

Eretz Yisroel: The Prism of God

Eretz Yisroel is undeniably beautiful, yet its beauty is difficult to pinpoint. It has mountains, valleys, beautiful beaches, bodies of water, and a sun-dried desert; but what makes it uniquely beautiful remains a mystery. The Swiss Alps, the Great Barrier Reef, and the Amazon Jungle all possess beauty that rivals that of tiny Eretz Yisroel, but when compared aesthetically to other notable places, somehow Eretz Yisroel stands apart. What is the secret to the unmatched beauty of Eretz Yisroel?

The secret of Eretz Yisroel's beauty is encrypted in the name "Tzion," one of the monikers used by the Prophets to describe it. The numerical value of "Tzion" is 156, which is the same numerical value as "Yosef." Numerical value, or "gematria," is a classic form of "remez," and hints to a commonality between words whose letter value amount to the same total. The implication of "Tzion" equaling "Yosef" is that they are similar in some way, and the parallel is for us to decipher. Because Yosef is described as beautiful, perhaps a deeper look into his beauty will help us pinpoint what is uniquely beautiful about Eretz Yisroel.

A vivid description of Yosef's beauty is found in the context of Potiphar's wife's attempt to seduce him,¹ and the subsequent false accusation that she leveled against him. But she isn't the only one who appreciated Yosef's appearance; Yaakov also praised his son for his looks and charm.² That Yosef's appearance garnered praise from both Potiphar's vain wife and his holy father underscores the complexity and duality



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of his beauty. What emerges is that beauty was both a challenge and an asset for Yosef, and that it could either cause his downfall or be employed in his service of Hashem.

The ambivalence of Yosef's external beauty accentuates two distinct attitudes toward beauty in general. External attractiveness is often used as a means for the pursuit of vanity, and can serve as a distraction from the meaningful interior that lies within. A contrasting attitude, prevalent among the morally upright, sees external beauty as a prism that projects inner meaning through an attractive exterior. Those blessed with aesthetic beauty must choose to either utilize it to project their inner virtue or follow it to the abyss of materialistic narcissism.

For the sake of clarity, let us examine two types of beautiful paintings. Some artists are content with a beautiful color scheme and design, but beyond the colors and shapes there is little depth; it is attractive on the surface but empty beneath it. A truly talented artist, on the other hand, knows how to utilize the beauty of the colors and shapes to express profound wisdom and emotion; his art has both allure and substance. Beautiful art is superior to art that is not attractive because without attractiveness it is appreciated only by elite thinkers and

connoisseurs. Its message is wasted on the masses if beauty is not utilized as a tool of allure.

Yosef possessed external beauty, and to ensure that his beauty wouldn't lead him astray, Yaakov made Yosef's unique mission clear to him early in his development. The Torah relates that Yaakov had a special love for Yosef, because he imparted to Yosef the Torah that he learned at the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. Because of this love, Yaakov made Yosef an exquisitely beautiful coat, a "Technicolor Dreamcoat" if you will.³ Why did Yaakov reward his wisest son with something as vain as a garment? Yaakov's message to Yosef was that his external beauty is not to be eschewed, and certainly not to be used for vanity, but utilized to convey the qualities possessed within. To assist Yosef in projecting his inner self, Yaakov gave him a beautiful coat, highlighting the harmony of depth and allure.

The two contrasting approaches to beauty are on display during Yosef's encounter with Potiphar's wife. Potiphar's wife clearly saw Yosef's attractiveness as a vehicle for vanity, and if just for a moment, Yosef seemed to be unsure himself. She was not alone in her shallow worldview, and the Torah therefore warns of the materialism and immorality rampant

in the country of Egypt and beyond.⁴

To remind him again of the role that his beauty played in his life's mission, Yosef was shown his father's countenance. The Gemara says that the beautiful countenance of Yaakov is a portion of the beauty of Adam HaRishon,⁵ the man who embodied the ultimate "Image of Hashem." The "Image of Hashem" is expressed in a glowing countenance, because in one's face his soul shines forth.⁶ Yaakov's beauty was comparable to that of Adam HaRishon, because he too embodied the "Image of Hashem," inasmuch as his soul shone forth through his countenance. Yosef had a striking resemblance to his father, and when enticed by the wife of Potiphar, was shown the true value of beauty in the form of his father's shining face. This served as a vivid reminder that his beauty was not to be used for vanity, but for projecting his soul.

Let us now apply what we have learned about Yosef to the beauty of Eretz Yisroel. As mentioned above, the numerical value of Yosef is

identical to that of "Tzion," indicating that Yosef shares a commonality with Eretz Yisroel. Eretz Yisroel is beautiful and Yosef is beautiful, but what connects them is their ability to utilize beauty in order to express a depth and meaning way beyond external attractiveness.⁷

This understanding of Eretz Yisroel's beauty is alluded to in Sefer Tehillim (50:2): "From Tzion will emerge the perfect beauty, G-d appeared." The beauty of Eretz Yisroel is extolled not because of its surface attractiveness but because of its ability to act as a prism in projecting Hashem's presence — "G-d appeared." Eretz Yisroel is Hashem's home, and it is there that He is closest to us. Hashem gave it a special allure and charm to attract us to its endless depth.

There are many beautiful places in the world and some may even be externally more attractive than Eretz Yisroel, but what makes Eretz Yisroel so unique is that its beauty is truly a window that allows us a glimpse into a realm much deeper than hills

and valleys. There are the Swiss Alps and the Grand Canyon, but there is only one place in the world where breathtaking beauty connects a person to a Divine reality that permeates the landscape.

It is imperative that we take the time to appreciate Eretz Yisroel's beauty and search for the Divine presence that saturates its facade. The proper attitude toward external allure will help us shun the vanity of external beauty and appreciate the Godliness in all of us.

Notes

1. Breishis 39:6.
2. Breishis 49:22.
3. Breishis 37:3, Rashi and *Targum Unkolos* there. The idea that Yaakov taught Yosef the Torah of the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever is developed by R. Yaakov Kamenetsky in his *Emes L'Yaakov*.
4. Vayikra 18:3.
5. *Bava Metzia* 84a, see Rashi.
6. See MaHaRaL, *Gur Aryeh*, Breishis 37:2. See also Devarim 21:23 and Rashi there.
7. Perhaps this is why Yosef had a special affinity for Eretz Yisroel (see *Devarim Rabbah* 2:8).

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