

## Shaving the Beard: A Preparation for Rosh Hashanah?!

The Tur (Orach Chaim 581) quotes a cryptic Midrashic passage (Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah 1:3), describing the attitude that should be had on Erev Rosh Hashanah:

“Typically, a person preparing for judgment gets dressed in black, grows his beard, and does not cut his nails, because he does not know what the outcome will be. The Jewish people, however, do not do so: they put on their finery, shave their beards, cut their nails, and eat and rejoice on Rosh Hashanah, because they know Hashem will perform a miracle [and judge them compassionately].”

Over the years, some have claimed that shaving the beard can be defended based on this passage.

Over the ages, numerous *sefarim* have discussed this matter, offering a wide range of approaches to rigorously and conclusively refute this claim.

What follows is a short synopsis of eleven such responses.

1. There is overwhelming evidence that the correct text of this passage is (not “shave their beards,” but rather) “cut their hair.” This is how the text appears in other Midrashic sources, as well as in numerous works both of Rishonim preceding the Tur and Acharonim following the Tur. Furthermore, this is how the Tur himself quotes this passage in his own *Kitzur Piskei HaRosh*. Moreover, the Vilna Gaon, considered one of the most authoritative decisors in areas where texts of Chazal have various readings, states that the correct text here is “cut their hair.”
2. Even if the correct text would be as quoted in the Tur (“shave their beards”), it would not have an impact on practical halachic practice, since there is a well-known principle that we do not derive *halachos* from *Aggadah*, the homiletical section of the Torah. No practical application can therefore be deduced from this passage.
3. Many sources emphasize that the Talmud Yerushalmi is replete with errors that crept in over the ages (as a result of the fact that it was not as widely studied as the Talmud Bavli).
4. The Chasam Sofer writes that until the eleventh century, it was uncommon even for Ashkenazic Jews to cut their beards. [It was only during the Crusades, when hordes of Christian mobs murdered any Jew in their path, that a dispensation was granted by certain authorities to allow merchants who traveled the highways and were in grave danger—and no one else—to disguise their Jewish appearance by removing their beards.] Hence, it is impossible that during the Talmudic era, it

was customary—as the Yerushalmi seems to indicate—for Jews to shave their beards on Erev Rosh Hashanah. We must therefore say that the version of the Yerushalmi as quoted in the Tur is erroneous.

5. Many Biblical and Talmudic sources indicate that shaving the beard is a sign of disgrace or mourning, not a method of beautifying oneself, as the above version of the Yerushalmi seems to imply. This fact further demonstrates that the text as it appears in the Tur is inaccurate.

6. Many Poskim are of the opinion that even shaving with scissors is forbidden *min hatorah*. If the version of this passage as quoted in the Tur is correct, how could they all have overlooked a clear Yerushalmi that allows it?

7. According to this version, the Yerushalmi only mentions shaving the beard, and not cutting the hair. Letting the hair grow unkempt is certainly unsightly and a sign of mourning. Why doesn't the Yerushalmi make any mention of cutting the hair? It must be that the correct text is indeed "cut their hair."

8. The Tur prefaces his quote from the Yerushalmi with the words, "We wash ourselves and take haircuts on Erev Rosh Hashanah, based on the following Midrashic passage..." Similarly, he concludes the quote by saying, "It is therefore customary to take haircuts and wear clean clothing on Erev Rosh Hashanah." He makes no mention of shaving the beard, further demonstrating that the text of the passage as published between the Tur's opening and concluding sections is distorted.

9. Interestingly, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 581) omits this Midrashic passage.

10. All opinions agree that the Torah considers the proper appearance of a Jew to be with a beard, and sources discuss at length the great holiness found in the hairs of the beard. Hence, cutting the beard is certainly not a recommended preparation for Rosh Hashanah!

11. The prohibition of shaving is limited to the five *payos*-locations on the face, and during Biblical and Talmudic times, it was customary by some to remove facial hair from the parts of the face not included in the prohibition of shaving. The Yerushalmi is thus referring to shaving the parts of the beard not included in the Biblical prohibition. [Nowadays, however, we do not know which parts of the face are not included in the prohibition, and it is therefore forbidden to shave any part of the beard.] This is the resolution offered by our own Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek (whose birthday is today, on Erev Rosh Hashanah).