The thrill of beauty causes us to call out theological questions, and seek what lies beyond.

In commenting on this midrash, the Etz Yosef, a 19th century Talmudist who wrote a commentary on Midrash Rabbah, explains that "the matter of the parable is that whoever sees a beautiful and orderly building understands and acknowledges that there is a master and owner of this palace, and a wise artisan built it."[11] The Etz Yosef, makes two assumptions. The first is that the beauty of the space caused Abraham to call out to God. The beauty forces Abraham to see beyond himself, to inquire, to search for an answer. Abraham is subject here to a physiological response to beauty and decides that there must be something more than the purely physical element of it that his eye captures, something that should cause him to try and communicate beyond himself. The second assumption is that beauty is related to a designer, master, or God like character. The beauty does not just evoke human reaction. The seeming intentionality of the beauty, the way that the colors or shapes blend together to create something beyond themselves, contains connection to or proof of the divine in and of itself. When Abram inquires "is it possible

[11] Etz Yosef on Breshit Rabbah 39:1

that this castle has no one to look after it," he asks whether it is possible for this beauty to be completely random or whether there might be some order or purpose inherent in the design. In a d'var Torah on Parashat Lech Lecha, Rabbi Zohar Atkins writes:

> *Abraham intuits that the world is too beautiful, "too lit,"[12] not to have a source. Abraham, in this rendering, ...is a physicist or a biologist so enamored by nature's patterns that he infers materialism is simply more absurd than transcendental idealism. In contrast to everyone else around him Abraham adduced there must be at least one thing which cannot itself be seen directly, and that is the condition for visibility itself; where others saw beings, Abraham discovered Being. Where others focused on the castle; Abraham appreciated its luminosity. Where others took their myths at face value, Abraham knew their fundamental nothingness. Caution: objects appear more corporeal than they are.*[13]

In this parable, as in other moments in Jewish text, the physical beauty of the universe is not about the object itself, but a reminder or indicator of God's presence. The experience of physical beauty, particularly the beauty of physical spaces, calls us to notice God. The physicality of the space allowed Abraham to "discover Being" while also recognizing that the object itself is not God. He was able to both pause at the sight of the castle, the beauty of which caused him to stop and then seek what was beyond.

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[12] There is another interpretation of the word דּוֹלֶקֶת which implies that the castle was "burning," not "glowing." This interpretation lends itself excellently to the reality which contemporary Jewish thinkers need to articulate in relation to the conversation around beauty. Beauty can be a real connector to God and it is also fragile, inflammatory, and possibly dangerous. Beauty can indicate or remind us of God but beauty is not necessary for God to be present. Something can be beautiful or it can be on fire and still contain God. The burning castle contains two truths about beauty that exist simultaneously: it is both holy and potentially dangerous.

[13] Email from Zohar Atkins on November 8th, 2019.

What exactly is that thrill of beauty that caused Abraham to stop at the castle and why should we take it seriously? Tillich called the reaction to the mystery and awesomeness of beauty "Ultimate Concern." He wrote that "Art makes us aware of something of which we could not otherwise become aware. We realize the quality of things which, without artistic intuition and creation, would remain covered forever."[14] In this case, art and beauty are connected in the way that their visual effects require us to interact with and try to uncover truths about our environment. For Tillich, the visual can lead us to truths beyond the pure representation itself. When objects or colors are put together in certain ways that evoke a reaction within us, they become more than the sum of their parts. This ability to reach beyond is holy because it helps us uncover and discover more about ultimate questions. Beauty and art live in the world of the physical and so our first reaction when encountering beauty is often physical. In *Art as Experience,* John Dewey wrote: "The first great consideration is that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it."[15] Working towards an understanding of life requires us to take our experience of that environment seriously. Understanding our reactions to our environment on a micro level helps us uncover their meaning. Dewey wrote:

> *In order to understand the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd --the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in the air on*

[14] Paul Tillich, et al. *On Art and Architecture*. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), P 16.
[15] John Dewey. *Art as Experience*. (New York: Minton, Balch and Co), P 12.

girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts. The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house.[16]

For Dewey, our physical experience of our surroundings is what we might call its own kind of Torah, to be studied closely and examined carefully. In focusing so closely on the raw reaction to our environment, Dewey pushes us to ask what it means to meaningfully pay attention to our surroundings, to know what catches our eyes and our breath. When we notice or become aware of something significant in its beauty, we are forced to pause in some way. That pause and the accompanied emotion leads to reflection. This makes the physiological reaction meaningful in and of itself. Beauty demands reflection. If we follow the logic of the B'reshit Rabbah Midrash, one can argue that these physiological responses and their following reflection can carry theological significance. The redness and roar of the firetruck and the grace of the ball-player both have the potential to be holy when they call our attention to something beyond ourselves. When we experience something beautiful we are reminded that there could be something "more" out there. The micro experience of beauty becomes a macro reminder of the mystery of life.

The connection to God takes place, not just through the existence of beauty itself, but through developing an awareness of it. Searching for a deep understanding about what calls our attention helps us interact with the world around us with curiosity, fascination, and wonder. Dewey argues that we should not have to see something in a museum in order to be wowed by it,

[16] Ibid. P 3.

that we should open ourselves to noticing the wonder and beauty of what exists around us. Noticing and appreciating beauty is a daily practice. It is this refocusing of attention that helps us open up to otherness. We encounter the world differently when we see ourselves in communication with and relationship to the other. This plays out in a more obvious manner when we pursue social justice work, but plays out in more subtle ways when we have to carefully consider the quality of our relationships with others around us. When we see the potential for beauty in relationship, we have another axis on which to appreciate them and the holiness within them. That openness to wonder and awe allows the individual to be aware of what is unique, special, and therefore mysterious about any given moment.

Jenny Odell writes about this practice of paying attention in her book *How To Do Nothing.* She writes:

> Curiosity is what gets me so involved in something that I forget myself. This leads into a second reason to leave behind the coordinates of what we habitually notice: doing so allows one to transcend the self. Practices of attention and curiosity are inherently open-ended, oriented toward something outside of ourselves. Through attention and curiosity, we can suspend our tendency toward instrumental understanding--seeing things or people one -dimensionally as the products of their functions-- and instead sit with the unfathomable fact of their existence, which opens up toward us but can never be fully grasped or known.[17]

Beauty can lead us to a place of curiosity. By grabbing our attention, it asks us to further examine and reflect on our surroundings. Beauty has an inherently mysterious quality. It requires

[17] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2020), P 104.

inquiry and therefore stirs something within us that asks us to take a second glance. By developing and expanding our ability to notice and appreciate beauty, we engage in what can be seen as a fundamentally spiritual activity; transcending ourselves.

This argument takes on a theological spin when described through Martin Buber's notion that we experience God in our ability to encounter the other. He famously describes an encounter with a tree by saying "it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me."[18] For Buber, being pulled outside of oneself is the way towards a relationship with God in the world. We are not able to conceive of God without being able to conceive of the other. Jenny Odell expands Buber's idea by saying the following:

> Here we encounter the tree in all its otherness, a recognition that draws us out of ourselves and out of a worldview in which everything exists for us. The tree exists *out there: '*The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I deal with it-- only differently.'[19]

Buber and Odell's descriptions of encounter and noticing can help us formulate a theology of encountering beauty. By seeking the thrill of beauty in our lives, by opening ourselves to encounter beauty in the day to day, by training ourselves to notice beauty, we become better equipped for I-Thou relationships. We bring otherness, and therefore God, into our lives with regularity. Although Buber was initially skewered by critics for including his encounter with a tree in his theological model, his description perfectly encapsulates creating relationship with the beauty of the natural world.

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[18] Buber, Martin. *I And Thou*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970). P 58.
[19] Jenny Odell. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, (Brooklyn: MELVILLE HOUSE, 2020). P 105.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel makes a similar argument in his writing on radical amazement. Heschel's premise for the way we experience God is the idea that nothing can be taken for granted. He wrote in his book, *Man is Not Alone*:

> There are three aspects of nature which command man's attention: power, loveliness, grandeur… we insist that it is unworthy of man not to take notice of the sublime. Perhaps more significant than our awareness of the cosmic is our consciousness of *having* to be aware of it, as if there were an *imperative,* a compulsion to pay attention to that which lies beyond our grasp.[20]

In order to work on having a relationship with God, Heschel suggests, each person has to develop a sense of wonder that allows them to be overwhelmed by a power greater than themselves. Heschel wrote that one should try to fall in love with God. He expanded on this by saying that love "is the result of perceptions of beauty, of moments of appreciation. Our task is to make such perceptions, such moments possible."[21] For Heschel, the ability to focus deeply on the reactions and interactions with beauty is part of building a muscle that helps increase our awareness of God. What makes us human is our ability to be aware of the emotion of awe. Much of our journey to God is through noticing and articulating the wondrous beauty of the world around us. For Heschel, the more difficult it is to articulate something, the more likely it is to draw us towards God. The emotions and reactions, which Dewey tries so hard to articulate, are ultimately important to Heschel in their sense of mystery. We might not quite understand what

[20] Abraham Joshua Heschel. *Man Is Not Alone; a Philosophy of Religion*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950), P 3.
[21] Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001).

excites us about the redness of a fire engine but when we work towards understanding that mystery, we come closer to discovering God.

The role of mystery in beauty helps explain why beauty is often dismissed as subjective. The study of beauty, to many, is a frivolous pursuit. This is true, in part, because we believe that beauty is in "the eye of the beholder." Does beauty's seeming subjectivity render it meaningless? Some argue for a more objective definition of beauty. Even if you do believe that beauty is subjective, however, this sense of subjectivity does not need to detract from the potential significance of the beautiful experience. In his *Lectures on Art and Religion*, Paul Tillich writes:

> But subjectivity is not arbitrariness. It is the empathetic union of the subject with the object on a level which is deeper than both of them...In every work of art an encounter between the artist and his world is expressed. Works of art witness to a creative encounter. Since in every encounter both sides participate, they witness to the objective as well as to the subjective side of the encounter. Art, as the result of all those considerations, discovers reality. It is theoretical in the genuine sense of *theoria* but it is not cognitive.[22]

Tillich looks at the reaction taking place between an individual and something external and points out the moment of connection taking place between those two things. The subjectivity of the reaction is neither trivial nor necessarily shallow. It only makes it more real and personal. Furthermore, if beauty has an element of subjectivity, it means that the range of what can be considered beautiful is wider and more attainable as opposed to narrow and specific. The

[22] Paul Tillich et al, *On Art and Architecture*. (New York: Crossroad, 1989). P 27.

element of subjectivity means that each person can be involved in the process of beauty, each person's experience of beauty is an encounter.The philosopher Sandra Lubarsky writes:

> To speak of beauty in this way is to move beyond the most modernist notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, an idea that reinforces a solipsism of values as well as a materialist interpretation of reality. The story of how we have practically lost beauty as a publicly understood value is imbricated in the story of the rise of modern science...But the experience of beauty never went away. Neither did its power to compel and attract, or the hold it had on our feelings. Still, we got used to distrusting our experiences of beauty, assigning them merely to our subjective "eye." We got used to living in a world in which the near universal and singular value system that had any weight in the public domain was economics."[23]

Dr. Lubarsky takes a postmodern approach to beauty which eradicates the need to search for a singular objective answer to what makes something beautiful. The part of beauty that involves a manner of subjectivity is no longer threatening to the entire concept of beauty. Instead, beauty can be expansive: an interaction between a person and an object that results in something greater than the sum of its parts. This posture towards beauty helps fight against the narrowness of definitions that are usually associated with it. It allows for the emphasis to be on the feeling or thrill accompanied by beauty as opposed to constricting requirements placed on an object or person.

[23] Sandra Lubarsky, "A Spirituality of Beauty," emailed on November 14, 2018.

The nature of subjectivity and objectivity goes beyond beauty itself and into our ability to see things in the first place. In the book *On Color,* David Scott Kastan describes the somewhat subjective nature of color:

> But for all color's inescapability, we don't know much about it. There is no comparably salient aspect of daily life that is so complicated and so poorly understood. We are not quite sure what it is. Or maybe it is better to say we are not quite sure *where* it is. It seems to be "there," unmistakably a property of the things of the world that are colored. But no scientists believe this, even though they don't always agree with one another about where (they think) it is...Color inhabits some indistinct borderland between the objective and subjective, the phenomenal and the psychological.[24]

Beauty, like color, exists in that same middle ground between subjectivity and objectivity. We may see beauty differently but we experience it similarly. We are drawn by the same pull towards it and are inspired by it in similar ways.

That pull towards beauty, the way in which beauty helps draw our attention beyond ourselves also relates closely to our ability to take care of things. De Botton writes:

> Beauty, then, is a fragment of the divine, and the sight of it saddens us by evoking our sense of loss and our yearning for the life denied us. The qualities written into beautiful objects are those of a God from whom we live far removed, in a world mired in sin. But

[24] David Scott Kastan and Stephen Farthing, *On Color*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). P 2-3.

works of art are finite enough, and the care taken by those who create them great enough, that they can claim a measure of perfection ordinarily unattaiable by human beings.[25]

De Botton makes a connection between beauty and care. The connection between beauty and God makes itself clear in its sense of worthiness. Our perception of beauty in the world helps us navigate what is worthy and important. The sense of loss surrounding the burning of Notre Dame or the Amazon Rainforest or the koalas currently dying in Australian wildfires, does not just revolve around their usefulness or history or ecological ramifications. Rather, it includes the loss of places and things that are special and unique and give life a sense of worthiness. We do not want to fall into a trap of only caring for beautiful things. That does not mean, however, that we need to ignore the value of beauty. Beauty can serve as an inspiration for care, and not the underlying cause.

Some go a step further, arguing that beauty leads to a more ethical world. Simone Weil wrote: "The radiance of beauty illumines affliction with the light of the spirit of justice and love, which is the only light by which human thought can confront affliction and report the truth of it" (Weil, 72). For Weil, beauty helps make life more confrontable and therefore gives us the ability and desire to keep improving the world. The beauty of justice and love are the flip side of affliction and it is the beauty of those two pursuits that compels us to fight against suffering. The potential of a more beautiful world makes the reality of our world less inevitable.

Elaine Scarry makes a similar argument in her book *On Beauty and Being Just*. Scarry begins with the physiological element of beauty. She writes: "What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems

[25] Botton, Alain De. *The Architecture of Happiness*, (New York: Penguin Books 2014). P 149.

to incite, even to require, the act of replication."[26] For Scarry, the act of replication is the natural result of the physiological experience of beauty. This act of replication pushes us to create more in the world- from creating children, to art, to writing, we cannot help but be compelled by an insatiable love for beauty. Scarry argues that our response to beauty encourages us to pursue rightness and justice in the world. She writes:

> Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness (or in the case of objects) quasi-aliveness of our world, and for entering into its protection. Beauty is, then, a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver.[27]

Scarry's notion of beauty is, in some ways, similar to the rainbow in the story of Noah's Ark. Beauty serves as a reminder, for people and for God, to try and avoid destruction. In a world that contains death and destruction, beauty becomes a symbol of life and a reminder or an urge to protect life. The physiological reaction to beauty, according to Scarry, causes us not only to feel or think beyond ourselves but to act beyond ourselves. She writes:

> It is as though beautiful things have been placed here and there throughout the world to serve as small wake-up calls to perception, spurring lapsed alertness back to its most acute level. Through its beauty, the world continually recommits us to a rigorous standard of perceptual care: if we do not search it out, it comes and finds us.[28]

Scarry points out that beauty draws us beyond ourselves and forces us to care. Beauty is not the source of our ability to care, but a constant pull and reminder about our ability to care and

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[26] Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), P 3.
[27] Ibid, 90.
[28] Ibid 91.

about the fragility of things. Dr. Lubarsky demonstrates this idea as it relates to nature, writing as follows:

> It is important to make the connection between beauty and nature obvious and to name beauty as the quality in nature we so desire. If we don't, we continue allegiance to the very paradigm that has been so destructive of the human-nature relations, the paradigm that erased value from the natural world and made beauty nothing more than a subjective opinion. And we play into the hands of that same human-centered mentality that regards nature solely as an instrument for human wellbeing.[29]

Lubarsky explains the role of naming and focusing on beauty as an element of creating ethics of care. The ideas listed above, in which beauty leads to care, connection, and justice, are not meant to be seen as the inevitability of beauty but more the possibility. Beauty can be spiritually powerful and it can also be seriously impotent and shallow. Many hold the widespread societal belief that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or that it is meaningless, or even idolatrous. Tillich wrote that "In order to express, art must transform."[30]The same is true of the way that we understand and utilize beauty in Jewish spaces. we can work to lift up the beautiful in Judaism through this deeper and expanded understanding of our reaction to beauty. Beautiful ritual objects and beautiful spaces for ritual can be sought out, not to prove that Judaism is better or expensive, or cool, but to evoke the thrill of beauty that pulls us towards God.

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[29] Sandra Lubarsky. "Speak the Name of Beauty." *Resilience* (2 Aug. 2019) www.resilience.org/stories/2019-08-02/speak-the-name-of-beauty/?fbclid=IwAR1QjsErJpzrE7EyGk0CIxJ_T3SK3Og5G3HVDy3WMdiz8S3JMatOluZardI.

[30] Paul Tillich, et al. *On Art and Architecture* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), P 19.

Chapter 2: Beauty as a Dwelling Place for God

What do Jewish texts believe that beauty can do in the world? The texts recognize the potential power of physical beauty. Beauty can move us, stun us, help us fall in love, or feel the presence of God. It can force us to see the other beyond ourselves. The texts reflect the reality that beauty's transformative abilities can be transcendent or dangerous or limited, depending on the context. They do not, however, eschew the concept of physical beauty as singularly idolatrous or shallow. On the contrary, beauty can help create a dwelling place for God. Beauty can symbolize, help call our attention to, or create space where we connect and therefore uncover truths about life.

With regard to this latter notion of creating space, the building of the Mishkan helps provide an entryway to understanding the relationship between physical beauty and God's presence. Exodus 25:1-8 states:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵּאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִקְחוּ־לִי תְּרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְּבֶנּוּ לִבּוֹ תִּקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי: וְזֹאת הַתְּרוּמָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְחוּ מֵאִתָּם זָהָב וָכֶסֶף וּנְחֹשֶׁת: וּתְכֵלֶת וְאַרְגָּמָן וְתוֹלַעַת שָׁנִי וְשֵׁשׁ וְעִזִּים: וְעֹרֹת אֵילִם מְאָדָּמִים וְעֹרֹת תְּחָשִׁים וַעֲצֵי שִׁטִּים: שֶׁמֶן לַמָּאֹר בְּשָׂמִים לְשֶׁמֶן הַמִּשְׁחָה וְלִקְטֹרֶת הַסַּמִּים: אַבְנֵי־שֹׁהַם וְאַבְנֵי מִלֻּאִים לָאֵפֹד וְלַחֹשֶׁן:וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. And these are the gifts that you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, goats' hair; tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; lapis lazuli and other

stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

The text draws a direct connection between materials and a dwelling place for God. While the text does not directly include the word "beautiful," the materials demanded, from gold to crimson to the famous dolphin skins, as well as the attention given to detail and design, seem so rare and special that the intended beauty of the physical space seems obvious. The language of תְּרוּמָה, or sacrifice, translated above as "gifts," indicates that the materials used to build the mishkan were special and most likely expensive. Furthermore, the materials themselves imply a carefully planned physical experience. God demands a shiny, colorful, light filled, good smelling dwelling place.

Why does God care about materials? What is it about aesthetically pleasing physical experiences that make God's presence more palpable? The Torah implies a connection between beauty and revelation. One cannot help but notice that the instructions for building a Mishkan come directly after revelation at Mount Sinai. The Torah describes the moment of revelation at Mount Sinai as the ultimate physical experience. God uses the strength of nature to demonstrate an overwhelming, unfiltered sense of presence and power. Exodus 19:18-19 states:

וְהַר סִינַי עָשַׁן כֻּלּוֹ מִפְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר יָרַד עָלָיו יְהוָה בָּאֵשׁ וַיַּעַל עֲשָׁנוֹ כְּעֶשֶׁן הַכִּבְשָׁן וַיֶּחֱרַד כָּל־הָהָר מְאֹד: וַיְהִי קוֹל
הַשּׁוֹפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחָזֵק מְאֹד מֹשֶׁה יְדַבֵּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְקוֹל:

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.

This moment sounds more terrifying than beautiful. Yet it demonstrates the way in which physical experiences can create connection to God. God communicates to the people with an intense level of physicality. God utilizes nature through smoke, fire, and the sound of a horn to make God's presence known in a clear and obvious way. That powerful visual and sound experience leaves an impression in peoples' psyche and soul.

The experience of Mount Sinai, however, is too overwhelming to be utilized in the day to day. The intense physical experience of God and awareness of God's presence needed to be watered down into something usable and transportable. The fact that the instructions for building the mishkan come almost directly after the scene at Mount Sinai demonstrate the way in which the *Mishkan*, and its beauty, are a non-idolatrous attempt to capture an element of what was experienced at Sinai. Experiencing beauty often plays out in small, physical ways, through the catching of breath and the stirring of the heart. When one feels moved by beauty, it can become a small moment of transcendence. In this way, the beauty of the Mishkan captures an element of the Mount Sinai experience. In *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus,* the modern commentator Avivah Zornberg writes:

> The Mishkan is to provide a solution from the problem of retaining Revelation- how is Sinai to remain with them, part of them, central to them? How is the possibility of linking the sublime and the mundane realms to become a bearable reality? How is the fire of Sinai to be tolerated in ordinary life? Is there an imaginable version of an intersection

between these two realms, a portable fiery nexus that will not consume its vehicle? Otherwise, Sinai will become a remembrance of things past.[31]

In looking for ways to connect the fire of Sinai to ordinary life, Zornberg underscores the way in which a spiritual connection to the presence of light can remind someone of Mount Sinai. Were an Israelite to gaze at the *ner tamid*, they would not have seen it as a purely symbolic reminder of revelation. They would have experienced a similar physiological reaction to fire than the one that they witnessed at Sinai. Physical experience imprints itself in our minds and hearts. The physical reaction that beauty provokes in us, from curiosity to attention to inspiration, is a watered down version of the intense awe and fear of Sinai. The design of the Mishkan was intended to remind the Israelites of Sinai on a visceral level. The sixteenth century philosopher and commentator, Sforno, wrote similarly in his commentary on Exodus 25:8. He wrote: "I will dwell among them permanently in order to receive their prayers and their sacrificial offerings in a manner similar to the way I displayed My presence at the mountain." In this iteration, the *Mishkan*, is similar to God's presence at the mountain. What makes the two experiences similar is the presence of the physical as a reminder of God. The design and requirements for the *Mishkan* indicate that beauty is integral in some way to recreate Sinai in the Israelite's day to day lives. Beauty is a watered down or partial reminder of truth. The experience of Mt Sinai, or truth itself, can exist in the day to day.

The beauty of material and the heavenly design create that link that Zornberg describes between the sublime and mundane. God gives the Israelites instructions for the material in droves. The presence of material at this moment in the narrative seems overwhelming or

[31] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*. (New York: Schocken Books, 2011). Loc 7175.

outsized, especially given our contemporary lack of focus on material in Jewish spaces. Aviva Zornberg expresses this confusion as follows: "After the terror of the mystic encounter, comes the shock of material- An inventory of metals woods, wools, skins, oils, spices, and stones, culminating in the simple, divine, demand 'Let them make for me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.'"[32] The intense attention to detail in the instructions for the Mishkan indicates that building a dwelling place for God requires serious planning and thought. At first glance, the focus on manmade materials seems opposite or inverse to the presence of nature at Mount Sinai. Yet both of these categories achieve the ability to transmit beauty. If the Mishkan is similar to Mount Sinai, as Sforno argues, then the experience of being in a space highly designed for spirituality should feel similar in some sense, or at least have a similar effect upon us, to the experience of standing at the foot of a mountain. Beautiful human-created material and design is an attempt to capture and recreate the awesomeness and symmetries that exist in the natural world. The description of beauty put forth here is a detailed, designed, God instructed, human-built beauty that reminds us of Mount Sinai and connects us to the power and truth of God.

Since this invocation in Exodus to build a dwelling space for God, religious architects have been thinking about what it means to create beautiful, awe-inspiring spaces for God. The theology of beauty has played out, over time, in the role of religious architecture. Like mountains and oceans, the beauty and vastness of buildings overwhelms people with a sense of awe. The philosopher, Alain de Botton, writes about the potential and also the limits of beautiful architecture. He acknowledges both its emotional power and its downfalls. He writes:

[32] Ibid. Loc 7159.

> We seem divided between an urge to override our senses and numb ourselves to our settings and a contradictory impulse to acknowledge the extent to which our identities are indelibly connected to, and will shift along with, our locations. An ugly room can coagulate any loose suspicions as to the incompleteness of life, while a sun-lit one set with honey-coloured limestone tiles can lend support to whatever i most hopeful within us. Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places-- and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.[33]

Building religious spaces is the aesthetic attempt to recreate religious truths. The beauty and therefore awe inspired by well designed spaces accomplishes what nature achieves naturally; a physical reminder that there is something greater than us. The space connects us to the feeling or concept, whether through building gorgeous cathedrals that fill us with wonder, or small rooms whose design allows everyone to see each other's faces. While the reality that we feel differently in different spaces contains obvious drawbacks, there are certain spaces where it can be easier to feel a spiritual connection than others. When we pay attention to the aesthetics of space in an attempt to help people connect spiritually, we create physical versions of prayer. Design becomes another version of expression and therefore communication. We call out to God and one another through our use of the material, building higher or more thoughtfully or carefully.

[33]Botton, Alain De. *The Architecture of Happiness*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), P 12.

This kind of attention to detail is not just prayer in itself, it affects how we pray. The priest and architect, Richard Vosko, who has helped facilitate the redesign of many churches in the United States wrote:

> Social psychological findings and other sources regarding beauty and nature offer compelling evidence for the claim that the environment for worship shapes the identity of the members of the congregation and influences how they treat one another, how they worship, and how they attend to strangers in the larger community. The work of designing an environment for worship is much more than a matter of observing rubrical guidelines or following fashionable trends.[34]

Beautiful spaces, when designed with theological intention and insight, create dwelling places for God because they facilitate deep inspiration and connection. When we experience the grandness of a high ceiling or the intimacy of chairs in a circle or a burst of natural light, we use those feelings and reactions as part of our communication with the divine. Design is supposed to leave us seeing our world and each other differently.

This concept of beauty as a dwelling place for God appears, not just in the story of the Mishkan, but also repeatedly throughout the development of the concept of *hiddur mitzvah.* *Hiddur mitzvah* is the practice and idea that there is value in incorporating beauty into the performance of a mitzvah, or commandment. One can fulfill their requirement through the minimum observance of a commandment, but there is an option of doing it in a more beautiful way in order to honor God. In the same way that God dwells among the people more easily with

[34] Richard S. Vosko, *Art and Architecture for Congregational Worship: the Search for a Common Ground*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019). Loc 165.

the beauty of the Mishkan, the presence of God becomes even more vivid with the beautification of daily Jewish practice.

Hiddur mitzvah is often cited in relation to the quote from *Shirat haYam* (Exodus 15:2): "*zeh Eli v'anveihu*" --This is my God and I will glorify God. The commentators delve into the word *v'anveihu* to try and understand what it actually means to glorify God. Many of the commentators translate the word *v'anveihu* to mean "building a dwelling place for God on earth," because the root נ.ו.ה means "house" or "dwelling place." This focus on the root of *v'anveihu* creates an immediate connection between God and creating a beautiful dwelling place. The act of glorifying God on earth requires increasing the presence of beauty. In the same way, beautifying our Jewish rituals and spaces becomes synonymous with connecting to God.

It fits then that for many commentators, the word *v'anveihu* both references God's splendor and the Beit haMikdash. In his commentary on this verse, Rashi writes: "ואנוהו: Onkelos translates this in the sense of a dwelling (viz., I will build Him a temple) as in (Isaiah 33:20) "a peaceful habitation (נוה)" and in (Isaiah 65:10) 'a dwelling (נוה) for flocks.'" The commentators assume that the splendour and awesomeness was integral to God's presence in the Beit Hamikdash. We know that the Beit HaMikdash was supposed to be an overwhelmingly beautiful place. Talmud Bavli's tractate Sukkot 51b states:

ת"ר מי שלא ראה שמחת בית השואבה לא ראה שמחה מימיו מי שלא ראה ירושלים בתפארתה לא ראה כרך נחמד מעולם מי שלא ראה בהמ"ק בבנינו לא ראה בנין מפואר מעולם

The Sages taught: One who did not see the Celebration of the Place of the Drawing of the Water, never saw celebration in his life. One who did not see Jerusalem in its glory,

never saw a beautiful city. One who did not see the Temple in its constructed state, never saw a magnificent structure.

These texts concentrate on the physical beauty of the temple itself and some of the lavish celebrations that took place within it. It is important to note that the conversation preceding this comment on the beauty of the Temple surrounds questions of the music sung by the Levites while the sacrifices were given. The text goes on to describe the materials that were used for building the Temple. Like the description of the Mishkan, the detail given to material relates directly to the spiritual experience of the place itself. In whole, the section focuses on the aesthetic experience of the Temple. The text assumes that the design and material of the Beit Hamikdash, when paired with the religious activity that took place within it, created the ultimate beautiful experience. The beauty becomes part of the unique ability of the structure to bring one closer to God.

In discussing the material itself, the text states:

במאי בניה אמר (רבא) באבני שישא ומרמרא איכא דאמרי באבני שישא כוחלא ומרמרא אפיק שפה ועייל שפה כי היכי דלקבל סידא סבר למשעיין בדהבא אמרו ליה רבנן שבקיה דהכי שפיר טפי דמיתחזי כאדותא דימא

The Gemara asks: With what materials did he construct it? Rava said: It was with stones of green-gray marble and white marble [marmara]. Some say: It was with stones of blue marble and white marble. The rows of stones were set with one row slightly protruded and one row slightly indented, so that the plaster would take better. He thought to plate the Temple with gold, but the Sages said to him: Leave it as is, and do not plate it, as it is

better this way, as with the different colors and the staggered arrangement of the rows of stones, it has the appearance of waves of the sea.

Here, we see the way in which the seemingly stunning material of the Temple taps into the strength and beauty of nature in order to draw people closer to God. The material of the Temple, where priests and lay people performed many rituals to communicate with God, had its own significance. The reverence with which the rabbis of the Talmud wrote about the beauty of the Temple and its surroundings indicate the way in which the material was supposed to inspire and excite the visitors. It is also a wonderful example of an attempt towards beauty that gets at the heart of what it means to communicate with God, as opposed to ostentatious beauty. The decision not to plate the Temple with gold, but to leave it resembling the sea models the ways in which one can design a space with an eye towards God as opposed to making it into an idol.

The second part of Rashi's interpretation which is not about the Temple connects the word *v'anveihu* to another possible meaning of the root נוה. He translates it as "to be adorned" or, simply, "beauty." Rashi points to the metaphor employed in Song of Songs 5:9-10, which states מַה־דּוֹדֵךְ מִדּוֹד הַיָּפָה בַּנָּשִׁים מַה־דּוֹדֵךְ מִדּוֹד שֶׁכָּכָה הִשְׁבַּעְתָּנוּ דּוֹדִי צַח וְאָדוֹם דָּגוּל מֵרְבָבָה *How is your beloved better than another, O fairest of women? How is your beloved better than another That you adjure us so? My beloved is clear-skinned and ruddy, Preeminent among ten thousand.* Here Shir Hashirim utilizes beauty as a description for God; indeed Shir Hashirim includes several instances of the word נאוה (comely), as in 1:10: יְ נָאווּ לְחָיַיִךְ בַּתֹּרִים, צַוָּארֵךְ בַּחֲרוּזִים. -- Your cheeks are comely with circlets, your neck with beads. The song expresses God's beauty not only as a connector to God, but as a sign of God's power and preeminence. Beauty becomes wrapped up in God's sense of holiness.

The Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, in commenting on the words *zeh eli v'anveihu*, takes this power of beauty as it relates to God a step further. The midrash begins with an analogy in which a king arrives at a province surrounded by guards and armies. Despite his level of protection, people still question his right to be king because he is a human being, made of flesh and blood. The text states:

> זה אלי, ר' אליעזר אומר מנין אתה אומר שראתה שפחה על הים מה שלא ראו ישעיה ויחזקאל שנ' וביד הנביאים אדמה (הושע יב) וכתיב נפתחו השמים ואראה מראות אלהים (יחזקאל א). משל למלך בשר ודם שנכנס למדינה ועליו צפירה מקיפתו וגבורים מימינו ומשמאלו וחיילות מלפניו ומלאחריו והיו הכל שואלין אי זהו המלך מפני שהוא בשר ודם כמותם אבל כשנגלה הקב"ה על הים לא הוצרך אחד מהם לשאול אי זהו המלך אלא כיון שראוהו הכירוהו פתחו כולן פיהן ואמרו זה אלי ואנוהו וגו'.
>
> *"This is my G d and I will extol Him": R. Eliezer says: Whence is it derived that a maid-servant beheld at the Red Sea what was not beheld by Ezekiel and the other prophets, of whom it is written (Hoshea 12:11) "And to the prophets I appeared (in various) guises," and (Ezekiel 1:1) "The heavens opened and I saw visions of G d"? An analogy: A king of flesh and blood comes to a province, a circle of guards around him, warriors at his right and at his left, armies before him and behind him — and all asking "Who is the king?" For he is flesh and blood as they are. But when the Holy One was revealed at the sea, there was no need for anyone to ask "Who is the King?" For when they saw Him, they knew Him, and they all opened and said "This is my G d, and I will extol Him ("ve'anvehu," lit.: "I will 'host' Him")!*

Here, the text makes a significant distinction between the power of physical strength and the power of natural beauty. An army full of people and a king very clearly draws its strength

from human organization and ability. An awesome, overpowering miracle at the sea is connected clearly and directly to God. The sea is not just beautiful because of its power but also because of its magnificent massiveness. The allegory maintains the slight yet important distinction between different kinds of physicality. Physicality can be both very human and it can also be Godly. It depends how it is utilized.

The Mekhilta continues: R. Yishmael says: Is it possible to "host" one's Master? Rather, (read "ve'anvehu" as) "I shall beautify myself (from the root "na'eh") before Him with mitzvot — with a beautiful lulav, beautiful tzitzit, a beautiful shofar, beautiful prayer." The Mekhilta here quotes Talmud Shabbat 133b which states:

דתניא זה אלי ואנוהו התנאה לפניו במצות עשה לפניו סוכה נאה ולולב נאה ושופר נאה ציצית נאה ספר תורה נאה וכתוב בו לשמו בדיו נאה בקולמוס נאה בלבלר אומן וכורכו בשיראין נאין

What is the source for the requirement of: "This is my God and I will glorify Him"? As it was taught in a baraita with regard to the verse: "This is my God and I will glorify Him [anveihu], the Lord of my father and I will raise Him up." The Sages interpreted anveihu homiletically as linguistically related to noi, beauty, and interpreted the verse: Beautify yourself before Him in mitzvot. Even if one fulfills the mitzva by performing it simply, it is nonetheless proper to perform the mitzva as beautifully as possible. Make before Him a beautiful sukka, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful ritual fringes, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in His name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.

In bringing together beautiful ritual objects with the word ואנוהו, the Mekhilta draws a distinct connection between beautifying deeds and the act of glorifying or connecting to God.

This encapsulates the central concept of *hiddur mitzvah*. There is a feeling of spiritual difference, or special quality, that can be created when ritual objects are beautified. I experience this beauty in the way my heart leaps in every service at Central Synagogue when the doors of the ark or *aron hakodesh* are opened and five or so deep blue Torah covers adorned with embroidered silver and gold accents sit against a gorgeous blue tapestry. This is not to say that I *only* appreciate the Torah when it is covered beautifully, but to note the thrilling majesty that the beauty of the ark lends to that moment. The beauty helps communicate on a visceral level an ideal relationship to Torah and illustrates the significance of what takes place in the moment of opening the ark.

Rashbam interprets ואנוהו to mean "and I will build a suitable residence for Him in our midst." This connection between beauty and God's dwelling place implies that beauty plays a role in God's dwelling on earth. The concept that God requires a "suitable" dwelling place and that beauty provides that habitability speaks to the relationship between beauty and God. Perhaps God calls out to us through beauty, or beauty reminds us to call out to God. Either way, beauty is a conduit between us and God.

These interpretations and connections to the word ואנוהו explore the different possibilities of the role of beauty in Judaism through natural beauty, through the beauty of space, and through the creation of the category of hiddur mitzvah. Together they help carve out a role for physical beauty that is very clearly different than idol worship. They encompass multiple ideas of beauty and use beauty as a way to create connection to God through imitation. ואנוהו connects the "I" to "God" through the act of להנוות or beautifying.

The word הָדָר plays a similar role to ואנוהו in its relationship to the idea of beauty and to the way in which its interpretation helps expand the concept of beauty in Judaism. BT Sukkot 29b teaches that the presence of הָדָר is essential in the performing of the mitzvah of the Four Species. In the midst of a discussion about whether or not it is acceptable to use a dry lulav on the first vs the second day of Yom Tov, the Gemara interjects: בשלמא יבש הדר בעינן וליכא "*Bishlama! A dry lulav is unfit because beauty is required and a dry lulav is not beautiful!"* A beautiful lulav is required in order to fulfill the notion of hiddur mitzvah. The requirement for the lulav to be beautiful applies to every day of the festival. Through this requirement, the holiday of Sukkot itself becomes symbolic of our connection to God through beauty. On Sukkot, we delve into the beauty of the natural world, and we create an orientation to God through beauty that reminds us of the role of beauty, not just on the holiday itself, but in the way we celebrate and connect with God throughout the year. In the same way that Passover asks us to explore the idea of freedom through experiential reenacting of the Passover story, Sukkot has us encounter beauty through the sukkah, lulav, and etrog. The beauty is not a nod towards God, or a reminder of God, it is inherent in the ritual, a central component of the process of drawing closer to God.

While the rabbis apply the concept of hiddur mitzvah to the entire lulav, the question of hiddur mitzvah appears most clearly in the Talmudic conversation about the etrog. Leviticus 23:40 states: וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר *and you shall take for yourself on the first day the fruit of a "beautiful" tree.* The word הָדָר does not have a clear and obvious translation and so here, too, the commentators provide different definitions of הָדָר. Given the orientation towards beauty on the holiday of sukkot, and the sense that the aesthetics of the four species are part of the ritual itself, each definition put forth by Torah and Talmud commentators of the word הָדָר

creates a potential understanding of a truth of beauty.[35] Each exploration creates a spectrum of possible meanings regarding beauty.

Ibn Ezra in commenting on this verse translates the word straightforwardly, as beautiful, explaining that the etrog tree is the most beautiful of all, writing as follows:

ולקחתם לכם. אנחנו נאמין בדברי המעתיקים כי לא יכחישו הכתוב אף על פי שמצאנו ויקחו להם איש שה לבית אבות. גם הם העתיקו כי פרי עץ הדר הוא אתרוג ובאמת כי אין פרי עץ יותר הדר ממנו ודרשו בו הדר באילנו

The Exegetes have also transmitted to us the tradition that the fruit of the hadar tree denotes the citron, and, in truth, there is no tree with fruit more beautiful [Hebrew: hadar]. They also called it "the fruit that resides [Hebrew: haddar] on its tree" as a kind of mnemonic [Sukka 35a], as I have explained above concerning the passage "to other people" The Exegetes have also transmitted to us the tradition that the fruit of the hadar tree denotes the citron, and, in truth, there is no tree with fruit more beautiful."

Chizkuni, in his commentary on Leviticus 23:40 writes:

פרי עץ הדר מהן עושים פירות ומהן אין עושין פירות והם באגודה אחת לומר לך שיתאגדו צדיקים ובינונים לעשות רצון בוראם.

[35] It is very possible that the word *hadar* does not necessarily mean beauty. In his book, *etrog, How a Chinese Fruit Became a Jewish Symbol,* David Moster explains: " For the rabbis, the word *peri* (fruit), *'es* (tree), and *hadar* (beauty), refer to the etrog, and the "four species" mentioned in the verse are to be shaken ritually during the Sukkot prayers. Although the rabbinic interpretation became the most well known, it was by no means predetermined." Moster concludes by saying: " In my view, *peri es hadar* means "choice tree fruits," that is "tree fruits" (*peri/es)* that are "beautiful" (*hadar*). For the israelite farmer, this would have been the freshly picked grapes, figs, dates, olives, and pomegranates of the Sukkot fruit harvest." While Moster makes a well researched argument for the original translation of the word *hadar*, there is still the reality that the decided *hadar* fruit becomes the etrog. This is what leaves space over time for so many homiletical and midrashic possibilities regarding the relationship between beauty and the etrog. David Z. Moster, *etrog: How a Chinese Fruit Became a Jewish Symbol*. PALGRAVE PIVOT, 2019.

Both from the type of trees that produce fruit and from those which are pleasant to look at and which provide pleasant fragrance." They are all to be tied together into one bunch. The moral lesson of this instruction is that both the pious people and those less pious but generally observant, are to join in carrying out G-d's will.

Daat Zkenim writes:

פרי עץ הדר. ארבע' מינין הללו יש מהן שיש בו טעם וריח כמו אתרוג והוא כנגד הצדיקים שיש בהם ריח תורה וטעם של מעשי' טובי'. באילן שבו גדל הלולב יש בו טעם ולא ריח וכנגדו הבינוני' של ישראל שיש בהם טעם של מצות ואין בהם ריח תורה.

"The fruit of the goodly tree": the four species of fruit which we use on this festival differ in basic attributes, The citron, etrog, is the fruit of a tree which provides taste as well as a pleasant fragrance. It symbolises the righteous person who has both Torah learning and good deeds to his credit.[36]

Both commentators point out that the etrog tree both looks beautiful and produces a beautiful fragrance. In these descriptions, the beauty and the accompanying moral is centered around the physical experience of encountering an etrog. The act of seeing and smelling the etrog make it a holy object. The way it looks and its fragrance recall different kinds of ways of being in the world. These explanations, while homiletical, provide postures for the way in which the experience of beauty can be translated into deep ritual meaning. The act of choosing to associate

[36] The Daat Z'kenim continues with these kinds of comparisons for the other species

a smell with a distinct idea or memory can help individual internalize messages on a visceral level. This interaction with the etrog

Sukkot 35a in the Babylonian Talmud contains an analysis of the possible definitions of a פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר. The first definition put forth is the idea that a פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר is a tree in which the fruit and the trunk taste the same. Although the commentators are confused on why this would be the case, it defines the etrog as a fruit that is not really edible; it tastes like bark. This perhaps indicates a definition of beauty in which beauty stands alone. The etrog cannot be used for other purposes such as food, it simply has to be beautiful.

The second explanation put forth by the text is that the פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר is the etrog tree because the tree can sustain fruit all year round. In this definition, the word הָדָר connects to the root גר meaning "to live." The etrog tree is the *pri etz hadar* because the etrog "lives" on the tree all year round, that is that it grows all year round and has no limited harvesting period. Rabbi Joshua Shmidman writes:

> Thus, they understand the word "*dar*" to mean the opposite of temporary or intermittent residence; rather, it implies permanence, a continuous process through time (similar to the French "*duree*" or the English "endure"). The *etrog* tree fulfils this requirement of constant dwelling, for most other fruits are seasonal, but the *etrog* grows, blossoms and produces fruit throughout all the seasons: in the heat and the cold, in the wind and in storm — it stubbornly persists! It endures! And in the Jewish view, that is why it is beautiful. Beauty, then, in classical Jewish sources, means the indomitable power of life,

the determination to live on despite all difficulties, the affirmation of the victory of life over death, the drive for eternity.[37]

This interpretation casts beauty as a quality that is enduring and permanent. This concept of beauty stands in opposition to the contemporary belief that beauty is subjective and fleeting. Here beauty and life are conflated, with the ability of the tree to sustain growth in different phases at the same time as part of its ability to produce beauty. This kind of beauty is iterative and sustaining as opposed to judgmental or harsh or shallow.

This interpretation models expanding the idea of beauty. According to the *Stam* of the Gemara, the etrog tree is הָדָר because it sustains difference and growth. In the ensuing discussion about the physical attributes of the etrog, the rabbis add various qualifications around the physicality of the etrog. It should not be dry, it should not be too brown, it should not have spots. It is significant to note that aside from a few qualifications that indicate some limits that ensure that the etrog is fresh, the rabbis do not say what the etrog should look like. This negative stance (as opposed to a positive one) leaves space for a wider array of options when it comes to beautiful etrogim.

The conversation about the beauty of the etrog continues in the Shulchan Aruch, a 16th century legal code by Rabbi Joseph Karo. The etrog buyer is faced with a situation in which they have purchased an etrog that has already begun to shrink. The Shulchan aruch reports that it is a mitzvah to switch it for a more beautiful etrog, unless it costs more. Rabbi Moshe Isserles adds that it is not worth it if it results in wasting money. Essentially, the Shulchan Aruch reminds us,

[37] Joshua Shmidman. "The etrog, Jewish Beauty and the Beauty of Jewishness." *Jewish Action*, 7 July 2016, jewishaction.com/religion/shabbat-holidays/sukkot/etrog-jewish-beauty-beauty-jewishness/.

beauty is worthwhile up until a point. We can look for the most beautiful etrog, and we should if we have the time and means to do so, but it cannot be our only or central concern.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi interjects in the conversation in the Gemara by saying that הֲדָר should actually be read as הדיר or sheep pen. The Stam of the Gemara explains that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi connects an etrog tree to a sheep pen because "Just as in a pen, there are both large and small sheep together, so too, on an *etrog* tree, when the small ones come into being, the large ones still exist on the tree, which is not the case with other fruit trees." Like the explanation that allows for different fruit to be on the tree at the same time, this interpretation focuses on the etrog tree as the dwelling place of beauty.

The etrog, and its connection to the word הֲדָר become an aesthetic symbol. The back and forth between הֲדָר as beauty and הֲדָר as dwelling place creates a connection between those two concepts that intertwines their meaning. Beauty can be fragrance and color and youthfulness, and it can also be a tree that provides flourishing and growth. The bringing together of beauty as a dwelling place continues the theme of the role of beauty in the Mishkan and the Beit HaMikdash.

Chapter 3: The Limits of Beauty

Our world has become increasingly dependent on visual communication thanks to technology and social media. Our lives and spaces are increasingly shaped by the role of the cameras we all carry around in our pockets. In a visually obsessed culture, we need alternative understandings of beauty that add depth and substance to the world of aesthetics. Yet it is challenging to articulate a positive view of beauty without incurring serious skepticism. Our culture tends to use the physical beauty of people as a weapon, making us obsessive, insecure, forcing us to hate our bodies or the bodies of others when we perceive beauty to be lacking. Our obsession with physical perfection has gotten so out of control that the pursuit of beauty makes many people sick, leading to eating disorders and a major increase in plastic surgery for minors. Emphasizing the importance of beauty seems risky in a world with such an unhealthy attitude towards the physical.

The potential power of beauty depends almost entirely on the way we understand and therefore interact with it. Beauty in and of itself can be horrifyingly impotent. Some of the most heinous acts have been performed in the most beautiful buildings. Beauty, from an empirical standpoint, does not seem to have the power on its own to make us better people. Alain de Botton writes:

> The noblest architecture can sometimes do less for us than a siesta or an aspirin...for even if the whole of the man-made world could, through relentless effort and sacrifice, be modelled to rival St. Mark's Square, even if we could spend the rest of our lives in the Villa Rotonda or the Glass House, we would still often be in a bad mood.[38]

[38] Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), P 18.

He continues to write that beauty may contain moral messages yet "simply has no power to enforce them. It offers suggestions instead of making laws. It invites, rather than orders, us to emulate its spirit and cannot prevent its own abuse."[39]

Recognizing both the limits of beauty and our unhealthy attitude towards it forces us to reexamine our understanding of its role in our world. Beauty in and of itself is not a magical antidote to evil or suffering.The appreciation of beauty and what it can do in the world requires our ability and commitment to train ourselves to relate to it differently. Beauty can play a significant role in our lives without becoming an illness or obsession. Jewish texts reflect that need for balance and awareness when it comes to beauty, creating room for a theology of aesthetics while also recognizing its limits. A contemporary Jewish attitude towards beauty needs to be aware of its power, shortcomings, and its limitations. Understanding its reality and its potential is the first step in creating a contemporary Jewish conversation about beauty.

Some of the resistance to prioritizing beauty stems from its seemingly unjust nature. The idea that the elevated social status that beauty gives some things and people and not others seems inherently vapid. What we often label as human physical beauty is both narrow in scope and random: it is not related to the integrity, values, or kindness of an individual and so the extra attention and care that beautiful person gets feels undeserved. As a result, attaching too much value to beauty feels dangerous. We worry that when we place value and priority on beautiful things and people it results in our devaluing and deprioritizing things and people who are not perceived societally as beautiful. Does valuing beauty necessitate the devaluation of people or things that we perceive to be ugly?

[39] Ibid, P 20.

If we look only to current attitudes towards physical beauty then the answer is yes. One cannot discuss beauty without relating it to the beauty of people because our obsession with beautiful people has become so overpowering within our society that one might classify it as a sickness. Our societal relationship to human beauty has to be addressed because it contains the danger of what happens when we relate poorly to beauty, creating narrow ideas of beauty and seeing beauty as the ultimate good in and of itself. This contemporary obsession with physical beauty is unique to our time and affects our lives. Contemporary Jewish ideas of beauty must not only address but respond to and even oppose it.

In the book, *Perfect Me,* the author Heather Widdows explains why our relationship to beauty is unique for our time. Widdows argues that technology and globalization have created an environment in which the beauty ideal is a global trend instead of a local one. This has both narrowed the idea of what is considered beautiful and increased its importance. She also writes that the beauty ideal has become an ethic. She writes:

> First, and most importantly, for those who fall under it the beauty ideal provides a value framework against which individuals judge themselves, and others, as being good and bad...It is not simply that more individuals happen to value appearance more, but that, as the dominance of the beauty ideal extends, so beauty becomes more valuable and valued. As an ethical ideal, which constructs selves and identities, and creates habits and practices, the beauty ideal becomes more dominant.[40]

Our serious conflation of beauty and goodness affects how we see the value of everything, from ourselves to our food to the products we buy. Attaching value to beauty in such

[40] Heather Widdows. *Perfect Me! Beauty as an Ethical Ideal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), P 8.

a specific way moves quickly from making beauty an element of goodness to making beauty goodness itself. Beauty is necessary for a good life, but when beauty becomes the end goal, it begins to appear more like a sickness.

We see this sickness play out most clearly in the way our society views women physically. Widdows explains that while beauty has always been a value for many people in society throughout time, the modern democratization of beauty and the access to technology has placed higher expectations for every day beauty on more people. She explains that while beauty has always been seen as a priority for celebrities, or those in the public eye, the ubiquitous nature of technology has made everybody into a mini celebrity and has therefore increased every person's beauty expectations. She writes:

> In all aspects of life, whether dropping kids off at school, or just seeing friends and family, we are expected to consider and monitor how we look. Indeed snaps of women going about their daily business are regular newspaper and magazine features, and there are countless social media ways in which to share what you're wearing today. In our private lives-- in person and virtually-- we are expected to be, and expect ourselves to be, 'camera ready.'[41]

In a sense, beauty has become not a privilege but an expectation. Beauty is no longer special but mundane. The everyday must be beautiful in order to be valued. When it is not, it results in "lower self-esteem, diminished well-being, disordered eating, lower activity, risky behavior, mental and physical health issues."[42]

[41] Ibid, P 58.
[42] Ibid, P 60.

Widdows also lays out the data around eating disorders and plastic surgery as evidence that the expectation of a certain level of physical beauty has become the norm. She writes:

> The American Society of Plastic Surgeons reports and increase in lip augmentations and states that "lip procedures were part of nearly 9.2 million injection procedures in 2015, a combined increase of more than 1000 percent since 2000...Taken together, this rise in anti wrinkle, youth-mimicking procedures suggests that firmness, smoothness, and youth are globally desirable. With the exception of the very few, treatments never aim to make us look droopy, haggard, blemished, bumpirer or older. In addition, studies show that there is 'significant agreement among people of different races and different cultures about which faces they consider beautiful.[43]

The ways in which an obsession with human physical beauty has gripped our society are undoubtedly harmful. We have enough of a sense of beauty to know that the problem may lie in the society and not in beauty itself. Botton argues:

> We are drawn to call something beautiful whenever we detect that it contains in a concentrated form those qualities in which we personally, or our societies more generally, are deficient. We respect a style which can move us away from what we fear and towards what we crave: a style which carries the correct dosage of our missing virtues.[44]

Taking the arguments of Botton and Widdows together, one could argue that if contemporary American culture intensely conflates beauty with goodness, we are simply confused about what it means to live morally. We need, therefore, to create new understandings of how we relate to both beauty and morality. Completely eschewing the importance of beauty as

[43] Ibid, P 103-104.
[44] Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).P 137.

a whole would be unrealistic, harmful, and inauthentic to many Jewish texts and ideas. In fact, turning to those texts and values for insight and alternative ideas of beauty widens our narrowing concept of beauty that Widdows describes.

Jewish texts, for example, treat the beauty of people differently than the beauty of places and things. The theology of the beauty of spaces and material laid out in earlier chapters does not necessarily extend to the human physical form. Physical human beauty is often connected to power whereas the beauty of buildings and nature are connected to God. The places where physical human beauty is named, such as in the stories of Joseph, Esther, and King David, are texts in which the physical beauty relates to the individual's power over human beings. For example, Midrash Tanhuma on Parashat Vayeshev tells this story:

> אמרו רז"ל פעם אחת נתקבצו המצריות ובאו לראות יופיו של יוסף, מה עשתה אשת פוטיפר נטלה אתרוגים ונתנה לכל א' וא' מהן ונתנה סכין לכל א' וא' וקראה ליוסף והעמידתו לפניהן, כיון שהיו מסתכלו' ביופיו של יוסף היו חותכות את ידיהן, אמרה להן ומה אתן בשעה אחת כך, אני שבכל שעה רואה אותו עאכ"ו, ובכל יום ויום משדלתו בדברים ועמד ביצרו מנין ממה שקראו בענין ותשא אשת אדוניו
>
> *Our rabbis taught: Once the Egyptian women gathered to behold the beauty of Joseph. What did the wife of Potiphar do? She gave each one of them a citron and a knife. She then called for Joseph and made him stand before them. As they were gazing at Joseph's beauty they all cut their fingers instead of the fruits. She then said to them: "You were subjected to this beauty for only one hour, but I must endure it every day!" Every single day she tried to seduce him, but he withstood the temptation.*

In this story, Joseph's beauty is entirely about objectification. Joseph becomes powerful in part because of his beauty but Potiphar's wife also uses his beauty to trap and harass him. The story poignantly illustrates the physical harm that can come from an obsession with and idolization of physical beauty.

This is not to say that there is nothing Godly about human beauty. Genesis 1:27 implies a basic understanding that there can be something holy about the human image, as the verse reads: וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם; So *God created man in God's [own] image, in the image of God, God created him; male and female, God created them.*

The use of the word צֶלֶם here ties the creation of human beings to the image of God. Human beings are created to resemble God in some ways, meaning that something about that physical resemblance must be sacred. Most of the commentators, however, argued that צֶלֶם relates to angels or the intellect. For many, this most likely drew from a desire to avoid the implication that God has a body. Their fear around connecting the body to God, however, underscores how difficult it is to appreciate the beauty of the human body in a way that is holy and not harmful.

The rabbis of the Talmud share stories that display a desire to appreciate human physical beauty while also recognizing its limits. BT Gittin 58a tells the story of a beautiful child who teaches R. Joshua b Hananiah a lesson:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת גיטין דף נח עמוד א ת"ר מעשה ברבי יהושע בן חנניה שהלך לכרך גדול שברומי אמרו לו תינוק אחד יש בבית האסורים יפה עינים וטוב רואי וקווצותיו סדורות לו תלתלים הלך ועמד על פתח בית האסורים אמר (ישעיהו מב, כד) מי נתן למשיסה יעקב וישראל לבוזזים ענה אותו תינוק ואמר הלא ה' זו חטאנו לו ולא אבו בדרכיו הלוך ולא שמעו בתורתו אמר מובטחני בו שמורה הוראה בישראל העבודה שאיני

זז מכאן עד שאפדנו בכל ממון שפוסקין עליו אמרו לא זז משם עד שפדאו בממון הרבה ולא היו ימים מועטין עד שהורה .הוראה בישראל ומנו רבי ישמעאל בן אלישע.

Our Rabbis have taught: R. Joshua b. Hananiah once happened to go to the great city of Rome, and he was told there that there was in the prison a child with beautiful eyes and face and curly locks. He went and stood at the doorway of the prison and said, Who gave Jacob for a spoil and Israel to the robbers? The child answered, Is it not the Lord, He against whom we have sinned and in whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient unto his law. He said: I feel sure that this one will be a teacher in Israel. I swear that I will not budge from here before I ransom him, whatever price may be demanded. It is reported that he did not leave the spot before he had ransomed him at a high figure, nor did many days pass before he became a teacher in Israel. Who was he? — He was R. Ishmael b. Elisha.

In this parable, Rabbi Hananiah initially finds himself drawn to the child because of his beauty. Rabbi Hananiah realizes, however, that the child has more to offer beyond his physical appearance. The child carries great wisdom and ends up demonstrating that he is more than just a beautiful face. In some ways, his response may even be rebuking Rabbi Hananiah's focus on his beauty. The child is able to bring together physical beauty and Torah. He becomes a reminder to Rabbi Hananiah not to judge a person on appearance alone.

BT Ta'anit 7a expresses more clearly the limited nature of human beauty:

כדאמרה ליה ברתיה דקיסר לר' יהושע בן חנניה אי חכמה מפוארה בכלי מכוער אמר לה אביך רמי 65 חמרא במני דפחרא אמרה ליה אלא במאי נירמי אמר לה אתון דחשביתו רמו במאני דהבא וכספא אזלה ואמרה ליה לאבוה רמייא לחמרא במני דהבא וכספא ותקיף אתו ואמרו ליה אמר לה לברתיה מאן אמר לך הכי אמרה ליה רבי יהושע בן חנניה קריוהו אמר ליה אמאי אמרת לה הכי אמר ליה כי היכי דאמרה לי אמרי לה והא איכא שפירי דגמירי.

As the daughter of the Cæsar once said to R. Jehoshua b. Hananiah: "Alas for such handsome wisdom, which is in an ugly vessel" (it means that the rabbi was very homely). And he said to her: "In what does your father keep his best wine?" And she answered: "In earthen vessels." And he rejoined: "Then what is the difference between your father and a commoner?" And she asked: "In what, then, shall it be kept?" And he said: "You, who are wealthy and mighty, ought to keep it in golden and silver vessels!" She then told her father, and he commanded that his wine should be kept in vessels of gold and silver. And it became sour. When the Cæsar was informed of this, he asked his daughter: "Who told you that we should keep our wine in golden vessels?" And she named the above rabbi. He was sent for, and questioned as to the reason of his advice. And he rejoined: "This was only an answer to the question of the princess." "But are there not," the Cæsar said, "men who are handsome and nevertheless are very scholarly?" "Believe me," said the rabbi, "that if they would be homely, their wisdom would be greater still."

Here, Rabbi Hananiah teaches the lesson about the perils of placing too much emphasis on human physical beauty. The text strikes a balance in which physical beauty is not eschewed entirely but is still perceived as limited in its importance. Taken together, these texts demonstrate

a general posture that acknowledges the ways in which physical beauty affects us as humans while warning against taking that affectation too seriously.

The body, according to these texts, contains holiness and should be treated as such. An appreciation of physical beauty, however, does not necessitate the idolization of seemingly perfect bodies. In order to create a new relationship to beauty we have to understand and acknowledge the insipid nature of our obsession with human physical beauty and the effect it has on our entire conception of beauty. Our job is to recognize its toxic grip so we can reject the posture towards beauty that feeds off of self hatred and judgment in favor of seeking out the kind of beauty in the world that facilitates sacredness and growth.

Conclusion

How do we build beautiful Jewish spaces and rituals that reflect the power of beauty to connect us to God? How do we do so in a world that idolizes the physical appearance of people and things without ourselves falling prey to idol worship? As people interested in creating dynamic Jewish spaces for the 21st century, we are tasked with keeping up with the increasing importance of aesthetics in a visual world. In articulating contemporary Jewish ideas of beauty, we can offer deeper, more complex notions of beauty, while simultaneously rejecting the ways in which objectification becomes harmful in our contemporary culture. The story of the building of the Mishkan provides yet another example on which to model a contemporary Jewish approach to beauty. In the building of the Mishkan, God does not depend on material alone to create a dwelling place on earth. Building a beautiful space with intention becomes inherent to the process. Exodus 28:3 commands: וְאַתָּ֣ה תְדַבֵּר֮ אֶל־כָּל־חַכְמֵי־לֵב֒ אֲשֶׁ֣ר מִלֵּאתִיו֮ רֽוּחַ חָכְמָה֒ וְעָשׂ֣וּ אֶת־בִּגְדֵ֣י אַהֲרֹ֔ן לְקַדְּשׁ֥וֹ לְכַהֲנ֖וֹ־לִֽי, *"Next you shall instruct all who are wise hearted, whom I have endowed with the spirit of wisdom, to make Aaron's vestments, for consecrating him to serve Me as priest."*

Similarly, in Exodus 31:3-7 we read:

וָאֲמַלֵּ֨א אֹת֜וֹ רֽוּחַ־אֱלֹהִ֗ים בְּחָכְמָה֙ וּבִתְבוּנָ֣ה וּבְדַ֔עַת וּבְכָל־מְלָאכָ֖ה: לַחְשֹׁ֣ב מַחֲשָׁבֹ֑ת לַעֲשׂ֥וֹת בַּזָּהָ֛ב וּבַכֶּ֥סֶף וּבַנְּחֹֽשֶׁת: וּבַחֲרֹ֣שֶׁת אֶ֔בֶן לְמַלֹּ֑את וּבַחֲרֹ֣שֶׁת עֵ֔ץ לַעֲשׂ֖וֹת בְּכָל־מְלָאכָֽה: וַאֲנִ֗י הִנֵּ֤ה נָתַ֙תִּי֙ אִתּ֣וֹ אֵת֙ אָהֳלִיאָ֔ב בֶּן־אֲחִיסָמָ֖ךְ לְמַטֵּה־דָּ֑ן וּבְלֵ֣ב כָּל־חֲכַם־לֵ֗ב נָתַ֙תִּי֙ חָכְמָ֔ה וְעָשׂ֖וּ אֵ֣ת כָּל־אֲשֶׁ֥ר צִוִּיתֶֽךָ: אֵת֙ אֹ֣הֶל מוֹעֵ֔ד וְאֵת֙־הָאָרֹ֔ן לָעֵדֻ֖ת וְאֶת־הַכַּפֹּ֣רֶת אֲשֶׁר־עָלָ֑יו וְאֵ֖ת כָּל־כְּלֵ֥י הָאֹֽהֶל:

See, I have singled out by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of

craft; to make designs for work in gold, silver, and copper, to cut stones for setting and to carve wood—to work in every kind of craft. Moreover, I have assigned to him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have also granted skill to all who are skillful, that they may make everything that I have commanded you: the Tent of Meeting, the Ark for the Pact and the cover upon it, and all the furnishings of the Tent.

In both of these examples, the texts describes the artisans as those who posess רַוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּחָכְמָה and כָּל־חַכְמֵי־לֵב. The use of חַכְמֵה in both texts implies that wisdom is a necessary element in designing and creating beautiful spaces. Commentators on this verse describe a "hakham" as a person familiar with all of the rules that God had set forth in terms of building. The 19th century commentator, Haamek Davar writes on Exodus 28:3: אלא כל מקום דכתיב חכמי לב הביאור יראת ה׳; *"Wise in heart" refers specifically to the possession of awe of God, which is the beginning of true wisdom (Tehillim 111:10)*

To be wise, one needs to work towards understanding the connection between beauty and God and needs to fold that understanding into the creation of beautiful spaces. The wise-hearted artists are those who deeply examine and become aware of the ultimate theological potential contained within beauty. The psychologist James Hillman poses the following hypothetical:

> Suppose we were to imagine that beauty is permanently given, inherent to the world in its data, there on display always, a display that evokes an aesthetic response. This inherent radiance lights up more translucently, more intensively within certain events, particularly those events that aim to seize it and reveal it.[45]

[45] James Hillman, "The Practice of Beauty," in *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, edited by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (New York: Allworth, 2001), P 267.

Anybody who takes on the responsibility of building a dwelling space for God takes on the responsibility of becoming a wise hearted artist, clarifying the radiance of life.

God's stated need for wise hearted artists in creating the priestly garments underscores the risks that come with the misuse or misunderstanding of beauty. The Torah places the story of the building of the Mishkan right beside the story of the Golden Calf. We learn about our relationship to beauty in the comparison of these two stories. Like the Mishkan, the golden calf is built out of gold. Both objects place heavy emphasis on the importance of material. What becomes the difference between material constructed for worshipping God and material constructed for idol worship? In emphasizing the need for wise hearted artisans who understand the role that beauty plays in creating dwelling spaces for God, God tries to help people avoid the golden calf scenario. When people use material to build out of fear or ostentatious displays of power, the object becomes an idol. Using beauty in spiritual or religious settings is highly important but needs to be done with care and by people who deeply investigate its spiritual purpose.

Those who are of wise heart or endowed with spiritual wisdom are best able to fulfill the requirement that the priestly garments be לְכָבוֹד וּלְתִפְאָרֶת, or for honor and splendor. Exodus 28:2 describes the beautiful clothing required for the priests who serve at the Mishkan as follows: וְעָשִׂיתָ בִגְדֵי־קֹדֶשׁ לְאַהֲרֹן אָחִיךָ לְכָבוֹד וּלְתִפְאָרֶת -- *Make sacral vestments for your brother Aaron, for honor and splendor.*

These two categories also help expand our understanding of two elements of beauty. "Those two words *kavod v'tiferet* describe the balance that creating beautiful ritual requires. *Tiferet*, meaning beauty and splendor, speaks to the material goods used to elevate a spiritual

space- whether it's the gold and crimson of the mishkan, the jewels of the priestly robes, or the candles and plants and strings of lights of today. *Kavod* refers to God's majesty, dignity, or weight. *Kavod* is depth and tradition and meaning. In his commentary on this verse, Ibn Ezra describes these words as follows:

> **לכבוד ולתפארת** שיהיה נכבד ומפואר במלבושים נכבדים ומפוארים, כמו שאמר הכתוב כחתן יכהן פאר (ישעיה סא י), כי אלה הבגדים לבושי מלכות הן

> ***For honor and for splendor:*** *That he should be honored and glorious with honorable and glorious clothing, as the verse states (Isaiah 61:10), "as a groom who ministers in glory" - as these clothes were the clothes of royalty.*

The two words, honor and glory, or *kavod* and *tiferet* each play a role in deepening our understanding of creating beautiful space and ritual. *Kavod* brings purpose to *tiferet*. We must stay true to *Kavod*, depth, in our pursuit of *tiferet*, beauty. But we cannot ignore the fact that *tiferet*, the thrill of beauty, helps bring people to a place of *kavod*. *Kavod* in its extreme results in fear. *tiferet* in its extreme results in idolatry. Both require the detail and skill of the wise hearted in order to be used effectively in spiritual settings[46].

In all of these examples, from the etrog, to the mishkan, to the priestly garments, to the wise hearted artists, the deep possibility of beauty to be holy becomes apparent. The God of the mishkan and the etrog is not the philosophical, distant, inconceivable God. The side of God that we experience through the thrill of beauty helps make God feel close and possible in our day to

[46] An excerpt from my senior sermon delivered on February 14th, 2019.

day lives. We can use the thrill of beauty to build dwelling spaces for God. The 20th century Hasidic rabbi, Shalom Noach Berezovsky, wrote in his work *Netivot Shalom*:

> The purpose of Creation and the purpose of divine service is for the Jew to immerse in all the physical things, and then to elevate them all in the name of God, for then he joins the lower with the upper. The path of separating from the things of the world is an easier path. But the higher level is to raise all the things of this world to the Holy One of Blessing. And that is the desired purpose.[47]

We get closer to the idea of God and God gets closer to us through beauty. It is our job to become wise hearted artists so that we can continue to perceive and create space for God's presence in our beautiful world.

[47] Sholom Noach Berezovsky, *Sefer Netivot Shalom*. (Belarus: Yeshivat Bet Avraham Slonim, 1982).

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