

Parashat Naso

Jews, Teens and Hair

ה כל-ימי נדר נזרו, תער לא-
יעבר על-ראשו : עד-מלאת
הימים אשר-יזיר ליהוה, קדש
יהיה--גדל פרע, שער ראשו.
5 All the days of his vow of Naziriteship there shall no
razor come upon his head; until the days be fulfilled, in
which he consecrateth himself unto the LORD, he shall
be holy, he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow
long. *Numbers 6:5*

My Conviction (from Hair: The Broadway Musical)

You know kids, I wish every mom and dad would make a speech to their teenagers and say
kids, be free, be whatever you are, do whatever you want to do, just so long as you don't hurt
anybody. And remember kids,
I am your friend.

I would just like to say that it is my conviction
That longer hair and other flamboyant affectations
Of appearance are nothing more
Than the male's emergence from his drab camouflage
Into the gaudy plumage
Which is the birthright of his sex

There is a peculiar notion that elegant plumage
And fine feathers are not proper for the male
When actually
That is the way things are
In most species

"Hair Apparent: A Guide to Jewish Hair."

How the tufts atop our heads figure into Jewish history

Dear Rivy,

I have come to the conclusion that Jews have a hang-up with hair. Think about it: first there's Samson, then there's women's head coverings, and there's the Hassidic men with beards and side curls. What is up with all of this attention to hair and its presentation?

You raise an intriguing issue. In response I offer you “Hair Apparent: A Guide to Jewish Hair.” In addition to the hair manifestations you mention, I will help you to explore a number of additional hair phenomena.

The Power of Hair: The Samson Syndrome

Our first inkling of a notion that hair might be of significance in a person’s spiritual life is in the **Book of Bamidbar**. Here we learn of the **Law of the Nazarite**; a person, male or female, who has elected to take upon themselves additional stringencies — for them, 613 is not enough!

For a self-determined amount of time — at least 30 days — they must not come in contact with the dead, indulge in wine or strong drink, nor cut their hair. All the while they are a Nazarite they are *kodesh*, holy to God. After the fulfillment of the vow they are instructed to go to Jerusalem and offer sacrifices.

The most legendary of all Nazarites is the last judge, whose story is told in the Book of Judges. While he is in the womb, Samson’s mother is instructed by an angel to dedicate her son to God. She too must observe similar Nazarite-like restraints and, once born, Samson must be a lifelong Nazir. He will grow his hair long and abstain from strong drink and wine. The ordinance to not come in contact with the dead is waived, as it will impede on a large part of his job description.

The mystery of Samson’s superhero strength is in his hair. When Delilah discovers this, she shears him of his locks and hands him over to the enemy. He dies dramatically, empowered anew with a fresh growth of hair on his head; then he collapses a Philistine arena down upon them, and himself.

Why must the holy Nazarite desist from cutting his hair? Does it indicate his letting go of self-involvement? It may be that this distancing oneself from the day-to-day need to primp invites a holy devotion to God.

Hair Allure: The Wigs and Whys of Women’s Head Coverings

Some cover with a wig, some with a hat, some with a wig and a hat, some with a scarf, and some with nothing at all. Some love it, some resent it — but all of us have ancestresses that covered their hair. But why and from where do we have a practice of covering the hair of a married woman? Though it hangs on a mighty thin thread — or in this case carefully spliced hair — it is based on a Biblical verse describing the humiliating ordeal a suspected wife goes through. One stage of her testing procedure, the details of which may be found in Bamidbar, is “the disturbance of her head,” understood as the uncovering of her hair.

Jewish legal literature concludes that if it is a humiliation for hair to be uncovered, it must be that the norm is for a married woman to cover her hair; tresses being a beauty reserved exclusively for husband. Ironically, a novel with no Jewish content makes this practice understandable. In *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, the young woman, soon to be robbed of her innocence, is rendered in her own mind violated as soon as her attacker has stripped her of her headdress.

Mournful Hair: Let It All Grow

Traditional Jewish practice is quite detailed when it comes to mourning practices. Those who are of the seven intimate relatives of one who has died: mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, or spouse are official mourners. They are to observe *shiva*, seven days of mourning, and to refrain from joyous behaviors for 30 days. They are expected not to cut their hair, and for parents there are additional restraints.

What is this mournful hair growing? As in the Nazarite, it indicates the letting go of self-involvement. One who mourns can barely muster the strength for normal human hygiene, so immense is their pain. The long uncut hair says, I am beyond thinking of myself — I am inconsolable.

Beards and Side Curls: The Face of Hair

This one is simple, yet emotionally charged. The Book of Vayikra enjoins upon men not to cut the corners of the head nor their face; not to use a razor to shave the face or the side curls. Though electric shavers, whose mechanics are more scissor-like than razors and therefore permitted, are used by some, others do not shave any facial hair whatsoever.

Like it or not, on t-shirts, in cartoons and in lots of Jewish kitsch, the beard has been taken as emblematic of the Jewish male. This hair makes a statement.

Three Years Old and never been trimmed!

Having been privileged to recently celebrate our grandson's "upsherin" — first hair cut, I come somewhat predisposed to the charm of this far from universally observed custom.

The growing of a young boy's hair until he reaches the age of three is compared to the mitzvah in regard to trees, whose fruit is not harvested until the fourth year — the year of holiness. The fruit of the tree is taken to Jerusalem to be eaten there; similarly, the youngster, having begun his fourth year, is initiated into Torah study with the honey-laced Aleph-Bet.

Hair is the most visible symbol of growth human beings possess. Once grown, we remain fairly stable organisms — a pound or two here and there notwithstanding. Hair indicates the unique human capability to change and to renew ourselves; it becomes a vehicle for our self-image. No nuance of our humanity is lost on our Maker; in Judaism hair matters. In the words of the famous Broadway show:

Hair! (hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair), Flow it, Show it; Long as God can grow it, My Hair!

Source: <http://www.jtnews.net/index.php?columnists/item/3773/C9/>

From Ohr Samayach:

Dear Rabbi,

A few months ago I started growing payos (sidelocks). Unfortunately, instead of growing in tight curls, they tend to stick out at strange angles, making my head look something like a wrecked airplane. Is there something I should be doing differently to make them grow neatly? I thought of using curlers, but wasn't sure if that was allowed for a man. Please advise.

Dear Name@Withheld,

A man shouldn't use curlers. Rather, if you want to curl your payos, use your finger. For the proper method to do this, we asked a Rabbi with long payos. He wrote us the following: "Wet the payos and comb them out horizontally across the forehead. Then, take the forefinger of the hand of whichever side you are doing, stick the forefinger from above in between the hair and the forehead, and push it towards the roots of the payos as far as you can comfortably get it. Then, with the other hand, curl the rest of the hair around your forefinger in the down direction, trying to keep it as in order as possible. Hold it that way just for a moment, and then gently try to remove the forefinger without messing up the curl. Once it's out, don't touch the curl; let it dry that way. Do this once each weekday morning, and maybe once again later in the day if you want (optional), and hopefully it will start curling naturally by itself. "If you ever cut your payos one time too short, then about five months later you will have a growth of hair coming from the top that will not go together with the rest of the payos, at least for a couple of years. Many have this problem. I don't have a clear solution for it."

http://ohr.edu/ask_db/ask_main.php/206/Q4/

Dear Rabbi,

What is the significance of hair? Why does Judaism seem so concerned with it? Women cover their hair, men have Payot (sidelocks), and boys have their first haircut at age three...

Thank you

Dear Bernardo,

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary on the Torah discusses the subject of hair and reveals some very powerful and insightful concepts. Take your face for a moment -- I sure don't want it :-). There are parts of your face which we would consider more physical and parts which represent the more intellectual. Your mouth and your eyes would be examples of the more physical parts. Your forehead would be the part which represents the intellectual. We know that both of these categories are important but the physical requires special monitoring. If you allow yourself pursuit of the physical without some mechanism for control you could slide into a pattern of self destruction. Hence the hair. It is a marker that says: *"Pay attention to this area!! Monitor it so that it can be used for good. Don't allow it to run off unbridled!!"*

If you think about this for a while you will get a sense of why Judaism concerns itself with issues such as the covering of a woman's hair (sensuality), Payot for a man (dividing the part of the brain that controls the sensual from that which is involved in the intellectual); and even why we cut a young boy's hair for the first time at the age we begin his education (learning how to use his intellect to control his behavior).

In short, hair [or long hair :-)] represents sensuality control.

The Jewfro

by Michelle Bayefsky - the Jewiish Week

When asked to estimate how many Jewish girls she knew that owned a hair straightener, Ramaz sophomore Ilana Schulder responded, "Everyone." The straightener is a wondrous invention that flattens and smoothes puffy and frizzy hair that, for many Jewish girls, takes on a life of its own right out of the shower. Is this a problem? Is hair straightening an addiction that is bad for the Jewish persona?

Back in the 1960s girls of all races and religions used clothing irons and ironing boards to straighten their hair — despite the frequency of burning catastrophes. Today the technology is more advanced but the idea is the same: turn frizzy and unmanageable hair into something lustrous and low-maintenance. The very latest technology — known as straightening — also comes with a steep price, around \$750, for a treatment that lasts from six to nine months. The process entails six long hours of chemical and heat treatment. Nevertheless enthusiasts in the Jewish community abound. Schulder explained that once your hair is straight, "you don't have to worry about it during the course of the day."

What is this natural Jewish hair? A 2005 New York Times article refers to "jair" — "Jewish hair — dark, thick hair that's been obviously straightened." And Israeli Beverly Hills stylist Yuki Sharoni is famous for fixing what he called Jewish actor-comedian Adam Sandler's "Brillo pad of hair." In a September 2005 interview with *The Forward*, Sharoni said, "When I first came here they hadn't figured out how to deal with Jewish hair."

Dr. Sander Gilman is a psychologist, author of "The Jew's Body" and an expert on Jewish self-perception. He is not convinced that there is such a thing as Jewish hair. However, Gilman admits that the same view has not been shared by notorious anti-Semites. Nazi war criminal Julius Streicher published a children's story called "How to Tell a Jew." In it he claimed that Jewish "hair is usually dark and often curly." A Jewish man in Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray" is described as having "greasy ringlets."

Although these stereotypes emanate from anti-Semitism there is no denying that many Jews have brown, curly, even unruly hair and frequently a straightener to go along with it. Gilman does not see hair straightening as an identity problem for Jewish teenagers. "It strikes me as a minor alteration," said Gilman. "Given the massive cultural traditions surrounding hair remember the old adage: this too will pass — as you can see by looking at the hair styles of your parents."

The fad does not seem to be unique to Jewish girls. “My friends who are not Jewish have straighteners and use them on a regular basis, like every day,” said Heschel High School sophomore Rachel Fell. Rachel has dark, wavy hair and agrees that straightening is time-consuming and saves it for special occasions. Straightening hair does not appear to indicate a penchant for assimilation, but rather a style popular with Jews and non-Jews.

Although Jews and African-Americans have idealized straight as opposed to curly hair, today’s styles are more likely to mark class rather than race, according to Gilman. Considering the expense of Japanese straightening and even the irons themselves (which can reach \$200) perhaps straight hair is a class symbol similar to cars or houses.

Hairstyles sported by Jews and non-Jews are historically for males as well as females. For example, in the late 19th century the Assyrian beard style – a long, flat and spade-shaped beard – was considered Jewish. However today’s American trend of straightening hair seems to primarily affect girls. “I don’t want to have messy hair, but I don’t particularly care about the style,” said Alec Goldberg, a sophomore at Ramaz. Goldberg said he never considered straightening his own curly hair, but he has a European friend that does.

American males “don’t want to go overboard.”

On the popular television program, “The OC,” the character Seth once kvelled his “Jew-fro benefits from summer weather.” For the rest of us, our CHIs (ceramic hair irons) will continue to have pride of place at least until straight hair goes out of style.

Michelle Bayefsky is a sophomore at Ramaz Upper School in Manhattan.

WHAT IS THE SYMBOLISM OF HAIR?

FOR JEWS?

FOR TEENS?

FOR YOU?