

Jesse Zaritt
rehearsal photo



Our rabbis have taught: A man should always be gentle as the reed and never unyielding as the cedar. Once Rabbi Eleazar, son of R. Simeon, was coming from the house of his teacher and he was elated because he had studied much Torah. He chanced to meet an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him: “Peace be upon you, sir.” He did not return the salutation but said instead, “Raca, [Empty one], good for nothing, how ugly you are! Are all your fellow citizens as ugly as you?” The man replied: “I do not know, but go and tell the craftsman who made me, ‘How ugly is the vessel that you have made...’” Soon after this encounter, R. Eleazar entered the *beit hamidrash* and expounded thus: “A man should always be gentle as the reed and let him never be unyielding as the cedar.” And for this reason the reed merited that it should be made a pen for the writing of the law, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*. (*BT Ta’anit 20*)

“The ugly man” — who remains nameless throughout the story — refers to himself as a vessel, and to God as a “craftsman,” placing the encounter in the context of creation, which is the essence of art. The relativity of beauty and ugliness is critical for an artist — even more so when artists express themselves through their own bodies. Three artists-in-residence of LABA — Jesse Zaritt, David Tirosh, and Manju Shandler — share visual glimpses here into their conversations about beauty and ugliness and the body.

—Basmat Hazan Arnoff
(additional comments by the artists appear on shma.com)