

The Golden Temple / Nurit David

I grew up in Ness Ziona and one of the hottest days at the beginning of summer, I chanced to be there again after many years for offering condolences. Hedia's father has just died and I've made an appointment with two of my classmates, with whom I had resumed contact lately, to visit the widow. Hedia herself died about twenty five years earlier in her prime, a short time after her marriage.

For me, with my parents' home ruined and its inhabitants dispersed, with my having moved so many flats and apartments, returning to Hedia's parents' home that still persists in its place seemed like a mirage. On its front shutters the same cypress trees surrounding the health care building opposite, were still casting their shadows in straight dark stripes. In my childhood, that health care building presented itself to me as an anchor of stability and hospitality, a shaded abode in which the words "Come to me, all you who are weary" were embodied.

Hedia was thought of as the most beautiful girl and her parents' home as the most clean and tidy, in the small world of my childhood and adolescence. This pair – beauty and cleanliness, cleanliness and beauty – so deeply ingrained in her figure, has become an ideal for me, a coveted model, to which I've become an eternal servant. Surely, there were others as beautiful as she, but she was my private Beauty, sent who knows wherefrom, to cast a cruel light on my own ugliness, just as my parents' home was the negative of her immaculate one. And just as the cleanliness carved and polished her face, so the dirt at our place turned my face gray and smudgy, blurring and obscuring it.

On top of the shining clean stairs we wiped our shoes just as we have done in our youth. Somewhat apprehensive and in awe of the extent of the grief of the mother, whose devotion to her home and her family, and especially to her dead daughter, was without boundaries, we squeezed in into the living room full as it was with mourners and sympathizers. We joined the circle of guests sitting around. In this home I used to be a daily visitor, have eaten many suppers and spent many nights between pure white ironed sheets when preparing for exams, I used to meet friends here, and later when conscripted to the army, when it was clear that our home is falling to pieces, Hedia's mother was kind enough to offer her home as a substitute. But destiny had other plans in store and so it came to pass that I didn't set foot here for many years while the apartment went through changes I could not recognize. The figure of Hedia's mother, an outspoken opinionated woman devoid of any skepticism, who can sharply tell right from wrong, honest and firm, a paragon of diligence and good common sense, remained ingrained in my mind as a symbol of all that is proper, deserving and exemplary, and consequently all that is judgmental and intimidating, lacking in inspiration and sense of humor.

Her life had no margins, she managed her household and led its inhabitants along the main road, straight as a ruler. Hence was it so cruel that her daughter, in whom she invested her best of efforts, the epitome of her endeavors, met her death in the ninth month of her pregnancy in a car speeding down towards the road margins. Only two years before, my sister, her husband and their two little children were also killed in a car crash. And so it came about that our families, having nothing in common, were made eventually into the two sides of a horrible symmetry.

From the many photo albums piled on the table Hedia's face glared at me like a burning sun. The death of the father in good old age, provided an opportunity now to a renewed grief over the agonizing, incomprehensible death of the loveliest of girls. Her face was shining from every corner, by herself or in a group, in her childhood and in her wedding, or just so, dressed up and laughing on a mundane weekday. Happy, joyful, carried upon waves of love among family and friends, dancing, swirling, exposing straight healthy teeth and a bit of the gums' pink above them. Not at all hiding, not at all timid, enthusiastic, showing her shoulders, her back, her feet, her thighs and ankles, her temples and her high forehead, her ears. Her eyes wide open, her nostrils agape, as if wishing to smell herself and have her fill of her own beauty.

Wherefrom did it suddenly turn up and come to my mind, sitting there under the gaze of Hedia's mother, among my classmates and other guests, some of whom I remembered from my youth, wherefrom did it emerge so clearly, claiming attention, wishing to point at something, Yukio Mishima's book "The Golden Temple", in the reading of which I was immersed at that time of summer 2007, more than three years after the death of my Japanese friend? In the book, a temple, all covered in gold, planted in a lake in a monastery garden, stands as a stumbling block on the path of a Zen acolyte to his maturity. The story is based on a true incident in which a young Zen monk burned down the ancient gem, the Golden Temple in Kyoto in the nineteen fifties, and when asked by his investigators why he did it, he answered he was envious of the temple because of its beauty.

A strange equation cropped up and pestered me: Hedia is The Golden Temple, Hedia is The Golden Temple, and if so, the second half of the

equation is obvious: I'm the ugly, stuttering Zen acolyte, Mizoguchi, the narrator, in this theatrical play shifted from Japan's Kyoto to Ness ziona. At the beginning of the book the young monk confesses that the first real problem he faced in his life was that of beauty, and one sentence, a question Mizoguchi asks the golden temple reiterated and echoed in my ears like a refrain: *Why is it necessary for you to be so beautiful?* And I repeat and recite: *Why, Hedia, is it necessary for you to be so beautiful? Why, Hedia's mother, is it necessary for Hedia to be so beautiful?*

Beauty as an entity appeared before me for the first time when I was six in her figure standing by the right side of the entrance door to our first grade class, a few days after the beginning of the school year. An illness prevented her from starting with us on Monday the first of September nineteen fifty eight, and as an evidence and symbol of her illness her head was wrapped in a transparent floral muslin kerchief tied under her chin, elongating her serious equine face even more. I immediately recognized the gravity of the moment. Until then I thought that blond was the most beautiful, I enjoyed my round face and blond hair reflected to me in the mirror, but as she was revealed to me, I suddenly realized the existence of beauty of a different order, not blond, not curly, not cute and not blue-eyed. It was the power of brown that hit me. In an instant I grasped the penetrating stillness of brown that in years to come will conquer anything and everyone on its way, with its warm subdued brown manner, plowing its furrow deeply but without the slightest effort. The same hue of brown to hair, eyes and skin of face, only the hair and eyes are a smidgen darker, but you could see that the skin is of the type that gets beautifully tanned, dotted with a few tiny beauty marks.

The forehead that later will be covered with bangs, is high and rounded, the mouth sealed in serenity, eyelashes downcast.

Was it a sacred moment in the sense of *put off thy shoes*? In the sense of a presence that delineates sharp boundaries, always staying apart, impossible to mix with? Was it a beauty marked by distance, under the influence of which other realms, serene and still, come to mind? And immediately, spontaneously a willing to serve is evoked. Was it then already that the acknowledgement of my going to lose in the game of life dawned on me, that in the inevitable comparison between us I'm going to be downright defeated? That she will get all the love and none will be left to me? That anyone I'll fancy will prefer Hedia? After that moment in the beginning of first grade I never again looked at Hedia's face. I was by her side more than fourteen years, she was, it can be said, my best friend, but never did I look at her face again. Therefore was it so dazzling to see her radiant reflection in the many pictures in the photo albums.

Although Mizoguchi says that when he saw a beautiful face, a simile would spring to his mind: *Lovely as the Golden Temple*, it seems there is something that mars the comparison between Hedia and the Golden Temple that may appear so very prolific; as about the beauty of the Golden Temple, Mizoguchi says, he heard much in his childhood from his father, but a few years later, standing in front of it the building failed to strike him as beautiful and he wondered: *Could beauty be as unbeautiful a thing as this*. And even before, he says that he staked everything not so much on the objective beauty of the temple itself as on his own power to imagine its beauty. Whereas the beauty of Hedia was discerned in an instant hitting you

like a lightning, no training was needed to recognize it, facing her each and everyone was a beauty expert, down to the last of garbage men.

But was it therefore merely an external beauty, or was there inside her an inner psychic lining that made her beauty what it was? For she did not have any special spiritual qualities, nor any poetic talents or imaginative abilities, only regular talents (in third grade she excelled in recitation and she was always a good runner); she was never especially kind-hearted, it can even be said she possessed a certain arrogance, and a touch of contempt expressed in a twisted mouth.

Of course I'm well aware that special talents and spiritual riches won't make you beautiful, it is not the kind of inner wealth that is needed. When talking about human beauty it should not be born from any quality that is independent of beauty itself, beauty should be a talent from and of itself, the natural talent to be beautiful. External beauty seems to stem from internal beauty and internal beauty is fully harnessed and calibrated for the purpose of creating beauty, and thus an efficient closed circuit is formed in which not a single droplet of beauty is wasted on other interests or missions in the world that would come on the expense of the constant manufacturing of beauty. The word 'manufacturing' can be misleading, as if any active doing is needed, but concerning beauty it is an advantage to be passive, abstaining and even feeble.

Similarly, we are not in any way talking about producing beautiful things outside or beside the body, but of beauty that springs from inside the body and flows back inwards, beauty united with the living body, an asset kept to its owner. On the contrary, by producing beautiful things outside the body,

the economy of beauty is drained and depleted. It is evident with musicians, as beautiful as they may be, their absorption in playing or singing, in the beauty of music, distorts their faces, brings them to the verge of grotesque. Their inner being comes to the surface and injures their looks, as if they are showing you their innards. They exchange the beauty of their faces, transmit it forth, trade it for musical notes.

This naked truth was hidden from me for many years. The ugly and disenchanted Mizoguchi sets out against beauty, sets loose the dangerous, blazing-hot golden tongues of fire to consume the beauty of the stylized icy gold of the building, while me, in my childish innocence wished to join beauty by entering the gate of art, and the silly hope to attain beauty through artistic endeavors was the unrelenting engine not resting for a moment, urging me to produce more and more paintings of which I expected to walk ahead of me, carry my name and give me a face. But, after all, whose paintings are they, and who is it that owns their beauty? Mishima's protagonist confesses that he is too proud to be an artist, and he's right; to be an artist you must have something of the servant in you, and in this field taking yourself seriously won't benefit you at all. Sooner or later, your readiness to exchange life for all kinds of passing fancies causes you to giggle and chuckle habitually and this chuckling becomes part of your nature, and there is no bigger dissonance than the one between the beauty of a work of art and the mocking monkey who created it.

And what is the beauty of the work of art? Sometimes it is an inconceivably ugly amalgam of components that creates beauty, a hybrid that doesn't even bother to hide its seams. Sometimes a work of art makes it a point to

deliberately point at its sutures, thrusting them intently under the nose of the spectator, so that human failings are displayed to all. And the strangest of all is the ability of a work of art to be beautiful even when showing sins or disasters, and a portrait painting can be beautiful even when depicting a face unmatched in its ugliness.

Mizoguchi says about the Golden Temple that it was built in a blend of three different styles for it to reflect the unrest that surrounds it, contain and embrace it, while Hedia was a monolith. Her upbringing was taken in utmost seriousness, with no doubts and not a speck of irony, being made of one piece like a sealed box, no duality has touched her. But can it be that the internal lining pleasantly filling her body was handmade by the caring and devoted mother who had a share in the secret science, the alchemy of beauty, the mysteries of style capable of creating a beautiful daughter?

In my memory, and the photo albums do confirm it, there were two periods in the Honey family's household and in Hedia's life. In her childhood her upbringing was strict, followed by many prohibitions. There were rigid rules in the house and no joy. Her mother and her mother's mother, who lived with them, were cleaning and washing, ironing and cooking, scrubbing and polishing. I have no recollection of their tending a garden in the small plot in front of the low duplex house (where they lived before moving to the apartment building opposite the health care building), like other neighbors who had Cosmos or Chinese Carnations growing in their gardens, or the two types of Tagetes with their pungent odor, the one with the large orange colored round head and the other with its small flowers in maroon decorated by a thin yellow margin. I'm inclined to think that the chores in the house

were so hard and many that they did not think it right to invest effort in futile activities. Hedia's mother was so adept in distinguishing the useful from the futile, an ability not to be found at all in our family. Even much later, at the end of high school or the beginning of the army she scolded Hedia for buying a book: why buy when you can borrow from the library.

In one of my visits to their home Hedia had opened the door of a cupboard in the entrance hall to reveal on one of the shelves neatly arranged small stacks of flat cardboard cases filled with colored pencils, a gift of an uncle who worked in a pencil factory in the north. I loved nothing more than opening a new colored pencils box, which occurred only rarely, not even in order to draw or paint, but for the sheer pleasure of trying them out, lining the hues up in a row on a white page. And here, to my great astonishment, stood dozens of lovely delightful pencil boxes completely untouched, nobody sharpened them or held them between thumb and index finger in order to use them. And when the door of the cupboard was opened it was only for them to be seen, as, I suspect, her mother probably thought: what can be done with a pile of used pencils, their size uneven, some of them with a broken tip? In this way, stored away in sealed boxes, neatly arranged on a shelf, they keep their value. Hedia's mother's clear knowledge of the useful and the necessary, created a base of sincerity to life, of gravity and dignity, and the sadness that came with it only intensified Hedia's charm and the deep mystery that surrounded her beloved person. This was the darkly shaded period in her life, of reticence, of sparing in smiles, of downcast eyes, of a stylized modesty which at the same time seemed to be natural, and yet mixed with an awareness of her self worth.

Towards adolescence and during high school a new era dawned on the Honey household; immersed in light and joy the sky grew taller and brighter above it and as if in an ongoing party the family was celebrating the radiant blossom of the beautiful, much sought-after daughter. Youth welcomed her with kindness and even her mother seemed to have gone through a metamorphosis, becoming relaxed and welcoming, sometimes joining our conversations, she was beaming thanks to the beautiful flower she raised; before, she worked hard and now she may enjoy the fruit.

To the speckless, shining home young boys started to come. The clean mother loved the coming of young boys. The cleanliness bore no contradiction to the coming of many boys. Speckless cleanliness and plenty of boys, you must admit, was a special combination invented by the mother of Hedia. The plenty of boys did not imply any notion of dirt, while in our dirty home, even the single boy my older sister brought was looked upon as dirty and was chased away by my father. No other home comes to my mind where young boys were welcomed so willingly.

Before, the house was conservative and had a certain gloom about it, but now it was filled with shimmering glitter. The mother threw her doors wide open as if collecting the suitors as petals to her pollen-of-a-daughter. The boys, like a large sunflower, added light to the sunny home. Climbing the few stairs, wiping their shoes vigorously, the house then wiped their faces, their ears, their nails, and so, thoroughly wiped, they sat with us on the balcony. Unlike the grandmother in the past, they did not cut apples to thin slices anymore, suddenly you could eat whole fruits there, wafers, candies and even coffee was served. I was the witness to all this lively activity, as a

transparent and sour-faced companion my eyes were watching. It's possible that secretly, like Mizoguchi, I harbored inside me the idea that *my outer appearance was poor, but ... my inner world became richer than anyone else's. Was it not natural Mizoguchi asks that a young boy who suffered from an indelible drawback like mine should have come to think that he was a secretly chosen being?*

As of Alina and Orna, my two nice and lovely classmates, sitting here beside me in front of the photo albums, I have no recollection of their being regular visitors in this house those days, and it might be the case that they, now as then, did not notice the celebration taking place, the overflowing eruption of youth. Someone like me, a complete opposite to Hedia, was needed, to look and take note and serve as a wall flower in the dancing ball.

How did Hedia's mother invent the joy of courting in this house that lacked any artistic inclinations? Wherefrom did she get the idea of embracing the boys, never heard of in the other houses? Hedia was rubbed and scrubbed clean of any sign of creativity, any unusual tendency was washed and thrown away, but later on, her beauty and success with boys increased to unexpected magnitude, swelling like flood. Her beauty overpowered her own self, her mother and the modest upbringing she received; it had arisen and become an independent entity dancing and frolicking ahead of her, sweeping whatever is there on its way. And me, with extinguished eyes, hard elbows, tangled hair, have seen all this. For just like Mizoguchi who knows that his beautiful friend Tsurukawa has no such love as he has for the Golden Temple, and that the bonds of love that tie him to the temple are rooted in his own ugliness, so like a moth I was attracted to the bright light

and sometimes could even imagine that a morsel of her beauty had clung to me as well and would forget for a short moment the gloom and the mess of troubles at our home. But other times, me too, like my double in Mishima's book *dreamed of something like a huge heavenly compressor that would bring down disasters, cataclysms and superhuman tragedies, that would crush beneath it all human beings and all objects, irrespective of their ugliness or their beauty*, and so a shared destiny would embrace the ugly and the beautiful and they won't be living in different ends of the universe anymore.

Beauty was nourished by lovely colorful dresses and wide skirts with delicate printed patterns, and Hedia's mother in her ongoing song, was giving twice as much validity to the name she gave her daughter in her infancy: Hallelujah Hedia! It was especially Friday nights that were full of cheer and joy, there was always a surprise in store, someone came, someone called on the phone, she would put on festive attire even when staying at home, and the friends were welcomed naturally as if joining in to form one big family that surrounds and embraces Hedia. All this is so alien and stands in such contrast to the endless gloomy chain of Fridays trailing behind me from then to now. Friday evenings always happen somewhere else, while I stand eternally in the dark outside the party, watching with a yearning heart the flickering red lights in the balcony opposite, and the dancing couples moving to the voice of *The Animals* screaming *The House of the Rising Sun*.

In other houses, after the army, the girls were encouraged to marry (except, of course, in ours, where our future was not taken as real and didn't count). But the Golden Temple was not destined to actually marry. Her mother

handed her over time and again, assuming a pose of constant handing over, and this very thing was exactly what burned my heart with jealousy, for what good can be gained from a marriage, but to be eternally about-to-marry, to be given to a long row of men when consummation is delayed forever, what can be more desirable than that? I'm reminded of the moving words of the poet Natan Zach: *...I was about to marry then...* in his poem that opens with the line *The sweet pain of love I want to know again*. What moment can be happier than the one of waiting to a taxi in pouring rain like in the poem, while inside you, like a warm pillow, rests the anticipation and the knowledge that you are about to get married?

And finally when given to a man she found her death down the margin of the road. Was it one of the gods who fancied her in his heart, or the envy of women, like me, who coveted her beauty, or was it the increasing pain of men, the ones left behind, that sealed her fate? For there was one who left her in her adolescence but just before his wedding crossed half the length of the country to propose to her, and another whose plan was to leave his wife and five children in the Kibbutz and take her with him to Australia, and there was a pilot who cried, and moreover, what about the pain of those who didn't dare approaching and were pining away, languishing at a distance?

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In the small town's slightly dust-blurred late afternoon, we left the albums behind and made our way along a row of cypress trees to Alina's mother who was still living by herself in their old home. It was pleasant to walk the streets of the town with my two good friends who also left it long ago, each

having her own character and uniqueness, but our common past makes them clear and familiar to me, their manners I'm used to. In our childhood I thought of Alina almost as a sibling but in high school she became so devoted to her studies that we all felt silly and childish in comparison. She is able to express her opinions with conviction and in a loud voice, and for some reason this always cheers me up. Orna was the girl who knew how to ask questions, she'd never become involved in the disputes between us, the girls. She was the only one to be really interested in things out there, in the world, outside the curriculum. She was sweet and very slim and an excellent athlete but with not a whit of arrogance.

A light breeze was blowing, cooling the heat of the day and the heated thoughts of my feverish mind. Summer flower gardens were following us on both sides of the narrow road. When Mizoguchi *saw small, dew-drenched summer flowers that seemed to emit a vague light, they seemed ... as beautiful as the Golden Temple*. What is the beauty of flowers? Why is it necessary for the flowers to be so beautiful? We are walking here in our hometown and in my mind it blends with another place, different yet similar, the Japan I know from books, a place I've never visited but in which my childhood is preserved and where, I want to imagine, different rules prevail according to which me too can have a share in life. I think of the road as the bank of Sumida River and of the greenery beyond the houses as the verdant plains of Musashino.

And so, in deep silence, disturbed only by the buzzing of bees, while walking with my friends, I tell myself: "My bridegroom was found for me, so it happened, at my father's house, late in life and in wondrous

circumstances...my father returned from the cold lands and we all gave a hand in building the summer house...my father felt it was his opportunity to make amends for a long history of causing pain...my bridegroom, a Japanese who spent many years in the Kibbutz, and more than anything else reminds one of the first generation of Kibbutz members, his trousers, it's true, were bought in an expensive shop in Japan but they are in the style of the pioneers; his checkered shirt, only an expert would notice the stylized seams crossing its sleeves, otherwise it looks as if it just has left the roller-press of the Kibbutz laundry...in ankle boots, always with a book under his arm...with his straight black hair that seems to have landed on the top of his head en masse like thatch, he's hopping in springy leaps, his smile, notwithstanding his crooked teeth, is charming...like a real man he pays no attention to me, but it's clear we are together, he is here for me even if he seems to prefer my father's company, making use of every opportunity to start a conversation with him...my father enjoys his courting...when they first met he called him Tennō, that is: the Emperor of Japan...when my father offers him a drink, he sips a bit to show politeness; it's strange that as a Japanese he hardly knows how to hold a glass..."

Alina's mother's house, not only remained standing in its place but was like a reservoir of our childhood, such a gift I did not expect in my advanced age. Like long ago, plants of sweet peas were stretching their delicate arms to climb the diamond shapes of the wire fence to the right side of the entrance gate, their soft flowers in white, pink and light purple as if calling out to me from across the years. The lowered wooden shutters were still there, and so were the pairs of white stripes, though yellowed now, in the textured greenish-blue oil paint in the entrance hall. The room with many windows

facing the backyard where the mother used to work, sitting and sewing, was preserved as well. Only the old mother became so very ancient, living with a young caretaker from a distant country who did not know our childhood and couldn't care less. "My heart is filled with happiness to see you" the old woman says and our heart goes out to her. Here, everyone is the mother of all, if not practically then on the level of emotion and awareness. She urges the young caretaker to serve us ice cream. "Isn't Alina beautiful?" she asks a rhetorical question. "Yes" we say "yes" and I think, yes, she's beautiful, her beauty is on a human scale, it doesn't burn or scorch you, it is a beauty that fits a human being. "Alina is a clever girl, a good girl" the old woman says with a toothless mouth, she's sweet, touching. "So, you didn't get married?" she asks me and her face is falling; "You didn't marry at all?" she writes me off on the spot as if saying: "why, then, did you grow up, for what purpose did your parents raise you? It was all in vain."

But let me give you a farewell kiss, lovely granny. I go out to the familiar backyard; avocado and nut trees were stretching to the sky patiently during the passage of time. While the old woman was bending and shrinking, they were growing tall and robust, how beautiful they are, casting quivering shadows on the path that leads to the old shed, on which the caretaker has freshly drawn straight parallel lines with a rake. Growing and gaining strength, indifferent and oblivious to the tremors of our heart and the vicissitudes of our fate.

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