

5778

There is a tendency in art to use a person's physical appearance as a means of communicating their character. Witches or mobsters are ugly and evil; princes and other heroes are handsome and wholesome. That tendency is so common that some writers have found success by turning the formula on its head, consciously making ugly characters the heroes and beautiful ones the villains in order to upend our expectations and, perhaps, even undermine the idea that appearance tells us something about people's interior lives.

The presumed connection between what we look like and who we are is an ancient one, and it shows up in this week's parshah. The early rabbis assumed that people afflicted with skin diseases, for example, do not merely suffer from a physical affliction; the cause of that affliction is moral transgression. According to that understanding, our inner rot manifests in physical decay.

As a result, biblical and rabbinic law attempt to isolate those who show evidence of such disease in order to protect the public from 'catching' either the disease itself or the underlying ethical lapses that were believed to cause it. In our time, of course, none of those beliefs hold up medically. But the idea that our bodies can betray our inner lives has some merit; hives, shaking and various other tics can indeed be signs of emotional distress. The difference in our time is that such things are now understood as signs of personal trauma rather than as indications of ethical lapses. By the early rabbinic period, the countervailing idea of deceptive appearances was also in play, as the sages wrote Pirkei Avot: "Do not look at a flask, but rather at its content."