

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 42: Medical Ethics 4 – Cosmetic Surgery

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Whilst we may think of cosmetic surgery as a modern invention, it has a surprisingly long history. The first skin grafts and rhinoplasty (remodelling of the nose) were reportedly performed by the Indian

healer Suśruta in the 6th century BCE. Historically, the primary application of cosmetic surgery was to help those who had been disfigured by war, deliberate mutilation or through diseases such as syphilis. During the 20th century, many of those who had suffered horrific facial injuries during the two World Wars benefitted from improved surgical techniques. Cosmetic surgeons treated many cases and refined their procedures, particularly helping those disfigured by war or other circumstances to regain their dignity.

The pseudoscience of physiognomy (judging a person's character by their facial appearance) became popular in the late 19th century. It probably was the catalyst for those wishing to conform to societal ideals to use cosmetic surgery to improve their aesthetic appearance. Regrettably, physiognomy also fuelled antisemitism and other forms of racism which are still prevalent today.

Some rabbinic authorities, such as Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (1915-2006) and Rabbi Shmuel Wosner (1913-2015) forbade elective cosmetic surgery on the grounds that there are health risks and that it is forbidden to deliberately endanger oneself (Devarim 4:9, 4:15). Other reasons include that a doctor's (human) mandate in some areas of Jewish thought is restricted to alleviating illness, rather than interfering with human aesthetics (see Shemot 21:19). The prohibition to wound oneself or employ another person to do so is also cited as a reason to forbid cosmetic surgery for purely aesthetic purposes.

However, other authorities, such as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986) and the late Chief Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovits (1921-1999) permitted cosmetic surgery within certain guidelines. They contended that intentionally wounding oneself only applies to degrading or shameful acts; surgery which is intended to beautify would not fall into this category.

Rabbi Professor Avraham Steinberg, a doctor who is perhaps the leading cotemporary scholar of Jewish medical ethics, notes that earlier sources, such as Rabbi Menachem Meiri (1249-1306) and Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1525-1572) also support the notion that surgery which is performed to relieve the emotional anguish of a negative body image is permitted. Furthermore, he explains that 'emotional anguish' may include the shame one may feel in public about their appearance. During a discussion in the Talmud (Shabbat 50b) regarding the removal of unsightly scabs due to the pain they cause, the Tosafists (French medieval commentaries on the Talmud) note that there is no greater pain than the embarrassment of looking unsightly in public.

Furthermore, given the advancements in surgical techniques and the relatively low risks, modern cosmetic surgery would not necessarily be considered deliberately endangering one's life. This would imply that most modern rabbinic authorities would permit cosmetic surgery, albeit only in cases where there is a demonstrable benefit to the patient's mental health.

