

What Susan Boyle Taught Us

Acharei Mot Kedoshim 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

What? You mean you haven't heard of Susan Boyle? By now "Susan Boyle" is a household name. If you own a computer then you probably have seen her video on "Britain's Got Talent," the British version of "American Idol." There have been 100 million hits on her Youtube clip singing "I Dreamed a Dream" from Les Miserables.

So who is Susan Boyle? I don't know if I can do justice in describing her. Susan Boyle is a forty seven year old spinster from a small village in Scotland who lives alone with her cat. She's short and plump with grey frizzy hair and bushy eyebrows. She initially claimed never to have been kissed: not exactly the image that we expect on television.

But there she was on "Britain's Got Talent" standing in front of Simon Cowell and the other judges as well as hundreds of people in the audience. When Susan said she wanted to be a professional singer like Elaine Paige the audience laughed and when Simon asked her how old she was, she put her hand on her hip and said, "Forty-seven and that's on one side," as she shimmied her hips. The audience became hysterical. I suspect, however, that they weren't laughing with Susan – they were laughing at her.

And then she began to sing. To say that Ms Boyle has a beautiful voice is an understatement. This woman has a voice that makes you want to weep it's so beautiful – and it's all the more striking because it seems to be so incongruous coming from such a dowdy and unattractive looking woman. In just moments, Susan Boyle's life changed. Minutes before the audience was laughing at her and now they were on their feet cheering for this self deprecating woman. In the weeks that have passed since her first appearance on TV, Ms Boyle has become the darling of the media. Every one wants to interview her and she has already receiving invitations from recording artists to sing together.

Of course, there's nothing new about this story. For as long as we human beings have been living in society we have been judging others by what we see rather than by who others really are. The *Talmud* (*Ta'anit* 7a-b) tells the story of Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah, a brilliant scholar who happened to also be a blacksmith, the humblest of professions. Rabbi Joshua was known for his great wisdom and his homely looks. Because he was a respected sage, Rabbi Joshua had access to the aristocracy of his day even though he was a humble craftsman. Once, the daughter of Caesar commented to him, "What a pity; that God would place such glorious wisdom in so ugly a vessel!"

Rabbi Joshua replied, "Tell me, in what kind of vessel does your father keep his wine?"

Caesar's daughter said: "In earthenware jugs."

Joshua: "Ordinary people keep wine in earthenware jugs; you, who are so important, you should keep it in vessels of silver or gold!"

Caesar's daughter went and told her father, who had his wine put into vessels of silver and gold. And of course you know what happened – the wine immediately turned sour. Caesar summoned Rabbi Joshua and asked him, "Why did you give my daughter such advice?"

Rabbi Joshua said: "The same question she asked me, I [turned around and] asked her."

I suspect that it was in response to this story that *Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi*, the editor of the *Mishnah*, said, *Al tistakel b'kankan eleh mah sheh-yesh bo*: "Don't look at the flask but what's found within."

But we've never really learned that lesson, have we? Last weekend, the NY Times had a story about Susan Boyle and how we are hard wired to reject the homely and embrace the beautiful. Social scientists claim that the ability to stereotype is an ancient survival technique for categorizing between people who were malignant vs. those who are benign. It helps us to make sense out of the world – even though the stereotypes are not always correct (as in this case). Our tendency to categorize people goes far beyond anger and friendliness: we look at age, gender, skin color, weight and social skills. In truth these categories are self fulfilling and reinforcing: because someone is young, thin and attractive, we presume that they are more socially skilled. And because we see them that way, they are more likely to respond that way as well.

When I was in college, my roommate was coming home late one night from the Seminary when he saw an African American man walking toward him. Arnold immediately moved to the far edge of the sidewalk – a safe distance from this guy. The man stopped and said to my friend: "You know you have some nerve – just because I'm black you assume I must be dangerous; I happen to be a college student like you... yet you assumed that I must be something else..." Arnold was mortified. No one could have been less prejudiced than him – and yet he stereotyped and judged, just by the appearance of the person in front of him, as I suspect many of us might.

The response of the judges and the audience to Susan Boyle was not so much a comment on her talent as it was an indictment of how superficial we can be. Like the daughter of Caesar, we tend to see the flask rather than to focus on what it contains. Someone enters the room and we make a flash judgment: good or bad, ugly or beautiful. We like them or we don't. Another friend recently told me that when he was a young business manager interviewing potential associates, he would judge them as soon as they entered the room based on how they appeared and then he'd ask the right questions to justify his initial impressions. I wonder how many of us are guilty of doing just that. I don't think this person is a bad person – just normal in his tendency to make judgments based on the outer surface rather than the inner essence.

This morning we read *Parshat Kedoshim*, one of the most important chapters in the Torah. The Rabbis tell us that chapter 19 of Leviticus contains *Rov Gufei Torah*, the essential principles of our way of life. We're told to "Love your neighbor as yourself" "Not to put a stumbling block before the blind," to "leave the corners of your field for the needy," and "not to oppress the stranger in your midst." All of these laws can really be reduced to a single overriding principle: *Kedoshim t'hiyu*, "You shall be holy."

But what does it mean to be holy? It means not only to act a certain way but to recognize the potential of godliness in others and to treat them accordingly. After all, doing the right thing or not hurting others does not make us holy – it simply means that we're not criminals. To be holy is to see the hidden godliness in all things and to strive to bring that quality out in ourselves. It is to see beyond the surface of things and to judge based on the essence of things.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with being attractive. The sages saw beauty as a sign of God's presence in the world. Rabbi Yohanan, one of the great sages of the Talmud, was known to be an exceedingly handsome. It's said that he would stand outside the *mikvah* and bless the woman as they left: "May the children you conceive be as beautiful as I am!" I guess he wasn't very humble but coming from a great sage it was an acknowledgment that beauty is a good thing.

But physical beauty is meaningless if it is not accompanied by depth and character. What counts, in the end, is what's found within. *Yiddish* speakers talk about a *shayner yid*, a beautiful Jew. Being a *Shayner Yid* has nothing to do with looks but with the essential character of the individual. And our tradition teaches us to say a blessing when we encounter a person who has physical or congenital disabilities. We say, "Praised are you *Adonai* our God who has created a variety of different types of people. In other words we are not beautiful or ugly, tall or short, physically able or disabled, whole or broken; we are just different.

So Susan Boyle can teach us a lesson. She reminds us not to presume anything about the people that we encounter in our daily lives. Even more important, we are taught to love them not because they are beautiful or talented or skilled or because they make us laugh but love them because they are human beings. They are *kamocho*, no different than we are.

We can't help ourselves. We are going to make snap judgments of others. But maybe we can step back and ask: Who is this person, really? What is it that I haven't seen?

Shabbat Shalom