



Is it Permitted for Women to Derive Pleasure from Gazing at Handsome Men?

Just as Men May Look at Women, Sometimes Women Stare at Handsome Men

As a teenager in the 70ties, I was a vehement Beatles' fan. It's hard to believe, but I had posters of the Beatles all over the walls and ceiling of my teenage den, in the basement of our villa, in the Danish suburb where I grew up. I never attended an actual Beatles concert, having been born too far north and just a few years too late, as the last Beatles' live concert took place in San Francisco, California in 1966, when I was just six years old. Yet, I'd listened to almost every single CD and LP and knew most Beatles' songs by heart. I also knew which tunes were included in each album in the right order! I favored John Lennon for his raw vitality and courageous, original spirit. I was also enchanted by the depths and truth-searching spirit of George Harrison, and loved the song 'Blackbird' by Paul McCartney, while being less attracted to the coarse Ringo Starr. I wasn't yet aware of the term, 'Beatlemania,' which describes the intense fan frenzy surrounding the English pop group – the Beatles in the 1960s. Throughout 1963, there had been reports of teenage girls screaming, crying, fainting and chasing the band down the street. Police escorts were required. The whole hall went into some kind of state, almost like collective hypnotism. [A reporter of Radio Scotland gaspingly asked, "What's happening?" Thinking on his feet, the promoter replied, "Don't worry, it's only... Beatlemania."](#) Although the Beatles did arouse an incredible stir, especially among teenage girls, at the pivotal time at the onset of the sixties' hippy, freedom revolution, women star-struck by male celebrities was far from being a new phenomenon. While it is much more common for men to regard women as sex objects, at times women too revel in the sex-appeal of handsome men. This phenomenon has been reported as far back as biblical times.

Egyptian Women staring at Yosef in Starstruck Awe

Yosef, son of Rachel is known to be one of the most handsome men in the world:

מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה פו פסקה
 ויהי יוסף יפה תואר ויפה מראה... לפי שכתוב (בראשית כט) ורחל היתה יפת תואר וגו' לפיכך ויהי יוסף וגו':

"Yosef was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance" (*Bereishit* 39:6) – this was because it is written "Rachel was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance" (*ibid.* 29:17); (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 86:6).

At Ya'acov's deathbed, when he blessed his sons, within his lengthy blessing of Yosef, Ya'acov mentioned his extraordinary charisma, that caused a major stir among the girls:

ספר בראשית פרק מט פסוק כב בן פרת יוסף בן פרת עלי עין בנות צעדה עלי שור:
 "A charming son is Yosef, a son charming to the eye; [of the] women, [each one] strode along to see him" (*Bereishit* 49:22).

Rashi explains that Yosef's gracefulness and charm attracted the eye that looks at him. The women of Egypt would climb up on a wall to gaze upon his beauty. Whereas the word *בנות/banot* – 'daughters' is plural, the word *צעדה/tza'ada* – 'tread' is singular. This indicates

that many daughters climbed to any place from which they could best catch a glimpse of Yosef. I remember learning that the Egyptian maidens were so mesmerized by Yosef's beauty, that they were unable to focus on anything else and thus instead of cutting lemons, they cut their fingers. While googling, I found no Torah source for this teaching, yet surprisingly, I found a source in the Koran, which is similar to what I recall having learned somewhere. According to the Koran, Potifar's wife was being ridiculed by the Egyptian women for attempting to seduce her own servant. When she heard their malicious talk, she sent for the women of Egypt, prepared for them a sumptuous feast, and handed each of them a knife. She then invited Yosef: "Come out and appear before them!" When the women saw him, they were greatly amazed at his beauty, and they were so flustered that they cut their hands with their knives, exclaiming, "G-d save us! This is no mortal man! This is nothing but a noble angel!" (*Surah* 12:30-12:31).

Women are Prohibited to Take Pleasure from Looking at a Handsome Man

Several generations later, in the Book of *Shmuel*, the midrash recounts how the girls couldn't get their eyes off Shaul, prior to his becoming the first king of Israel. The donkeys of Shaul's father had gotten lost, and he sent Shaul to search for them. After having passed through numerous districts without finding the donkeys, Shaul's servant suggested to ask the prophet Shemuel for help. On the way, they came across a group of young maidens coming out to draw water, so they asked them, "Is the seer here?" (I *Shmuel* 9:11). The maidens answered the following lengthy answer: "When you come to the city, straightway you will find him, before he ascends the high place to eat, for the people will not eat until he comes, for he will bless the sacrifice, and afterwards the invited guests will eat. Now go up, for at this time, you will find him. (I *Shmuel* 9:13). The Midrash asks: Why go into all that length? [why did the maidens give such a long answer to Shaul's short question, "Is the seer here?"] Rabbi Yehuda said, it teaches that they were looking at the beauty of Shaul and they couldn't get enough of him. Rabbi Yossi said, if so, you make the daughters of Israel into harlots, [you attribute impure intentions to them]. However, the same way that it is prohibited for a man to take pleasure by looking at a woman who is not intended for him, likewise it is prohibited for a woman to take pleasure from looking at a man [literally feed her eyes on] that is not intended for her. According to this opinion, it is prohibited for a woman to take pleasure from looking at a handsome man. Another explanation: The long speech [of the maidens] teaches us that the right time had not yet arrived. From heaven they had delayed him, as the moment for establishing the beginning of Shaul's kingdom had not yet arrived... (*Midrash Shmuel, Parasha* 13:8). Besides wanting to gaze at Shaul's beauty, the Talmud also gives an additional answer for why the maidens spoke so lengthily, "Because women are talkative" (*Babylonian Talmud, Brachot* 48b).

Women's Purity of Thought Brings Mashiach

We have long protested against men objectifying women, and the advertising industry for using photos of pretty girls, to make their various products attractive. However, in our post feministic era, there is also an increasing phenomenon of women objectifying men and taking pleasure by feeding their eyes on handsome virile men. Hashem created attraction between men and women for the sake of the holiness of marriage and raising Torah families. Misusing this powerful drive for selfish pleasure— while tempting — is diametrically opposed to the purpose of creation and precludes holiness. Not only are men prohibited from allowing themselves to become aroused by gazing at attractive women or photos of women, there is a prohibition of *hirhurim* (inappropriate thoughts) also for women, from the Torah verse, "Do not lust after your hearts and after your eyes" (*Bamidbar* 15:39). However, there are who are

lenient regarding the prohibition of hirhurim for women, they are not concerned about looking as long as it is not followed by immoral behavior prohibited due to *Dat Yehudit* [Jewish accepted custom] (*Igrot Moshe, Eben HaEzer* 1:69). The difference between men and women is that hirhurim can at times cause a physical reaction in men, and that reaction is prohibited. The prohibition against hirhurim is not as clear in women, because there is no equivalent physical response. Yet it is a great virtue for women to nurture purity of mind and thoughts by avoiding books that cause erotic arousal and feeding their eyes on pornographic photos and videos. This prohibition is included in the Torah verse: "And you shall observe My charge, not to commit any of the abominable practices that were done before you, and you shall not become defiled by them" (*Vayikra* 18:30). Everyone agrees that it is completely prohibited for a married woman to think of other men, as her thoughts must be devoted fully to her husband. At this time period, leading up to the coming of Mashiach and Malchut (kingdom) of Israel, we are greatly tested in the area of the preceding sefirah of Yesod (sexuality). Therefore, especially now, women can help bring the Mashiach by working on refining and purifying our thoughts to our highest ability. Let us follow Yosef's example of tremendous self-control in the area of sexuality, now at the fall of democracy in Israel. With our purity of heart and mind we will pave the way for Mashiach!