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Beauty is as beauty does

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On Purim, it always came down to a choice between the two beautiful royals.

Ahasuerus, Mordechai or Haman rarely appealed, no matter how much fun cross-dressing might be.

A beauty queen was what every little girl wanted to be. And I was no different.

I loved the regal robes decorated with sparkly sequins. I loved the glittery crown. I loved being perfumed and bejeweled, coiffed and rouged, though by the end of the Purim revelry my costume may have been rent, my hairdo undone, my carefully made up cheeks smeared with prune and apricot.

It was beguiling, being a queen for a day, and I delighted in continuing the tradition with my daughters.

Things didn't change much from Shushan to Phoenix, from then to now, to Purim and beyond. Just take a look at the enormous growth of the beauty industry and the power of the mirror.

We've come a long way, baby, to be sure. But I'm not so sure that on our way from playing beauty queen to pursuing beauty we've been waylaid. I still remember my first Tangee lipstick and powdered blush, the first time I shaved my legs, the first time I had my hair "done."

Fast-forward to teenage girls today, tanned and toned, waxed and peeled. And their mothers, who want to look just like them, nipped and tucked, augmented and uplifted, injected and implanted. Botox can make you wrinkle free (if only it would banish the worries that caused those lines in the first place), laser surgery can erase those pesky varicose veins. Liposuction can smoothe, collagen can plump.

"Don't let another year pass you by ... breast augmentations, breast lifts, breast reductions, tummy tucks, eyelid surgery, facial plastic surgery, laser surgery" trumpets an advertisement in the local newspaper.

But the years do pass, though hopefully they do not pass us by, and with them come the inevitable gray hairs, extra pounds, fine lines around the eyes. The mirror is less forgiving, and we often become less forgiving of ourselves.

So if we look better, we may feel better, and Jewish law allows for that, up to a point. Cosmetic surgery is not prohibited, explains Rabbi Yakov Bronsteyn of the Phoenix Community Kollel, even though it may be construed as damaging the body. In cases

where a person is pained or compromised by his or her looks, it is permissible. However, notes the rabbi, there is a difference between "need" and "want." And he reminds, it is what is inside a person rather than outside that ultimately matters.

Which brings us back to the Purim story and our beauty queens Vashti and Esther, the former who refused to parade her looks in front of her husband and his friends and was punished for insubordination, the latter who used her beauty to gain her husband's favor and save the Jewish people.

Why we pursue beauty - and how we use it - has more to do with who we are than how we look.

Beauty is as beauty does. Ask Esther.

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