

Beauty and Long Life

“At the age of twenty Sarah was still as beautiful as she had been at seven, and at the age of one hundred she was still as innocent as at twenty.” Our women today would not appreciate such a compliment, whose latter part especially, were it to be used in an ordinary context, would sound rather left-handed, to say the least. But the context in which these words were said by our Sages affords us a biographical sketch of the most wonderful, noble woman in our history.

People say that just as times change ideas also change, and they are never at a loss for cases in point, for comparisons with the “good old” days of our grandfathers. But on more mature reflection the very opposite would appear to be true. Yes, times and, let us hasten to add, also superficial forms do change, but certain fundamental ideas remain constant. All the examples cited in support of the notion that ideas change relate only to things and circumstances of secondary import, to various superficial manifestations of one and the same idea. The forms may change (and even then by far not as greatly as one might think) but the core remains the same. To be sure, the palace of a wealthy Assyrian was probably as different from the villa of a powerful Roman at the time of the Civil Wars as the country home of an affluent Byzantine was from a German diplomat’s residence built in the rococo style. Modes of costume also change, though we often see a return to fashions from a bygone era. But when it comes to important things, to fundamental ideas that give direction to human life, the Babylonians of antiquity and the Frenchmen of today are alike, and the ancient Phoenicians were not one whit different from today’s Englishmen.

In the course of the centuries, as nations go through changes in their language, literature and customs, one and the same idea may assume new manifestations. However, the superficial impression of fundamental change fades away when we examine the individuals that make up these nations.

But even aside from these considerations, does anyone seriously

believe that, when it comes to the ideal of human happiness, there is any difference between the people of the year 1800 before the Common Era and those who lived in the year 1800 after? Did people (I mean the masses, the overwhelming majority of the human race) ever believe that a person who was *not* wealthy and *not* endowed with all the material means for a life of pleasures and luxuries could be regarded as a truly happy man? Was there ever a generation that did *not* regard the pursuit of riches and creature comforts as the basic ambition common to all mankind? Was there any substantial difference between the thinking of the masses that, 1900 years ago, allowed the lure of *panem et circenses*, banquets and festive pageantry, to rob them of their most sacred spiritual values, and the elite minority of princelings who, only 50 years ago in Paris, cowered before the throne of the mighty one,* or before the door of his chamberlain's valet, to beg for a piece of the territory he had stolen from their neighbors?

It must be admitted that even the Jewish nation, taken as a whole, was never so thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the Torah that—except perhaps during times of great national upheavals—Jews as such could ever have been said to have held views of life at utter variance with those typical of other societies. It could never be said that the philosophy on which our Sages based their own views and standards, as described below, was the one that prevailed among all Jews at the time. However, this philosophy was indeed the view that was predominant within the circles of our Sages, those men who had attained a moral and spiritual level to which their own generation, along with all the generations that followed, could well point as their shining ideal. Regrettably, there can be no serious rebuttal for the argument that our own generation has not only failed to come noticeably closer to this lofty ideal but in fact has clearly moved further away from it. It must be said then that, in contrast to the unchanging values held by people in general, our own Jewish generation does appear to be very much different from that of, say, our great-grandfathers.

Returning to our opening remark, the Torah leads us to the tomb of one of the noblest women in our history and has inscribed upon her monument only these words, "The years of her life were one hundred years and twenty years and seven years." Our Sages regard this epitaph as the perfect character sketch, the most beautiful eulogy possible for

* Napoleon I. (Ed.)

our immortal matriarch. "At the age of twenty she was [still] as beautiful as she had been at seven, and at the age of one hundred [still] as innocent as at twenty."

It seems odd that anyone should consider childhood as the prime of a woman's beauty and even odder to regard the age of twenty as marking the peak of womanly innocence. We, for our part, associate innocence with childhood; we talk about "beautiful" youths and maidens and "innocent" children. We seek innocence in childhood and beauty in young adulthood.

Our Sages, however, have a different view. They believe there is nothing more beautiful than the face of a child—and, come to think of it, are they not right? Are there not many more beautiful children than there are youths and (please do not take offense) maidens, men or women, of whom the same could be said? Hardly any child is born ugly; all newborns are beautiful. And why are people more beautiful at the age of seven than at twenty? Few questions are more likely to capture our undivided attention than this one, for who would not like to be beautiful and remain so?

According to the view on which the epitaph quoted above is based, the secret of beauty does not lie in the makeup box and the *fleur d'orange* [perfume]. A child has an angelic look because base passions have not yet etched their lines on its face, because it has not yet come to know envy or rage, greed or arrogance, and is still unacquainted with meanness and vulgarity. He who wants to have his children remain beautiful—let him teach them to be good and virtuous. As for the maiden and the youth who think they are beautiful and would like to remain so—but then I think that once they believe they are beautiful their beauty has vanished, for at this point the destructive paintbrush of vanity comes into play, marring the beautiful face with a smear of ugliness. A beautiful body is the result of a beautiful soul, and he or she who would like to be beautiful, or we others—the ugly ones (among whom we might number ourselves)—if we want to become beautiful, all we need to do is to keep away from sin and base passion. Every beautiful thought, every fine sentiment, every lofty resolve makes one beautiful, and the most beautiful face is the one least disfigured by the pernicious colors and lines of base passion, malice, arrogance and vanity. That is why a child is at the peak of its beauty, and our Sages say that if we would still be *tamim*, as pure as angels at the age of

twenty, we would also keep the angelic beauty we possessed when we were seven.

What about innocence, angelic purity, *temimus*? "At the age of one hundred as innocent as at twenty." With these words our Sages have placed themselves at sharp variance with the predominant notions of our own century and of all the centuries past. Their message is: The peak of innocence is not reached in infancy. Those who are genuine *temimim* do not attain that level until they are twenty. True "innocence" can exist only in combination with a genuine, perfect freedom from guilt.

An "innocent" man is called *tam*. We, of course, have twisted the meaning of *temimim* and given the word a pejorative connotation. As we use the adjective today, a "good" person is one that is "easy to handle," one who lets himself be pushed around by others, who allows himself to be led by the nose and is totally lacking in common sense. In other words, a "good man" and "a good woman" in our present-day idiom are synonymous with a simple-minded man and an unintelligent woman, respectively. We define "innocent" as "unsuspecting," still too simple-minded to sin. This definition is based on a notion so typical of our age: as a man grows in worldly wisdom, he is bound to do evil. This notion, so degrading of human dignity, is accentuated by the concept of "saintly innocence," which a certain religious faith has vested with a shining halo. By contrast, consider how the lofty view of our Sages ennobles man and enhances his dignity. In their interpretation the culmination of innocence comes at a stage in life when two seemingly opposing aspects of the human personality, consummate clarity of mind and genuine warmheartedness, first come into open confrontation.

"As innocent as at twenty"—that bright phase of life at which the mind has become more mature than it was in the boy or girl of seven, at which the eyes are opened, judgment is sharpened and the senses are vigorous and receptive, but the heart is still wide and warm and the pulse beats more rapidly for all things good and noble. That is the age at which the youth or maiden still believes in the value of virtue, at which the senses are most receptive and outside stimuli can leave a profound impression. At the same time, self-control and the willingness to make sacrifices for noble and lofty ideals do not yet appear to these young people as wild fanaticism; they do not yet ridicule faith in ideals

and aspirations toward these aims, and their hearts are still capable of swelling with hope, confidence and energy.

But then, of course, our generation has turned virtually everything upside down. By the time they are seven years old our children are already smarter than they should be at the age of twenty. Think of our youths at the age of twenty; what will they be like if their hearts have already been defiled when they were seven? Sin lies in the street for everyone to see, and the boy and girl of seven already know what men and women of one hundred should not know yet. Our children age prematurely and our youths and maidens no longer want to listen to our "sermons" about magnanimity and unselfishness. They have been initiated early into the calculations of everyday life. True, we give children a catechism that tells them to fear God, to be merciful and forgiving and not angry or miserly, and so forth. But all this is considered a part of childhood; once you have entered adolescence, and later still as a grown man and woman, you are expected to forget about these things. Once you are past childhood, you are taught to place a damper on your heart which, perhaps, when you were twenty, still dared to harbor sentiments of magnanimity and loving-kindness. But now comes serious everyday life to show the mature man and woman that they must appoint strict economy as their bookkeeper and pride and arrogance as their line of defense. And so you pass all your virtues through a process of selection, eliminating one virtue after the other; indeed there is not one virtue left to which you may give yourself unstintingly. But *tamim* means just that: to give yourself wholly, without reservations, to the good, without prior calculations and deliberations. One should be "whole" in what one wants to do. Our children are more beautiful and pure than our adolescents because the passing of years brings a decline in purity and virtue and therefore also in beauty. The vicissitudes of life cannot make a person more beautiful; only a beautiful, pure spirit, inspired by the spirit of God, can produce a physical image of angelic beauty.

And just as the secret of beauty does not lie in superficial cosmetics but can be acquired only from within, so, too, our Sages (who are *the* Sages) tell us that prescriptions for longevity cannot be purchased from charlatans at country fairs or even learned from the practitioners of medicine. If we look to our Sages and ask them: "What must we do in order to live long?" they (מגילה כ"ז) give us a prescription that is

quite different. For even after the death of Abraham and Sarah we had men who were blessed with longevity and who were asked: "How did you get to live so long?" "To what prescription do you attribute your longevity?" They were not asked, "To what baths did you travel? What kind of wine did you drink? At what restaurant did you eat each day? Which pleasures did you pursue and which ones did you avoid?" In each case it was clear to the inquirer in advance that the answer would deal with rules of moral behavior. This is obvious from the fact that when some of the venerable old men took exception to the questioning and teasingly replied, "Why, do you envy me for having lived so long?" the inquirer in each instance answered with a formula ordinarily used to explain one's desire for guidance in ritual questions: "This is Torah and we need instruction in it."

Rabbi Nechuniah ben Hakanah was the first to answer our question: "You ask how I came to live so long? [Because] I have never sought honor by degrading my neighbor, or by cursing him, or by hostility toward my neighbor. I never went to bed in such a mood. Also, I was not too exacting about my money." I sold on easy terms, as they say in business parlance. I did not run after every penny, even when I would have been entitled to it.

The following answer came from Rabbi Nechuniah Ha'Gadol:

"I have never taken anything to which I was not entitled, even if it would have been given to me voluntarily; likewise, I did not insist on getting that to which I was indeed entitled." I learned from Father Abraham to be able to raise my hand and say, "I have dedicated to God's service my hand and all that it has acquired so that no one should be in a position to say: It was through me that the Jew Abraham grew rich." That is why I never insisted even on getting that to which I was entitled. I have never exploited my honor or my money for personal gain. Rather, I always preferred to waive my rights.

The following curious answer was given by R. Joshua ben Korhah:

"I have never looked at the physical appearance of a wicked man." I have never spent time looking at the outer appearance of a person whom I knew to be evil within. Even if he came before the world covered with ornaments and glory, he did not exist as far as I was concerned. I never judged people by their outer appearance but only according to their spiritual worth.

A later Sage, Rabbi Zera, replied:

“You ask how I came to live so long? [Because] I was never irritable at home and never walked ahead of people greater than myself.” I was not the kind before whom everyone outside lived in fear and trembling, yet who himself trembled in fear at home even before his wife; nor was I a tyrant at home yet the meekest and humblest man outside. I was never angry at home. I was not a domestic tyrant; my wife, my children and the members of my household did not have to be afraid of me. I never flew into a rage, not even in my own home. And as I was at home, so was I also in life outside. I never walked one step ahead of anyone who was greater than I. I happily subordinated myself in public life even if the other party was years younger than I. And, third and last: לא הרהרתי במרוצת המטונפות. All my life I never considered the Torah as my private possession. I did not regard the Torah as my own personal favorite hobby; it was not my private “passion.” I always regarded it as Divine. I viewed my study of Torah as an act of service to God. Even as I stood respectfully and humbly before men, so I always stood in respect and humility before the Torah and in my own mind always regarded it as something holy. Even as I respected every human soul, even as I respected the youngest child in our home and restrained myself from ever giving way to anger, so I was always motivated by the thought that the Torah was not the work of my hands, nor was it my business; the Torah was my master. The Torah has been my guide all my life. Whatever I learned from it was to be put into practice in daily life. These ideas were meant to be imprinted upon my brain by my *tefillin*, and to motivate all my actions. “I never walked even as far as four cubits without my *tefillin*.” And even as I considered the Torah sacred, so I likewise regarded as sacred everything related to Torah. “I never took malicious pleasure in the weakness or the humiliation of my neighbor and never called anyone by a pejorative nickname.” I recognized every human being as created in the image of God, and even as the Torah was sacred to me, so, too, were human beings, so that I regarded the humiliation of a human being as a degradation of the image of God.

These are some ingredients from the prescriptions for longevity which the Sages of our people would offer to those who would like to live long. Those who wish for a long life could learn the secret from these *chachamim* of life: to elevate themselves spiritually to such a

philosophy of life and to use this philosophy as the point of departure and focal point for all their acts and resolves, aspiring to reach that lofty spiritual level at which the words, "At the age of twenty as beautiful as at seven, and at the age of one hundred as innocent as at twenty" will not suggest bitter irony but will reflect conviction coming from deep within the heart.