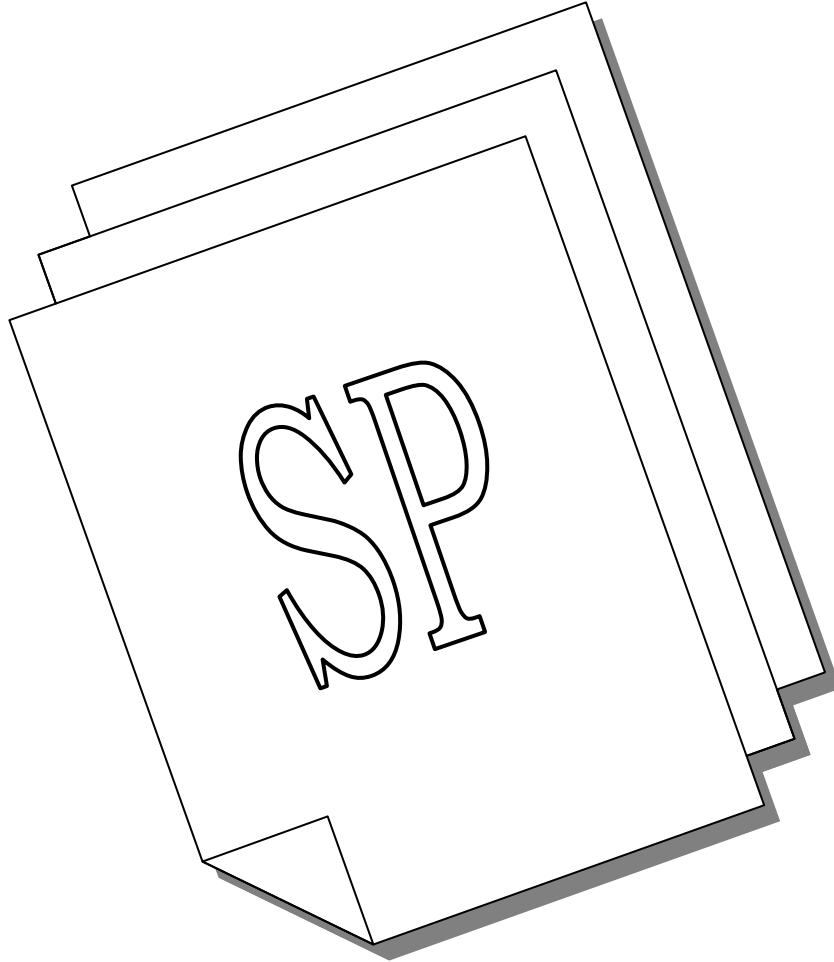


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Eve or Lillith? The View of Women's Physical Attractiveness in Jewish Sources: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

In Judaism, women's beauty is considered a positive value only when it is subordinated to a superior goal. The role of beauty is only functional but it is irrelevant and even dangerous if it becomes an experiential phenomenon by itself. What are the superior goals which women's beauty serves? Finding a mate, establishing a family, and keeping its continuity by childbearing as well as pleasuring her husband. Women's beauty is perceived as a desired phenomenon if it serves these important goals. Yet, if there is any potential threat for the patriarchic social order and male hegemony, it is considered as promiscuous and sinful. The paper argues that the Jewish view of women's beauty is ambivalent: on one hand, a woman should be attractive for her husband, but on the other, her beauty is threatening and forbidden as potentially disastrous to the Jewish family and undermining the traditional patriarchal structure of the Jewish community.

Introduction

It is quite ominous that, over the ages, Judaism made no attempt to develop principles of aesthetic thought or define an attitude toward beauty. If we conduct a comprehensive review of Jewish sources including the Bible, the Mishna and Talmud, Jewish philosophy texts of the middle ages and modern times, we will find no systematic reasoning related to the idea of beauty or the pleasure it embodies, despite their frequent occurrence in man's natural world (Firon, 2003).

This paper examines beauty perceptions in Judaism as reflected in the traditional Jewish sources. In Jewish view, beauty is ostensibly marginal to the central purposes.. In this paper we focus on both primary and secondary sources. A review of the various sources reveals Judaism's dual attitude to beauty: on one hand, beauty is the revelation of what is good, godly and eternal. On the other, beauty represents what is threatening, seductive and forbidden. Although the passage from Proverbs 31:30, *Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting*, ostensibly views beauty in a negative light, a review of Jewish sources indicates that beauty assumes a crucial and focal role in the Jewish worldview. Feminine beauty is perceived as a value unto itself in Judaism,

however, only when it represents the divine essence, or is a means to attain godliness. Alongside the natural admiration that is evoked by beauty as part of the divine creation, it also evokes some concern for its potential to captivate man's attention and pervert man's conduct.

Safrai (1998) contends that Jewish law functions as a social structure for a community, and therefore, is also an agent of social control. According to her point of view, a woman's body, its beauty and presentation, functions as a statement and a conduit for a direct social control. Therefore we will attempt to interpret this statement and its implications, by confronting Jewish sources regarding women's attractiveness with a modern feminist awareness and criticism.

In the first part of this paper we will review the feminist literature regarding the issue of women's beauty. The second part is divided into two sections. First we will present sources in which women's beauty is considered positive and essential. By using these citations we will attempt to prove our argument, which holds that women's beauty is considered good as long as it serves the reproduction of the patriarchic family nucleus and the male hegemony of Jewish community. In the second section we will pose arguments about demonization of women's beauty and abuse of beauty as a means to exclude women from the public sphere. Citations in each section will be presented by their chronological order.

A feminist perspective on women's beauty

Women's beauty standards and beautification has been a subject of many feminist critics over the past decades (Friedan, 1963; A Redstocking Sister, 1971; Banner, 1983; Brownmiller, 1984; Freedman, 1985; Steele, 1985). According to Tolmach, Lakoff and Scherr (1984) beauty is a source of social power for women, but paradoxically over time they become dependent upon it: "Women in particular are controlled by the tyranny of looks, by the threat of having approval, and with it power, withheld" (Ibid.: 20). Naomi Wolf (1991), a leading theorist in the feminist discourse around this topic, argues that to be accepted in the world of the liberated and independent "new woman," one had to meet rigid new standards of slimness, beauty, and fashion. According to Wolf (1991), ideology of female beauty keeps women down; this ideology is expressed in a generalized atmosphere rather than an organized conspiracy (Ibid.: 3), "The rites of beauty counter women's new freedom by combating women's entry into the secular public world with medieval superstition, keeping power inequalities safer than they might otherwise be [...] the rites are archaic and primitive so that part of the core of female consciousness can be kept archaic and primitive " (Ibid.: 86-87). The beauty myth which includes the slimness ideal is a major instrument to reproduce the masculine dominance; the beauty myth gives women hierarchical value by applying the cultural ethos regarding women's outward appearance. Wolf's insights and interpretations (1991) have an important contribution to the feminist discourse and supported the argument that women's beauty standards promote sexual objectification of women.

Women's beauty and sexual objectification

Craig (1998) reviews the development of the feminist thought regarding beauty and beautification of women. He argues that as the women's movement evolved in the 1960s and 70s, three major political branches emerged: the radical, socialist-feminist and liberal feminist. The philosophical and political differences between the three groups are amply illustrated by how they each saw the issue of women's beauty and

sexual objectification. For the radicals, the social pressures on women to be "beautiful" were an example of a patriarchal society's treatment of women as chattel -- property to be displayed and exploited. The socialist feminists added the criticism that the promotion and sale of cosmetics and fashionable clothing to women was a divisive class-based capitalist strategy to sell more consumer goods. Liberal feminists also crusaded against many aspects of sexual objectification, but their approach tended to be more pragmatic than philosophical. One area of concern to them was mediated images of women, especially images of women in advertising.

As early as 1963, Betty Friedan, one of liberal feminism's most popular spokespersons, blasted the advertising industry in her international best seller, *The Feminine Mystique*, for perpetuating and exploiting the oppression of women through the use of negative advertising stereotypes. One of Friedan's major criticisms was that advertisers consciously manipulate their portrayals of women to insure they continue to serve as good consumers of the thousands of products and services sold by the food, drug, and fashion industries. But it was the radical feminist intellectuals who gave the arguments against advertisers a solid base in feminist theory. In 1971, an anonymous member of the radical feminist group, the The Redstockings, explained it this way:

The real evil of the media image of women is that it supports the sexist status quo. In a sense, fashion, cosmetics, and "feminine hygiene" ads are aimed more at men than at women. They encourage men to expect women to sport all the latest trappings of sexual slavery—expectations women must then fulfill if they are to survive. . . . For women, buying and wearing clothes and beauty aids is not so much consumption as work. One of a woman's jobs in this society is to be an attractive sexual object, and clothes and make-up are tools of the trade. (A Redstocking Sister, 1971: 483).

However, notions of femininity and beauty and their interdependence with the fashion and cosmetics industries have been very deeply ingrained in American life (Craig, 1998). While some women began to reject beauty products, many others did not. The "beauty dilemma" fostered confusion and even divisiveness, especially among liberal feminists. Feminist pioneer Susan Brownmiller (1984) noted that more women supported the Equal Rights Amendment and legal abortion than could walk out of the house without eye shadow. The fundamental reason many women were unwilling to give up fashion and cosmetics was that they had been saturated since childhood with patriarchal society's emphasis on beauty. Women believed that they had to at least make an attempt to be conventionally beautiful or they would be branded unfeminine and undesirable. Women had been told over and over by the beauty industry that their products were the way to achieve the conventional standards of femininity that insured social acceptance (Craig, 1998).

As the women's movement matured into the 1980's, the beauty dilemma persisted in the minds of some (Craig, 1998). The beauty industry made attempts to redefine and co-opt feminism to its own benefit. A number of "feminist" books on beauty have been published, such as Lois Banner's *American Beauty* (1983), Rita Freedman's *Beauty Bound* (1986), and Valerie Steele's *Fashion and Eroticism* (1985). Although each author offered her own interpretation of the beauty dilemma, they all agreed that women's reliance on fashion and cosmetics is not the product of sexual objectification

produced by a patriarchal society as the radical feminists suggested, but should rather be seen as a form of women's empowerment.

The decade of the 90's has seen renewed interest in the beauty dilemma, initiated in part by Naomi Wolf's best selling *The Beauty Myth* (1991). The book presents a thorough discussion about the "beauty dilemma" -- whether or not women should buy and use fashion and beauty products. Not only does the issue of sexual objectification remain, but pressures on women to become more "beautiful" have led many to courses of actions that can create severe and irreversible health problems (e.g. cosmetic surgeries and other body modification practices).

With this feminist perspective on women's beauty in mind, we shall now examine what is the Jewish view of this matter.

Analysis of Biblical and Talmudic sources

An attractive home, an attractive woman and attractive utensils cause a man pleasure" (Berakhot 57b).

A beautiful wife is a joy to her husband; the number of his days shall be double" (Babylonian Talmud, Yebamoth 63b).

Happy the man whose wife is beautiful; the number of his days is doubled" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 100b).

The words "it was good" that conclude each portion of creation (Genesis 1) are often interpreted as "it was beautiful" because beauty and good are synonyms in the Bible (i.e., Genesis 9:27) The mothers of the Jewish nation, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, are described as beautiful and of comely appearance.

Once Sarah and Rebecca are taken to the palace of the king, Avimelech, who desires them for their beauty, but special divine intervention prevents him from sinning. These descriptions are the first to indicate that when beauty becomes a goal, when attention to external appearances becomes an objective rather than a means, beauty has the potential to sow the seeds of sin.

Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting – but only when they function as man's exclusive goal, and assume value in themselves; but "*a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised*" for her charm and beauty, which when anchored in the fear of G-d, they acquire their correct relative value and place in the system. That was the interpretation of the Gaon from Vilna. Therefore, the Torah also notes Sarah's beauty (Genesis 12:11, 14), Rachel's beauty (Genesis 29:17), and the exclusive beauty of Zion (Yoma 54:2) which is "*the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth*" (Lamentations 2:15).

Our Sages followed the Bible and extended the acclaim for beauty in the Oral Law. We find the dialectic attitude to beauty in the different attitudes of the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. "*Three things increase a man's self-esteem: a beautiful dwelling, a beautiful wife, and beautiful clothes*" (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 57:2). Some including the Maharasha (Samuel Eliezer ben Judah Levi Edels), interpreted this as having a negative meaning, while Rabbi Kook interpreted it in a positive light. Beauty facilitates the expansion of knowledge, but woe is the individual whose mind is besotted by beauty. Objective beauty associated with

physical harmony, such as the beauty of the Mothers (see the story of Abraham and Sarah's reflection in the river as a setting sun, (Midrash Tanhuma, Berashit, Lech Leha), of Job's daughters ("*Though they were not doubled in number, they were doubled in beauty,*" Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra, 16b), of Rachel, Abigail, and others.

Safeguarding woman's beauty is important, Rabbi Hiyya argues in the Gemara (Babylonian Talmud, Kethuboth 59:2). Although a woman's work is granted to her husband in exchange for her livelihood, there are some domestic tasks such as grinding, baking and laundering that women are not obligated to perform because they destroy their beauty. For this reason, the Mishna (Ibid.: 61:2) relieves women from working with linen, because it requires to endlessly place the linen threads in her mouth to moisten them with her saliva, and "*Nor may he compel her to work in flax because flax causes one's mouth to be sore and makes one's lips stiff.*" Rabbi Hiyya, who said that "*A wife [should be taken] mainly for the sake of her beauty*" and also "*A wife is mainly for the wearing of a woman's finery,*" did not intend to disparage women's intellectual skills or mental attributes. Rather, he intended to use these expressions to describe woman's general image, to remind the husband of her unique nature and the need to take her unique nature into consideration and limit his demands of her, especially those which are detrimental to her special needs and wants. In contrast to the linen task, women were not exempt from other difficult chores, such as a daily kneading of a large quantity of dough for baking bread for the family; kneading thick dough requires a lot of effort and causes pain in the hands and the back. Similarly, women had to go far from their home to the local water well and carry two full and heavy buckets of water back home. Although these chores demand a lot of physical effort and strength, they did not damage their facial attractiveness, therefore were not discarded from their daily chores routine.

Many sources attest to the attitude of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud to beauty. Here we focused on the comprehensive studies by Hershberg (1911, 1912), who explored beauty and beautification of women in the Talmud era, and early Hebrew dress. Women's beauty and means of beautification through manners of bathing, anointment, dress, and ornamentation were a topic of great interest for the Mishna and Talmud sages because their hearts were widely open to the sensations of beauty of creation in general, and in individuals in particular. They were also inspired by the unique nature of woman as one of the means for man's pleasure in G-d's world and an enhancement of family life based on holy purity (Hershberg, 1911).

However, the Sages extensively acclaimed and augmented the value of a woman's beauty, by saying that woman was created to embody the beauty of the world; projecting beauty is woman's mission in life (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 31a).

The Sages also interpreted the biblical names of women on the basis of their beauty, including Isca who would be kept safe by her beauty (Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 14a), and Ziporra (the root of the name meaning - Look and see [how beautiful]). Among the marks of a woman's beauty, Rabbi Yishmael son of Rabbi Yossi notes a nice head, nice hair, nice eyes, nice ears, and other features (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 66b). Marks of a woman's beauty were white skin and tall stature (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 9, 10). Of a woman's eyes it was said that if a bride's eyes are beautiful, her body needs no examination (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 24a).

A woman's chief mission is to give birth to sons, which traditionally is the most honorable and supreme goal for all families in Israel (Hershberg, 1912). Therefore,

women should apply all the means that advance them in this goal in life, and especially to endear themselves to their husbands.

Ornamentation underscores beauty and adds grace. What counts as ornamentation, according to the Sages, are black liners around the eyes, rouge on the cheeks, and a fair hairstyle (Rashi, Ketuboth 107b). Perfumes were designed not merely as scents but also as “adornment” (Tosafot, Ibid.: 66b) and were designed to enhance women’s body and skin. Dyeing the hair was also considered ornamentation. However, other sources said that what counts as “jewelry” is subjective, and includes anything that women yearn (Babylonian Talmud, Ketuboth 65a) because jewelry can express a woman’s personality and her attributes. For example, the famous story of Rabbi Akiva who despite being poor prepared an engraving of Jerusalem as adornment for his wife, commensurate with her devotion to him (she had sold her hair to enable Rabbi Akiva to study Torah).

A review of the sources indicates that women employed various methods to look beautiful: they anointed and moisturized themselves, adorned themselves, bathed, applied eye liner, make-up and perfume, they curled their hair, covered and placed ornaments in their hair, and used decorations and jewelry on clothes and shoes.

A famous debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai concerns the accepted causes for divorce: “even if he found one nicer than [his wife]” (Mishna Gittin 9:10 and parallels). The ruling of Hillel became the accepted Halakha: any trivial reason could be a cause for divorce, including a woman's physical condition and her looks (Safrai, 1998). A related issue is whether a menstruating woman should use make up and cosmetics. In Rabbinic tradition it was held that during their periods women should refrain from using makeup, which might cause a physical attraction between husband and wife. But R. Akiva asserted that her plain looks might cause hatred... and he might want to divorce her, [therefore, she should not refrain from make up]" (Sifra Metzora, ch. Zavim, 5, see also Shabbat 64b).

The following accounts reflect strong emotional reactions expressed by early Sages to women’s beauty. Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel, standing on the upper level of the Temple, looked down and saw a very attractive non-Jewish woman. He blessed her by saying, “*How manifold are Thy works, O LORD*” (Psalms 104:24). Rabbi Akiva cried over the beauty of wife of the wicked Tyranus Rufus and (“*he spat, then laughed, and then wept*”) Babylonian Talmud, Abodah Zara 20a).

Both the early and later Sages attributed a high value to woman’s beauty within her family life. They often cite the adage by Ben Sira, (“*A beautiful wife is a joy to her husband; the number of his days shall be double*” Babylonian Talmud, Yebamoth 63b; “*Happy the man whose wife is beautiful; the number of his days is doubled*” Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 100b). The seven virtues of the Zadik included a wife who is more attractive than his friend’s wife (Rabbi Nathans’ Letters 37).

There are no legal regulations which control women's behavior regarding beautification; rather, the control seems to be placed in the hands of the husband. He has the right to comply with or to reject his wife's wishes and direct her behavior. His wishes and preferences take precedence over her religious devotion (Safrai, 1998). Theoretically, and practically, a husband is allowed to require his wife to apply certain means of beautification, in spite of her reluctance that might stem from her religious values and orientation. Her personal choices and preferences are inferior, his

sexual needs and desires are superior. *"The womb is a tomb" (Ohalot 7:4) or: "All the honor of the king's daughter is within" (Psalm 45:14)*

Early in the story of *Bri'at Ha'olam* (Creation), the beauty of the daughters of Adam is described as an obstacle and an antecedent to the flood (*"the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives, whomsoever they chose,"* Genesis 6:2). The negative, seductive aspects of beauty are also reflected in the Book of Samuel, in the description of David's adulterous conduct with Bathsheva (*"the woman was very beautiful to look upon,"* Sam II 11:2). The book further recounts the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon, who falls in love with her outer beauty (Sam II 13:1). In contrary to the clear acclamation of physical beauty in Song of Songs, the Book of Proverbs, with its moralistic orientation, leads a line of disdain and scorn for beauty, especially when beauty is not accompanied by a corresponding internal essence (Proverbs 31:30. *"As a ring of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman that turneth aside from discretion,"* Ibid: 11:22), yet applauds inner virtues: (*"but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised,"* Proverbs 31:30).

The following Gemara story (Ta'anit 7a) illustrates the relationship between individual beauty (or the lack thereof) and personality and character, and especially the great dangers that beauty poses for individuals whose appearance is attractive. Beauty can lead to a focus on external appearances, and may captivate the total attention of both the individual and others:

The daughter of a Roman emperor once said to the wise man, Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hannanya, who apparently came to court as the emperor's advisor: "Wow, how is there such a beauty in such an ugly vessel [body]?" He replied: "Even your father keeps his finest wines in simply, ugly jugs". She was surprised and asked how else he could keep his wines. Rabbi Yehoshua said: "You are important and rich people, place the wine in gold and silver vessels." She proposed the idea to her father, who accepted it. The wine, however, soon became spoiled. The emperor angrily asked his daughter: "Whose idea was this?" and she replied: "Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hannaya's." He called Rabbi Yehoshua and asked him why he would give such advice. Rabbi Yehoshua replied: "I replied to her in the form of a parable because she teased me." The emperor who understood the moral of the parable asked Rabbi Yehoshua: "Aren't there people who are both smart and beautiful?" Rabbi Yehoshua replied, "There are such people, but if they were ugly, they would be even smarter." (*authors' paraphrase*)

Eve or Lilith

Jewish tradition acknowledges the myth of woman as Eve, embodying the power of life, or as Lilith, the personification of a destructive, captivating seductress who defiles life. "The traditional family woman became taken for granted...no longer was she an erotic objective, but rather a woman of the home, responsible for sustaining the family and its continuity...In contrast, Lilith is described as a beautiful, powerfully loved woman, who arouses irresistible passion..." (Abarbanel, 1994). The Eve-Lilith contrast illustrates the contradictions in the Jewish attitude toward beauty – on one hand as pure and divine, but on the other threatening and superficial. Na'ama, Zilla's daughter, is noted in the Book of Zohar, in a similar fashion (*"Why was she called Na'ama, which means "pleasurable" in Hebrew? Because she accompanied idolatry by pleasantly playing on a tambourine..."* Bereshit Rabba 23:4), and was described as stoking the fires of passion and giving birth to demons (Mishna Zohar 1: 363).

Yet, the attitude of the later Talmud Sages to beauty changes, especially the attitude of the Babylonian Sages to female beauty. They said that men should not state how beautiful a non-Jewish woman is (especially the Babylonian Sages, Abodah Zara 20a) and they demanded to maintain the commandment “*shalt keep thee from every evil thing*” (Deuteronomy 23:10) - to avoid looking at wives of other men, at attractive women, even if they are unmarried, and even at ugly women. This prohibition became so strongly entrenched in their sensibility that when Rabbi Yossi saw that one man was attracted to his daughter, he admonished his daughter, saying, My daughter, don't be an obstacle for others (Ta'anit 24a). It is evident that this prohibition also became deeply ingrained in women's conduct, from the prayer style of virgins (“*for R. Johanan heard a maiden fall upon her face and exclaim, 'Lord of the Universe! Thou hast created Paradise and Gehenom; Thou hast created righteous and wicked. May it be Thy will that men should not stumble through me'*” Babylonian Talmud, Sota 22a).

Women's hair underscores her beauty and brings about the association with her intimate parts, and this is the reason why married women are required to cover their hair. Adler (1998) suggests that the analogy that Rav Sheshet makes between women's hair and a herd of goats that go down the mountain is an attempt to prove that a woman's hair is like nakedness. Rav Sheshet cites Song of Songs:

*"You are beautiful my wife
 You are beautiful
 Your eyes are pigeons through your braid
 Your hair is like a herd of goats
 That rode down the Gil'ad Mountain"*

We find a strong contradiction between the views of the early Sages and the later Sages regarding beauty. The early Sages (Rishonim), and especially those in the Land of Israel, stayed close to nature and to the simple, healthy life of a nation working its own land. By contrast, later Sages (Aharonim) in general, and the Babylonian Sages in particular, had been uprooted from such a life and lived in exile. The Rishonim addressed the beauty of creation in itself, while the Aharonim addressed man's urges. The early Sages viewed beauty merely as one of the laws of creation established by nature and were careful to avoid being attracted by physical beauty that was valorized by the Greek culture over generations. A Jewish Sage who saw a beautiful non-Jewish woman expressed a blessing at her Creator, and was not expressing wonder at the beauty of the individual person – in his eyes, even the donkey, the camel and the horse were attractive, and he blessed G-d for having attractive creatures in his world.

Representing the other view was the Sage who cried over the body bearing this beauty. For this reason Rabbi Shimon Ben Yehuda quoted Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai as saying that adornment is good for Zaddikim and good for the world (Babylonian Talmud, Abot 8), meaning beauty is good for righteous people who view it objectively without involving their emotions and urges.

More recently we find an account of attractive Jewish women who followed their lovers and joined other nations. These references express strong dismay at the unlimited sensuality and pursuit of emotions and mourn the honor that the daughters of Israel lost because of their beauty, which led them to betray their nation and marry non-Jews to whom they were attracted.

Women's beauty has negative repercussions for both men and women. Not only does women's beauty promote sexual license and national betrayal on their part, it also

constitutes an enormous source of temptation for men to commit adultery and thereby is a threat to family integrity.

Beauty also has a strong behavioral effect and a potential to cause impulsive, uncontrolled conduct, due to its tendency to evoke total fascination. Beauty can stimulate a whirlpool of senses, passions and irresistible urges. Admittedly, ancient Judaic tradition contains no comprehensive texts dedicated to the subject of beauty. Yet, the demonization of beautiful women such as Lillith or Na'ama reflects a negative attitude toward women's beauty in cases when it does serve the purpose of traditional family life or when women disobey the masculine dominance or challenge the traditional structure of the community.

Summary and discussion

This paper focuses on the view of women's beauty and external appearance in the Jewish sources. The findings of the study point to diverse sources from the Bible, the Babylonian Talmud and Jerusalem Talmud which contain references and ambivalent attitudes towards beauty and external appearances. On one hand, beauty's great contribution to the Jewish family and community and to faith in G-d and, on the other, a great concern that beauty and external appearances lead to manifestations of evil and promiscuity. In many such narratives, there is a clear tendency to treat beauty as the end rather than the means in and by itself.

Although Judaism refrains from defining norms or boundaries for human beauty, it does not reject beauty as an admirable feature that merits cultivation. However, in Judaism, beauty must be subordinated to one single purpose. Beauty has an exclusive function in which all its import lies. To be both desirable and significant, beauty must serve the higher purpose of goodness, effectiveness and sanctity – but beauty is irrelevant and even may be dangerous when it is an experiential phenomenon in its own right.

Elior (2001) claims that the Jewish religion is characterized by a masculine point of view. She points to the prevalent dichotomy between women as agents of the materialistic sphere of life (*gashmiut*), while men are in charge of the spirituality of the Jewish family and community. We believe that since *gashmiut* has been traditionally the part of the women's life in the Jewish community, their physical appearance has been a subject of control and regulation by the community leaders (all of them men). Women's appearance is given additional implications that have 'added value' beyond the mere visual impression.

Following Elior (2001), we argue that reading Jewish sources regarding women's beauty not only shapes gender relationships and reproduces masculine superiority but even serves as an additional means to keep feminine inferiority. Women receive ambivalent messages from their leaders: you are supposed to be attractive to your husband, but at the same time, if you are 'too' beautiful you will be charged with seduction and promiscuity. This dual message causes women to experience a great daily dilemma which in some cases leads them to psychological fixation and stagnation. This stagnation, in turn, weakens their negotiating power over the central issues of power allocation and status in the community they live in.

Hartman-Halbertal (2003) criticizes the social control of women's appearance. She claims that the burden of keeping the modesty of the Jewish community and regulating male sexuality is in the exclusive responsibility of women. As a result, instead of encouraging men to take responsibility over their own sexual desires,

Jewish leaders teach them to ascribe their sexuality to "inherent and cureless weakness, and to require the women to give them salvation and cure".

We would like to make a further step beyond criticizing modesty regulations, and to suggest that the concept of women's physical attractiveness per se is interpreted and communicated by the spiritual leaders of Jewish communities (all of them male, of course) in a biased and imbalanced manner. The view of women's beauty is delivered to the public of believers through the *k'tuvim* (written sources); this uni-directional communication channel contains a process of defining and redefining, constructing and reconstructing, producing and reproducing the power balance between the sexes.

In conclusion, the Jewish view of female beauty is not coherent and unequivocal; rather it is used and abused as a tool of social control over women's consciousness in order to maintain the male hegemony in the family and community life across the long history of the Jewish people.

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