

Appearances – All is not what it seems

I don't know if anyone here has seen the Netflix series called Black Mirror. It is a British science fiction anthology series which explores a twisted, high-tech near-future and, in particular, the unanticipated consequences of new technologies. The series consists of stand-alone episodes and there was one, for me, that stood out. It is called Nosedive and, as a review in The Telegraph states, the drama 'plunges us into an immediate future in which every interpersonal encounter, however minor, concludes with the participants "rating" each other out of five on (what else?) their phone.' In this dystopian world the ratings are a kind of parallel currency: get above 4.5, and the world is yours; drop much below 3.5, and you'll be a pariah, unable even to rent certain cars or enter certain buildings.' You are judged solely on how others see you – on your appearance, as they see it. As the newspaper review continues, 'This antiseptic, pastel-coloured Stepford-cum-Brave New World, in which everyone desperately maintains a veneer of niceness for fear of getting a negative rating from others' is superb and thought-provoking.

This world, of course, may feel too fantastical – but yet we know the grip that social media has on our society. When we book an Uber, not only do we rate the driver, the driver rates us. When we post a picture on Facebook it is liked, disliked, loved... Our tweets are re-tweeted, our Instagram pictures are commented upon. We go on TripAdvisor to rate every meal, hotel and cafe...In some ways this dystopia has already begun.

The appearances we construct for ourselves are clearly highlighted in the texts which we read today from *Shemot/Exodus* and *Melachim/the Book of Kings*. The Israelites build the most extravagant of tabernacles – we've heard the detail – gold, animal skins, sculptures, engravings....They were, perhaps, attempting to construct an image of themselves that was far from the reality. The building said – we are a successful, wealthy people – we have no cares and are busy flaunting our goods. Yet, we know that these are the same Israelites who only a few years before were slaves, they are homeless, wandering the desert – a motley crew, finding their place in the world. Their appearance, and that of their temple was far from their reality. In our society, we are guilty of the same conduct. I am thinking particularly of our public figures, be that celebrities, politicians or even rabbis! The images we post, the snapshots we give of our lives, are usually positive – smiling faces, funny moments, or sharing important pieces of local and personal news. We rarely share the dark moments – the

mornings when it's impossible to get out of bed, the days when staying in bed seems like the only option, the moments when we question everything.

Over the last few months we've seen leaders make mistakes – some serious and inexcusable, others minor – but yet we criticise and vilify. It seems that our society holds our leaders up to a staggeringly high standard. I know that, as Shakespeare wrote in his play King Henry 4th, 'uneasy lies the head that wears the crown', and that our leaders take on extra responsibilities because of their roles and that they must act with integrity and conform to stricter standards than others. But I worry, that in our world which prizes the appearance of beauty, strength, happiness – it often forgets that we are human – liable to make mistakes (which we then learn from), with emotions such as envy, greed and anger. In fact, there have been several studies which show that the most successful leaders are ones who show their vulnerability. In this regard, our biblical ancestors and leaders led the way. We get a glimpse of the private lives of our role models – who have become our leaders whether we can prove their historical placement or not. We see that from Moses with his speech impediment, Jeremiah and his depression, Hosea and his immoral behaviour, Saul and his paranoia, David and his complicated sex life, Abraham and his near brush with child sacrifice, Rachel with her envy and so on and so on – we find that the Torah, as usual, holds a mirror to us and teaches us that we are human – all of us. We make mistakes – we have complex emotions. We must be held to account for the mistakes we make but not completely scapegoated. There must be the chance for redemption and forgiveness where possible.

As we wind our way through the book of Exodus, towards the Promised Land, may we recognise that however much effort we put into how our tabernacle looks – how we look – may we remember that our reality is better mirrored in the broken tablets a few chapters later - when our ideals and constructs are smashed and we are forced to pick the broken pieces up and work on putting it all back together. May our desire for approval not be at the cost of numbing us to the rollercoaster ride that it is to be human. Ken yehi ratzon . May this be God's will. Amen.

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Rabbi Ashworth Steen