

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
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*Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue; Is it good for the Jews?*

I suspect that there is no other rabbi in America who has discussed it from the pulpit ... but that won't stop me! Jews across America have been talking about it, so why shouldn't I? And if I'm going to do it, it has to be this week, and it has to be right now. So here goes: a rabbi's perspective on *Sports Illustrated's Swimsuit Issue*!

If I'm going to talk about it, it has to be this Shabbos because *Sports Illustrated's* annual Swimsuit Issue always comes out in February. By March, it's already forgotten! And if I'm going to talk about it, it has to be right now because in a little while more than a hundred teenagers from across the country who are participating in our annual Weiner Tournament are going to be joining us for the conclusion of services. I really don't want them to go back home and tell their parents: the rabbi at Beth Tfiloh spoke about the Swimsuit Issue ... let's get rid of the rabbi we have who only talks about the Torah!

No, under normal circumstances I would not be talking about the Swimsuit Issue, but this year's issue was different. This year the issue had on its cover – wearing a very, very skimpy swimsuit – a young woman named Bar Refaeli, who happens to be an Israeli. And the swimsuit she is wearing *is* very, very, very skimpy. Let me show you! (Hold up magazine.) As you can see, I've put a little “dress” on Ms. Refaeli because I didn't think it was appropriate to show all of her in shul ... and besides, I don't know about her mother, but my mother never would have let her wear such a swimsuit at the beach, saying that she would “catch a cold” wearing it! But Jews across America – and many non-Jews as well – took note of the fact that not only was the cover girl of what has become an American icon – the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* – an Israeli, but there are ten pages of her in the issue itself, and to top it all off, the issue features another bikini clad Israeli named Esti Ginzburg.

And so, we are left with the age-old question that even *Newsweek Magazine* asked: Is this good for the Jews? Now I know the obvious answer ... the answer of generations of our people is put into a simple word which is not even a word: *Feh!* This is the way a Jewish girl walks around? So much of Jewish tradition is based on *tsniut* – modesty – in dress and decorum. I know that, and it's true, ours is not a people that saw any holiness in beauty. Rather, we saw beauty in holiness.

This is seen so clearly in today's Torah portion where we have a description of the Mishkan – the Tabernacle that was build for the Jewish people as a forerunner for the Temple built in Jerusalem. To this day, every synagogue has aspects to it to help us remember that Tabernacle and Temple as reflected in all of our prayers being directed to the *Aron Kodesh* – the Holy Ark – which reminds us of the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

That Holy of Holies was set aside, was set apart, by a *parochet* – a curtain. And indeed to this day, a *parochet* is found in most every Ark that I know of, for behind it are the *Sifrei Torah* – the holiest object in the Jewish faith. Notice that every single one of these Sifrei Torah has a cover on it. Technically, I suppose that we could have Torah scrolls in the ark that do not have covers on them, but I am sure that every Torah scroll is displayed with a cover. And you know why? Because a Torah scroll is holy. If you want something to be holy, you cover it up. Leaving it exposed is disrespectful because it takes away the mystery and the importance of an object. That is why we dress the Torah with a special cover and that is why you put it in the ark, and that is why we put a curtain as a cover over the ark. The Sifrei Torah are covered three ways: by a cover, by the ark and by the curtain over the ark ... because it is holy ... very holy. And yet, not as holy as a human being.

Somehow Bar Refaeli and so many others have forgotten that message. They have forgotten what the biblical term for sexual immorality is. You know what it is? It is “giluy arayot” which literally means “uncovering nakedness.” That’s a strange expression. I think that what it tells us is that not only are rape and incest forbidden, but the law uncovering of the nakedness of another human being for immoral purposes is forbidden. So great is the reverence of the human body that to uncover it for no moral purpose is considered a sin; more than a sin, it is considered THE sin ... one of THE three – together with idolatry and murder – that a human being would sooner die than commit.

We have come a long way from that kind of thinking. The swimwear of Bar Refaeli and Esti Ginzburg, as well as the dress of many of our own teenagers, was traditionally described in the Yiddish word: *prust* – vulgar, ill-mannered. It’s just not nice, it’s *prust* ... there’s no getting around that.

And yet, I think of the words of the great sage, the Maharal, who wrote: “If the thing is impure it is impossible that it will not have some purity within it. Likewise if the thing is pure it is impossible that it will not have within it some impurity.” The Maharal is telling us that nothing is 100% pure or 100% impure ... that even in all black, there is a little white. Is there something good to be found in having two Israeli women featured in Sports Illustrated’s Swimsuit Issue? I think there is! Their presence there does serve a purpose – a positive purpose: it breaks stereotypes.

The fact of the matter is, Judaism took note of and spoke highly of the beauty of women. The Midrash tells us that our matriarch, Sarah, was so beautiful that everyone used to gaze at her. Our matriarch, Rebecca, is described in the Bible in the words, “And the girl was very good looking.” Mother Rachel, we are told, “had a beautiful form and a beautiful appearance.” Esther, the heroine in the Purim story is described in the Talmud as being “one of the four most beautiful women in the world.” Nothing wrong with being beautiful!

In fact, our tradition has us recite a special blessing when we see a particularly beautiful person; thanking God: “*Shkocho lo b’olamo*” for creating such as these in His

world.” And yet, Jewish women in our day and age may be noted for many things but beauty is not one of them! The truth is, no woman is more maligned than the Jewish woman ... from Portnoy’s Complaint to The Heartbreak Kid, from the Jewish mother to the Jewish Princess ... the image of the Jewish woman projected in our society is one of a needy, domineering, kvetching human being, who is either too zaftig or anorexic.

That’s the way Jewish women are depicted in our society. Melvin Konner, in his new book, *The Jewish Body*, writes, “Jewish women who have been famous for their beauty – like Sarah Bernhardt, a goddess of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European stage; Theda Bara, the matinee idol of silent film (whose real name was Theodosia Burr Goodman); or Lauren Bacall, the 1940’s movie star and partner of Humphrey Bogart on and off the silver screen (who started life as Betty Persky) – have neither ‘looked Jewish’ as defined by the larger culture, nor publicly identified as Jews in any significant way. The same applies to more recent examples like actresses Gwynneth Paltrow (descended from a family of famous rabbis named Paltrowitz), Winona Ryder (nee: Winona Laura Horowitz) and Rachel Weisz, whose parents are Holocaust survivors.” Jonathan Mark got it right in writing in the *Jewish Week*: “In a world such as this, the emergence of beautiful Jewish (Israeli) supermodels is a good thing, if only for their impact on the communal self-image of young Jewish boys and girls, for whom these sort of things matter.”

Yes, let Jewish boys – and Jewish men who are still boys – and Jewish girls as well, know that our women are just as pretty as any others. And to prove it, they can make it to the cover of *Sports Illustrated*’s Swimsuit Issue.

But the same Jonathan Mark, writing in the *Jewish Week*, pointed out another stereotype that Bar Refaeli seems to shatter. We all know how different it is for Jewish kids to be growing up in America compared to Jewish kids who are growing up in Israel. We are soon going to see some Jewish high school kids – they already have in mind what college they will be attending. Israeli kids their age are not thinking about college ... they are thinking about the army, where they are obligated to serve. But not everybody, in fact, serves in the Israeli army. Tell the truth, when you think of those who are draft dodgers in Israel, what picture comes to mind? I bet you it’s the picture of an ultra-Orthodox Jew who is so resented by so many Israelis for avoiding the army by attending Yeshiva. And what they do is wrong ... so wrong. But you know what? Bar Refaeli, our *Sports Illustrated* cover girl, dodged the draft! She could have been in *Sports Illustrated* AND in the Israeli Army! Esti Ginzburg, her fellow *Sports Illustrated* model, served in Gaza during the war. But not Bar Refaeli. She is part of an ever-growing group of Israel’s “beautiful people” who are avoiding serving their country. And if we resent the ultra-Orthodox for doing that, we have to resent the ultra-Tel Aviv types as well. Bar Refaeli may be a beautiful Israeli but she’s not a good one. In fact, she is quoted as saying, “Why is it good to die for our country? Isn’t it better to live in New York ... what does it matter – Uganda or Israel?”

You see, she’s not looking so pretty anymore. That’s the real story when it comes to beauty. It’s the story as old as the Tabernacle in today’s Torah portion. Our sages in

the Talmud tell us, “He who has not seen the Temple in its full construction has never seen a beautiful building in his life.” And when our sages wanted to describe just how beautiful the Temple was, they compared it to the beauty of a woman when they wrote: “What did the Tabernacle resemble? A woman who goes in the street and her skirts trail after her.” Indeed, the poles of the Ark thrust into the veil covering the holy of holies is described in the Talmud as having been “protruded like two breasts of a woman.” But it is in materials of the Ark itself that we find Judaism’s true lesson in beauty, where we are told: “*V’tzipisu oto zahav tahor m’bayit u’michutz t’zapanu* – and thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it.” And the rabbis ask: we can understand why the Ark had to be covered with gold on the outside, that’s where everyone would see it, that’s where everyone would be impressed with its majesty and beauty. But why the need for gold on the inside where it would not be seen? And from here the sages in the Talmud tell us that the ideal person – the true meaning of beauty – means that one must be “*tocho k’baro*” – their inside must match their outside. What one looks like on the outside is not enough. As American tradition teaches, “Beauty is only skin deep.” But it was Redd Foxx who said, “Beauty is only skin deep but ugly goes all the way to the bone!” For the Jewish tradition, beauty must go all the way to the bone.

When our society speaks of the “beautiful people,” it is referring to the Hollywood jet-set types who are noted for their flashy, ostentatious, materialistic, immoral lifestyles. But when our people refer to someone as being a “*Sheiner Yid*,” that has a completely connotation. It speaks of what is inside a person; it speaks of the beauty of their personality and character. A member of the congregation said to me that if he had had a Bar Refaeli in his class in Hebrew School, he would have attended more often. I’m sure he would have! But he might not have been able to concentrate on what the teacher was trying to get across to him, a Jewish perspective that beauty is not something that can be understood in isolation; that real beauty is for those who fulfill the words of King Solomon: “*U’motzah chein v’sichel tov b’einei Elokim v’adam* – one who finds grace and good favor in the eyes of God and one’s fellow man.” Amen.