

SEASONS OF THE MOON

THE MONTH OF KISLEV

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Every time we celebrate Chanuka, we are re-affirming our stand against a world that values youth, beauty and physical and intellectual prowess above all. A world bequeathed to us by the Greeks.

Art is the ideology of beauty. The Greeks, both ancient and modern, hold great store by the power of art to take us beyond the surface of things, to bring us into contact with life's spiritual realities, to express the underlying truths of existence. This is the philosophy of art. Beauty leads to truth. Beauty is truth.

ART STORE

But art is a funny thing. This week's flash is next week's trash. This week's beauty becomes next week's hideosity. This week's corny and trite becomes next week's cutting edge.

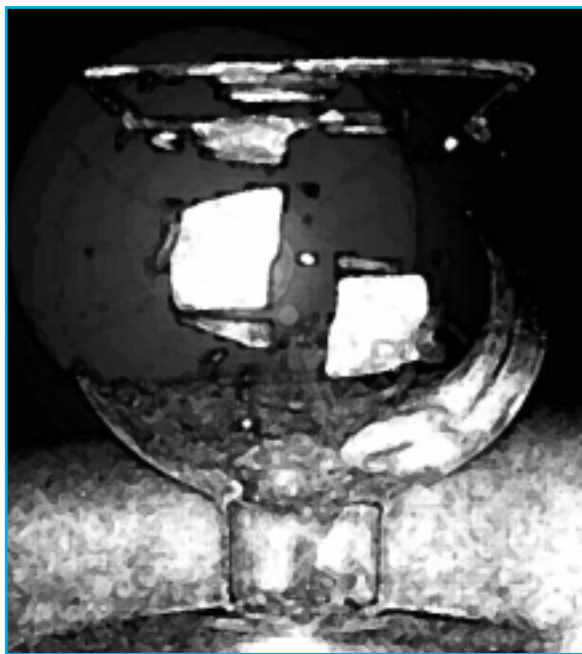
If beauty is truth, how come "beauty" changes so rapidly? No truth that changes can be true. A truth that changes must mean that either: a) it wasn't true before or b) it isn't true now, or c) it was never true. Truth's clearest identifying property is that it is unchanging. If "beauty is truth" why is art about as immune to fashion as a Paris *couture* house?

Another thing, artists are notoriously eccentric and self-indulgent. Without wishing to give undue importance to their foibles, could there be something more to their excesses than meets the eye?

THE BEAUTY BARRIER

Why does art's definition of beauty change? Beauty is a physical thing and the physical world has its limits. There are just so many ways you can paint a tree.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST



There are just so many ways you can photograph the shadow of a net curtain on a window sill. Beauty is a physical thing, a finite thing. Sooner rather than later you bump up against the limits of beauty, of that particular vision of beauty, and where will you go then? There's nowhere to go except to break the beauty barrier, reverse the polarity and embrace and celebrate everything that

up till now has been ugly. You can do this in an evolutionary way and nibble at the edges of ugliness, or you can dive in at the deep end. You can tear up everything that has just been and tar it with the feather of being *bourgeois*, the ultimate art crime.

ISM-ISM

Whichever way you get there, however, the search for beauty ultimately leads the Greek to the ugly, the bizarre and the perverted. In a nutshell, this is the history of art. Realism, Cubism, Modernism, post-Modernism, every 'ism' in art shares one thing in common: Each claims

to have replaced the former totally and made it forever redundant.

A FICKLE GODDESS

Art is a fickle goddess. If beauty is truth, it means that the Greek definition of truth is as negotiable as each version of its beauty is changeable.

The Jew says to the Greek that an infinitely malleable truth means no truth at all. A constantly metamorphosing beauty means no beauty at all.

The Jew doesn't have this problem. His beauty is as unchanging as his truth. The hidden truths of the Torah are called *kabala*. The word, quite simply, means receive-

THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST *continued*

ing. In every generation, the truths of existence are handed down and received by the greatest and the holiest. There is no need to bang up against the brick walls of the physical world, stretching and torturing the physical to its limits and beyond, for everything has already been *received*.

Beauty too, is not a process of pushing the edges of the envelope of ugliness.

"By His breath the Heavens are spread (*shifra*)" (Iyov 26:13).

G-d spreads aside the curtain of cloud to reveal that which is beyond. He disperses the clouds that conceal so we can see past the obstruction, past the surface. The word for spread, *shifra*, has the same root as *shafir* which means to beautify. In Jewish thought, beauty is seeing past the surface to the essence. That which is beautiful, by definition, is that which takes us beyond the clouds, to reveal the truth. Just as the Torah's truth is unchanging, so too is its beauty.

Similarly, the word for ugly and opaque in Hebrew are the same – *achur*. By definition something which conceals is ugly; it can never be next week's beauty.

FLIRTING WITH UGLINESS

Just as the Greek pursuit of beauty inevitably leads to ugliness, so too those who aspire to live their lives as the artists of this beauty will seek to ride the edge of the envelope of acceptable social behavior, partly because of nothing more sophisticated than lust and indulgence, partly because of something more subtle.

The indulgence of the artist in his personal life, comes from his own desire to push the "beauty barrier", to reach beyond the real world in an attempt to connect to those

same truths that he hopes his art will express.

In much the same way as art is always flirting with ugliness, so the artist is always flirting with a world of indulgence and illusion. He sees this freedom as an essential part of his art. He says he must be free and unconstrained to tune into the myriad possibilities of the cosmos from which he will pluck his artistic inspiration. To the Jew however, his freedom is slavery. Slavery to the

senses and their agenda. A slavery that limits the permutations of creation to the mind.

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

The Mishna in Avot (6:2) teaches that " 'The tablets were G-d's handiwork and the script was G-d's script, engraved (*charut*) on the tablets' Don't read the word as *charut*, read it as *cheirut* (freedom), because you can have no freer person than one who is involved in the learning of Torah."

Ostensibly, this idea is self-contradictory. The Torah is a set of laws which govern and constrain the actions of a person 24-hours a day, from birth till death. Shouldn't the Mishna more accurately have written that you can have no more *captive* a person than one who is involved in the learning of the Torah?

The answer is simple. There is no greater prisoner than he who lives in a world of illusion, for his is a

world from which there is no escape. You cannot escape from something that doesn't exist. Something that doesn't exist has no exit.

The Torah is the truth. The truth obliges. Nothing is more compelling than the truth. The truth compels you to act a certain way. The truth restricts.

But the truth is also the only real freedom.

LEARNING
TO LIGHT

we have burned
the midnight oil
for You
our minds
twisting and turning
through corridors
of logic
long-since abandoned
by their workers.

and like gold miners
with blackened egos
we emerged from the pits
clasping to our breasts
the whitest dove,
the love of Your Word.

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