The Morality of Esthetics

And from the ground the L-rd G-d caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad. (Bereishit 2:9)

In a subtle analysis, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch points out that the trees in Gan Eden are described first and foremost as “pleasing to the sight” – they are beautiful, esthetically pleasing, and only afterward are they “good for food” – providing fruits and the need for nourishment. “Here, in this verse, the perception of beauty was justified and sanctified,” he writes. “As far as we know, man is the only creature endowed with the capacity for deriving pleasure from beauty. This is how man’s superior level was revealed:”

The Torah lauds beauty before functionality, and it seems that only human beings notice beauty and enjoy its pleasure. The conclusion: this must be part of the uniqueness of man. When looking at a tree, before we see lunch, we stare in amazement. Wow! How beautiful is this tree!

“The beautiful forms found in Creation and the ability of humans to sense and enjoy them prevent man from deteriorating to the level of animals.”

Indeed, someone who tramples a flower bed without any appreciation for the delicate and the beautiful, is like a beast. This perception, this recognition of beauty and the wish to protect it, protects us from arrogance and haughtiness.

But Rav Hirsch doesn’t stop there. He continues to develop this idea in a way that is quite baffling: “This proves the importance of beauty to man’s moral obligation. The joy in the beauty of nature and plants will bring us to rejoice in moral beauty as well. In a society which does not show compassion toward beauty, man will grow wild."

If we ascribe importance to beauty, will this advance us morally? How does this work? I find it difficult to avoid mentioning the historical irony: Rav Hirsch lived in Germany (1808–1888). That country, which excelled in valuing and cultivating the culture of esthetics – art, poetry, music – did not turn out to be an example of moral excellence. The words of Natan Alterman’s poem “From All of the Nations” echo in my mind:

With the greatest concern for the sculptures and art / Lest those treasures be bombed in a raid. / But the heads of infants, precious treasures thou-art, / onto walls and roads crushed and sprayed.

Nevertheless, even if this idea did not stand the test of history, what was Rav Hirsch trying to say? What was the meaning of esthetics in his worldview and what could his understanding contribute to our value system?

It seems that Rav Hirsch’s ideas grow out of the classical philosophical belief that beauty stems from order and concord between elements. Harmony, proportion and structure are what create the esthetic experience. This incredible harmony of mathematical composition is found in all of Creation and therefore the entire world, made by G-d, is beautiful.

The French scientist and philosopher Henri Poincaré wrote: “The scientist does not study nature because it is useful to do so. He studies it because he takes pleasure in it, and he takes pleasure in it because it is beautiful... meaning, the more intimate beauty which comes from the harmonious order of its parts, and which pure intelligence can grasp.”

Esthetic, physical beauty and moral or spiritual beauty are two different spheres. But the pursuit of order, proportion and harmony characterize both. Perhaps this is how we can understand Rav Hirsch’s conclusion: “Man’s joy of esthetic harmony is similar to his joy in moral harmony; indeed, there is no ‘evil,’ but brokenness and devastation – moral harmony which has been disabled.”

If we train ourselves to notice and be amazed by the harmony of the world, our inclination will be to respect and seek harmony in all our conduct. Perhaps the lesson from the failure of this idea in Germany is that loving and glorifying harmony is not enough; it must be mitigated by yirat shamayim. In the words of Maimonides:

“When one reflects on His wonderful creatures and will understand through them His wonderful, unparalleled and infinite wisdom, he will spontaneously be filled with love, praise and exaltation... then he will be taken aback in a moment, and, stricken with awe, realize that he is an infinitesimal creature, humble... standing with an insignificant knowledge in the presence of the All-Wise” (Hilchot Yesodei haTorah 2:2).

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