

# THE PERFECTION OF BEAUTY

Torah Musing Psalm 50:2

מִצִּיּוֹן מִכְּלָל-יִפִּי אֱלֹהִים הוֹפִיעַ

**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined.**

**Rabbi Malchah**

Nissan 10, 5783 – April 1, 2023

**Beauty-** the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit: aesthetically pleasing.

There are many things and people that one may consider beautiful. Some people would say that the Somali model Iman, actor Haile Berry or the sight of an African bride adorned for her husband are quite beautiful. Still others may cast their vote for the majestic heights of Mount Kilimanjaro, the sweeping beauty of the Swiss Alps on a pristine winter day or the majesty of the many life forms and foliage of the Costa Rican rainforest. My personal list would include the celestial grandeur of a view of the Northern Lights, the grand showcase of wildlife as they cascade and scamper across the Serengeti plains and the imposing likeness of Pharaoh Khafra<sup>1</sup> standing majestically on the Giza plateau.

Our lists may differ but I suspect that none of us would have any difficulty compiling a list. I imagine that if we were to examine hundreds of “most beautiful list,” not many would include Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> It is not that this place is unattractive or even undesirable,<sup>3</sup> but it just would not make a top ten most beautiful list (neither would many other places). Israel is a harsh, and in some aspects an outwardly uninviting land. The Judean desert is bare and scorched and the Dead Sea coastline resembles an outlandish alien landscape. The topography of Israel is quite diverse and in biblical times, the hilly nature of the terrain made it a difficult place to conquer and live. In Israel rainfall was crucial for agricultural success and the many biblical verses that refer to the importance of **יורה** early rains **and מלקוש** late rains<sup>4</sup> reveal the importance of rainfall for living successfully on the land.

While most people would hardly consider Jerusalem beautiful, interestingly,

in the Tanak, Israel is called אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ “*a land flowing with milk and honey,*” at least twenty-four times.<sup>5</sup> To a pastoral people, this description would sound quite inviting. In good years Israel was indeed a land flowing with agricultural wealth but the persistent threat of drought prevented it from being a ubiquitous cornucopia terrain of fertility and abundance. Perhaps even more astounding is the description of Jerusalem as the “*perfection of beauty.*” Jerusalem, the holy city, is perfection? Perfection presumes that something cannot be improved and infers that there is absolutely nothing that one can add to, or subtract from it to refine or enhance it. Yes, one can consider many things as beautiful, however, *the perfection of beauty,* is quite another matter. Other than The Most Holy One, I can hardly imagine anything or anybody that is the “*perfection of beauty.*” Perfect? Show me what you consider to be the perfection of beauty and I and others will be quite able to highlight flaws or point out blemishes. With what eyes was Asaph, the psalmist, looking at Zion to feel inspired to designate it as “the perfection of beauty? ”

I grew up in a congregation in which the same phenomenon was operative. The members called headquarters “Zion.” It was once a thriving economic community and was basically a self-supporting community until the post-World War II years brought an economic downturn. As members moved north in search of employment many of the institutions and buildings began to decline. By the time the 1960s came, one could hardly call it a beautiful or physically desirable place. To the outward observer, the place seemed like a town that was lost or frozen in time. It was a deteriorating rural community stuck in the middle of a thriving and increasing prosperous semi-urban metropolis. Most assuredly, members saw the condition of the once thriving community but none-the-less they continued to call

it “Zion, the beautiful city of God” and “sweet Canaan land.” In my youth, I often wondered what they saw in the place other than it being the executive headquarters of the organization. Were they blind or just living in a fairy-tale, make-believe world? I did not see much that the eye would call beautiful, until one day, as I read Psalm 50, it occurred to me why it was indeed beautiful to behold.

## **Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined.**

What is operative here? Why does Asaph call Zion the perfection of beauty” and why is the headquarters considered” the beautiful city of God?” In both of these cases, I contend that the same phenomenon is operative; They were able to see beyond what the natural eye could behold. Of course, with the natural eye, they saw the condition of Jerusalem and the headquarters but when they regarded these places as the “perfection of beauty” and the “beautiful city of God, “they were looking not with the human eye but with eyes that only otherworldly sight can behold. The transcendent eye saw these places as they once were and then envision a time when they would regain the splendor of its former days and perhaps even surpass that grandeur. These groups are an example of a forward -thinking people. Their transcendent vision allowed them to envision what the human eye cannot. Transcendent vision has its intrinsic rewards.

I always admire people who are optimistic and upward looking. People who can see beyond what is to what can be, always possess the fortitude and spirit to bring their visions to fruition. They possess keen imaginations and in the envisioning thereby devise plans to bring their lofty dreams to fulfillment. For these people, Zion, Jerusalem, and headquarters never ceased to be “*the perfection*

*of beauty.*” I wonder what would happen if more of us were able to see with the transcendent eye? What would occur if we continued to see our spouses, as they were when we fell in love with them and not with the human eyes that perceives flaws, blemishes and faults? What would transpire if we ceased to see our people as merely ex-slaves and see ourselves as we were in our African homeland, at a time long before the incursion of the slave trade and European hegemony? What if we supposed ourselves as the royal peoplehood and individuals of high moral aptitude and as the pioneers that we are? Can we envision the epochs when we constructed the great pyramids; mapped the night skies; and traveled the great oceans long before Columbus? What became of the time when orphans, homelessness, and despondency were practically unknown in our communities? Can we remember the people, who with futuristic eyesight, said “If not in my time, then in my children’s time?” Suppose we did not regard our youth as lost, rebellious and wayward children, wearing pants around their backsides and sporting underwear as outerwear, but as the valiant freedom-fighters who once staged sit-ins and endured contempt and insult, all for the betterment of our people? I truly wonder what would occur if we could just for a moment forget about the rampant unemployment in South Africa but rather remember the brave and courageous children of the Soweto uprisings? Can we consider the men and women of the Loyal League and those who risked significant danger of imprisonment or death to establish and maintain the Underground Railroad? Can we begin to think about the Fruit of Islam who cleaned up drug -infested neighborhoods without the aid of the police or guns?

We are a people in need of vision correction and we need a pair of well-constructed transcendent-tinted eyeglasses. We can change our collective

astigmatism and we surely must change it because a people without vision perish.<sup>6</sup> Asaph, the psalmist and the congregation members of my youth instinctively possessed flawless vision but that is something I had to acquire. The “perfection of beauty” is an attainable goal and only our flawed vision and the cataracts covering our eye lenses prevent us from conceiving of and obtaining it. Open your eyes and behold the world through the transcendent prism of a people inclined towards the Holy and declare:

**Out of Zion, the Perfection of Beauty, God hath Shined.**

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שבת שלום מביתנו לביתך

**Shabbat Shalom From Our House to Your House**

**Rabbi Malchah**

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The identification with Khafra is not settled and is open to debate and dispute

<sup>2</sup> Israel would be on my list of most desirable places to visit because of its unique relationship with the three monotheistic religions.

<sup>3</sup> Israel is definitely not undesirable. One need only look at its ethereal connection to the three monotheistic religions and the pervasive wars and battles fought over Jerusalem throughout the annals of written history.

<sup>4</sup> The Early Rains and the Latter Rains- See Deuteronomy 11:13-14, Jeremiah 5:24, Joel 2:23, Hosea 6:3

<sup>5</sup> Examples- see Shemot (Exodus) 3:8, 3:17, 33:3, Devarim (Deuteronomy) 11: 13, 11:9, 26:9, Yermiyahu (Jeremiah 11:5, 32:22, Yehezkiel (Ezekiel) 20:6, 20:151

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 29: 18