Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Vayeshev

Is Beauty Only Skin Deep?

After Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery at the beginning of this week's Torah portion, he is taken down to Egypt, where he joins the household of a wealthy Egyptian named Potiphar:

בראשית לט:א–י (א) וְיוֹסֵף הוּרַד מִצְרָיְמָה וַיִּקְנֵהוּ פּוֹטִיפַר סְרִיס פַּרְעֹה שַׂר הַטַּבָּחִים אִישׁ מִצְרִי מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרְדֻהוּ שָׁמָּה: (ב) וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי אִישׁ מַצְלִיחַ וַיְהִי בְּבֵית אֲדֹנָיו הַמִּצְרִי: (ג) וַיַּרְא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי יְהוָה אִתּוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהוָה מַצְלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ: (ד) וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חֵן בְּעֵינָיו וַיְשָׁרֶת אֹתוֹ וַיַּפְקִדֵהוּ עַל־בֵּיתוֹ וְכָל־יֶשׁ־לוֹ נָתַן בְּיָדוֹ: (ה) וַיְהִי מֵאָז הִפְקִיד אֹתוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ וְעַל כָּל־אֲשֶׁר יֶשׁ־לוֹ וַיְבָרֶךְ יְהוָה אֶת־בֵּית הַמִּצְרִי בִּגְלַל יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי בִּרְכַּת יְהוָה בְּכָל־אֲשֶׁר יֶשׁ־לוֹ בַּבַּיִת וּבַשָּׂדֶה: (ו) וַיַּעֲזֹב כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ בְּיַד־יוֹסֵף וְלֹא־יָדַע אִתּוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי אִם־הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר־הוּא אוֹכֵל וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יְפֵה־תֹאַר וִיפֵה מַרְאֶה: (ז) וַיְהִי אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אֶשֶׁת־אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ אֶל־יוֹסֵף וַתֹּאמֶר שִׁכְבָה עִמִּי: (ח) וַיְמָאֵן	וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־אֵשֶׁת אֲדֹנָיו הֵן אֲדֹנִי לֹא־יָדַע אִתִּי מַה־בַּבַּיִת וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־יֶשׁ־לוֹ נָתַן בְּיָדִי: (ט) אֵינֶנּוּ גָדוֹל בַּבַּיִת הַזֶּה מִמֶּנִּי וְלֹא־חָשַׂךְ מִמֶּנִּי מְאוּמָה כִּי אִם־אוֹתָךְ בַּאֲשֶׁר אַתְּ־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֵיךְ אֶעֱשֶׂה הָרָעָה הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת וְחָטָאתִי לֵאלֹהִים: (י) וְיְהִי כְּדַבְּרָהּ אֶל־יוֹסֵף יוֹם	יוֹם וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֵלֶיהָ לִשְׁכַּב אֶצְלָהּ לִהְיוֹת עִמָּהּ:	**Genesis 39: 1–10** When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his prefect—an Egyptian—bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. God was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master. And when his master saw that God was with him and that God lent success to everything he undertook, he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned. And from the time that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, God blessed his house for Joseph's sake, so that the blessing of God was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside. He left all that he had in Joseph's hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome. After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin

	before God?" And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.

- **Based on these verses, how would you characterize Joseph and his motivations?**
- **Potiphar is described as leaving everything in Joseph's control except "the food that he ate." What is one aspect of your life you would be reluctant to place in someone else's hands, no matter how much you trusted them?**

When Joseph continues to resist her advances, Potiphar's wife accuses him of assaulting her, and he is thrown into prison as punishment. The influential medieval Torah and Talmud commentator Rashi connects Joseph's fate to the description of his physical beauty in these verses.

רש"י בראשית לט:ו **ויהי יוסף יפה תואר.** כְּיוֹן שֶׁרָאָה עַצְמוֹ מוֹשֵׁל, הִתְחִיל אוֹכֵל וְשׁוֹתֶה וּמְסַלְסֵל בְּשַׂעֲרוֹ, אָמַר הַקָּבָ"ה אָבִיךָ מִתְאַבֵּל וְאַתָּה מְסַלְסֵל בִּשְׂעָרְךָ, אֲנִי מְגַרֶּה בְּךָ אֶת הַדֹּב	**Rashi on Genesis 39:6** **Now Joseph was well built.** As soon as he saw that he was ruler (in the house) he began to eat and drink and curl his hair. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "Your father is mourning and you curl your hair! I will let a bear loose against you"

- **In this source, Rashi uses the metaphor of a bear to refer to Potiphar's wife and the threat she poses to Joseph. Why do you think he chose this metaphor, and what does it add to the story?**
- **Rashi implies that Joseph deserved to be punished for indulging in frivolity while his father was mourning. Do you agree that we have a responsibility to limit our own joy out of solidarity with loved ones who are suffering, even when they are unaware of what we are doing?**

The modern Israeli scholar Tamar Weissman offers a very different perspective on Joseph's beauty from Rashi's. Rather than viewing the description as merely physical, she suggests that Joseph and his mother Rachel both possessed an inner beauty that captivated those around them:

***Tribal Lands*, Chapter 12; Yosef**
We are told of one essential trait in regard to Rachel: "and Rachel was beautiful in form and beautiful in appearance" (Genesis 29:17). This trait was shared by Joseph, who was "beautiful in form and beautiful in appearance" (Genesis 39:6). Rachel and Joseph were defined by this great beauty. More than a physical attribute, this beauty seemed the embodiment of passion, longing, instinct, response. It demanded utter engagement, complete sincerity. Jacob, the Midianites, Potiphar, Potiphar's wife, fellow prisoners, Pharaoh himself: all were drawn to the charismatic Joseph, who "found favor" without even trying... Joseph awakened love, an instinctive openness to trust and connection. And he reciprocated. Utterly trustworthy, he was loyal to those who believed in him. To him, the reality of relationship defined good and evil, and was the basis for understanding God: "After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said: 'Lie with me.' But he refused. He said to his master's wife: 'Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. No one in this house has more authority than I, and he has kept nothing from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness? It would be a sin against God!'"

- **Tamar Weissman explains that for Joseph, good and bad were defined by his relationships. How did this shape his refusal of Potiphar's wife?**
- **What does this source suggest about the relationship between physical beauty and inner character?**

These two sources offer very different approaches to Joseph's beauty—and to a larger question that runs through Jewish thought: How should we relate to physical beauty? One perspective on this question can be found in a story from the Talmud, a record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the third and eighth centuries:

Taanit 7a–7b
The daughter of the [Roman] emperor said to Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya, [who was an ugly man:] Woe to glorious wisdom [such as yours,which is contained] in an ugly vessel. [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya] said to her: Does your father keep his wine in clay vessels? [The emperor's daughter] said to him: Rather, in what, then, should he keep it? [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya] said to her: You, who are so important, should put it in vessels of gold and silver. [The emperor's daughter] went and said this to her father. He put the wine in vessels of gold and silver and it turned sour. [When

תענית ז.–ז:
כְּדַאֲמַרָה לֵיהּ בְּרַתֵּיהּ דְּקֵיסָר לְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חֲנַנְיָה: אִי חָכְמָה מְפוּאָרָה בִּכְלִי מְכוֹעָר! אֲמַר לַהּ: אֲבִיךְ רָמֵי חַמְרָא בְּמָנֵי דְּפַחְרָא? אֲמַרָה לֵיהּ: אֶלָּא בְּמַאי נִירְמֵי? אֲמַר לַהּ: אִתּוּן דַּחֲשִׁיבִיתּוּ, רְמוֹ בְּמָאנֵי דַּהֲבָא וְכַסְפָּא. אָזְלָה וַאֲמַרָה לִיהּ לַאֲבוּהּ רַמְיֵיהּ לְחַמְרָא בְּמָנֵי דַּהֲבָא וְכַסְפָּא, וּתְקֵיף. אֲתוֹ וַאֲמַרוּ לֵיהּ. אֲמַר לַהּ לִבְרַתֵּיהּ: מַאן אֲמַר לָךְ הָכִי? אֲמַרָה לֵיהּ: רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן חֲנַנְיָה. קָרֵיוּהוּ. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: אַמַּאי אֲמַרְתְּ לַהּ הָכִי? אֲמַר לֵיהּ: כִּי הֵיכִי דַּאֲמַרָה לִי, אֲמַרִי לַהּ. וְהָא אִיכָּא שַׁפִּירֵי דִּגְמִירִי! אִי הֲווֹ סְנוּ—טָפֵי הֲווֹ גְּמִירִי.

	his advisors] came and told the emperor [that the wine had turned sour,] he said to [his daughter:] Who told you to do this? [His daughter] responded: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya. [The emperor] summoned him and said to him: Why did you say this to her? [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Ḥananya] said to him: Just as she said to me, so I said say to her. [The emperor said to him:] But there are handsome people who are learned. [Rabbi Yehoshua replied:] Had they been ugly, they would have been even more learned.

- **What might the intercultural dynamic of this exchange—the fact that it takes place between a rabbi and a Roman emperor's daughter—add to its meaning?**
- **Do you think Rabbi Yehoshua seriously means his assertion that beautiful people would be wiser if they were less beautiful, or do you interpret his statement differently?**

A different approach can be found in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, also known as Maimonides, was perhaps the greatest intellectual and spiritual figure of post-Talmudic Judaism. Among his most notable works is the *Mishneh Torah*, a monumental legal code and one of the most organized, comprehensive, and influential works of Jewish law. Written over a period of ten years, the work systematically categorizes and explains all aspects of Jewish observance. The passage below comes from the section discussing the laws governing blessings.

משנה תורה, ברכות י:יג הָרוֹאֶה בְּרִיּוֹת נָאוֹת וּמְתֻקָּנוֹת בְּיוֹתֵר וְאִילָנוֹת טוֹבוֹת מְבָרֵךְ שֶׁכָּכָה לוֹ בְּעוֹלָמוֹ.	**Mishneh Torah, Blessings 10:13** A person who sees beautiful and well-formed creations or pleasant-looking trees should recite the blessing: [Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe,]w,hose world is like this.

- **Why do you think Maimonides singles out trees as something over which to recite this blessing?**
- **What perspective on beauty is implied by the language of this blessing, and how does it compare to the perspective presented in the Talmud?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Imagine a conversation between Rashi and Tamar Weissman. How might each respond to the other's point of view?

2. Beauty can be a source of power, but it can also become a source of danger. How do the sources on this sheet speak to the relationship between these two possibilities?
3. After studying these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you, and what is one question you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study
If you are interested in seeing further sources on Vayeshev, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Vayeshev page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Vayeshev topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Joseph, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, and Beauty.

Chapter 10 of the *Mishneh Torah*'s section on blessings, from which the last source is taken, contains many blessings beyond the more commonly known ones recited over food, such as a blessing to say when seeing a rainbow, or entering a bathhouse. The entire chapter (along with the rest of the *Mishneh Torah*) is available on Sefaria in the original Hebrew and English translation.

Enjoyed this sheet? Receive a new one in your inbox every week by subscribing at simchattorahchallenge.org.