

# APPRECIATING BEAUTY



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT TETZAVEH**  
**RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN**

How often do you feel awe, admiration, and elevation while witnessing beauty and excellence? Appreciation is one of the twenty-four character strengths and virtues outlined by psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman that enhance well-being. They define appreciation as the “ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds.” Peterson and Seligman make an important distinction between three different types of goodness that one can feel and show appreciation for: 1) physical beauty, 2) skill or talent, 3) virtue or moral goodness. María Luisa Martínez-Martí and her colleagues reported in a recent study that individuals who score high on an Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence scale (which includes all three types of appreciation) generally report higher senses of well-being, life-satisfaction, purpose, and hope. They also report more impactful spiritual experiences, and are more empathetic, sympathetic, and concerned for the well-being of others.

It is clear from the sheer number of verses related to the construction of the *Mishkan*, its vessels, and the clothing of the *Kohanim*, that the Torah is deeply interested in transmitting a theology of beauty. Moshe is commanded in the beginning of *Parshat Tetzave* to make holy garments for his brother Aharon “*lekavod u-le-tifaret*” – “for honor and for beauty” (*Shemot* 28:2). The commentators differ on the exact meaning of the verse. Elements of the dispute rest on a textual ambiguity, which perhaps also reflects a deeper spiritual message.

Textually, it is unclear which noun “for honor and beauty” is modifying. Some understand that the clothing itself must be honorable and beautiful, so that if it is ripped or worn out, it would be invalid (Ralbag). Others argue that it is the *Kohen Gadol* who is being honored and beautified by the clothing, as the garments described were also worn by royalty (Ramban). Still others argue that it is not the clothing, nor is it the *Kohen Gadol*, who is being honored, but it is G-d (Sforno) or the *Mishkan* (Ramban) that is being beautified by the special clothing. Regardless of which approach we take, it is evident that there is an inherent value in magnifying and glorifying the physical beauty as it relates to deeply sacred rituals. The spiritual experience is enhanced by the surrounding physical beauty.

Yet, the sense of awe and appreciation is not limited to the realm of just physical beauty. Inherent in witnessing and experiencing the presence of the *Kohen Gadol* was also an appreciation of skill and talent. As is evident from the verses describing the performance of the sacrificial rituals, especially in the context of *Yom Kippur*, the work of the *Kohen Gadol* was complicated and required practice, precision, and determination. No doubt, spectators witnessing the *Kohen Gadol* (and even modern readers imagining the ancient scene) feel a sense of awe and appreciation of the skill and talent required to successfully execute the rituals.

In his commentary, *Aderet Eliyahu*, Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, better known as the *Ben Ish Chai*, adds the final dimension of appreciation into the mix, namely, virtue and moral goodness. He argues that clothing cannot be an inherent symbol of character. If someone who is known to demonstrate low moral fortitude wears royal or regal attire, the contrast between his or her internal flaws and the external pretense, makes the wearer even lower in the eyes of others. It is only if the onlookers know for certain the pristine character of the wearer of the garments that the clothing can enhance his or her stature. There is a Talmudic tradition that the *Kohen Gadol* could only emerge from the Holy of Holies on *Yom Kippur* if he was of high moral character. Therefore, when the *Kohen Gadol* emerged on *Yom Kippur*, everyone was aware of his virtue. The beauty of his priestly garments was integrally intertwined with the beauty of his virtue, character, and moral goodness.

The *Mishkan*, and particularly the role of the *Kohen Gadol* within it, provides a paradigm for us to nurture our own sense of appreciation. If we can learn how to cultivate this trait within a spiritual paradigm, combining an appreciation of beauty, talent, and virtue, we can enhance and deepen our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with G-d.

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SCHIFFMAN**

[www.PsychedforTorah.com](http://www.PsychedforTorah.com)  
[PsychedforTorah@gmail.com](mailto:PsychedforTorah@gmail.com)  
[@PsychedforTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedforTorah)

