

## D'VAR TORAH



### Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow Ilana Kurshan

Our parashah describes the laws of the Nazir, one who elects to take a vow of consecration to God for a certain period of time. Such an individual is required to abstain from wine and avoid all contact with the dead, which suggests that the Nazir is taking on the stringencies of the priesthood; the priests, too, had to abstain from wine to maintain the proper mindset and avoid contact with the dead so as to serve God in a state of purity. More puzzling, perhaps, is the Torah's stipulation that the Nazir may not cut or shave his or her hair, and then must shave it all off and place it to burn on the sacrificial altar at the culmination of his or her vow. What is the logic behind the unique grooming practices of the Nazir? What can we learn about the way we relate to our own hair—or lack thereof?

The Torah suggests that the Nazir's hair becomes the hallmark of his or her consecration to God. We learn that the Nazir may not come near the dead even if his parents or siblings die, because "hair set apart for his God is upon his head" (6:7). If a Nazir does become impure during the period of his or her vow, the Torah states that it is in fact the Nazir's hair that becomes defiled, and therefore it must be shaved off and then left to grow anew: "If a person dies suddenly near him, defiling his consecrated hair, he shall shave his head on the day he becomes clean... That same day he shall reconsecrate his head" (6:9-11). As these verses indicate, both the practice of growing one's hair long and the practice of cutting it short are fundamental to the identity of the Nazir, embodying his or her act of consecration.

The Talmud in tractate Nazir discusses the laws governing the Nazir's grooming practices in extensive detail: May the Nazir use depilatory cream? What if his or her hair always sheds while combing it? What if a Nazir was attacked and forcibly shorn by a group of thugs, leaving just a small bit of hair? These questions may seem like splitting hairs, until we come to a story about a particular Nazir who had a unique and inspiring relationship with his hair.

The story is narrated by Shimon HaTzadik, a priest during the Second Temple period. He tells of one particular Nazir who came to the Temple at the culmination of his vow to shave and burn his hair, as the Torah stipulates. The priest describes this Nazir as having "beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance, with his locks arranged in curls," an image reminiscent of the beautiful Absalom's heavy tresses or the curly locks of the lover in the Song of Songs. The priest saw this Nazir upon his arrival at the Temple and asked, "Why did you become a Nazir, which would force you to destroy this beautiful hair?" The Nazir responded that he was shepherding his flocks when he came to a pool of water and gazed admiringly upon his reflection: He decided to become a Nazir to escape his infatuation with his beauty: "I said to my heart: Wretch!

How you pride yourself in what is not yours, made of dust, worm and maggot! Behold I will shave it off for the sake of heaven!" (Nazir 4b). This Nazir was not just struck by his beauty; he was also struck—and alarmed—by his vanity, which he sought to check by consecrating his hair to God.

This story is often compared to the myth of Narcissus, which scholars presume to have influenced the Talmudic account. But another useful intertext—albeit one that came much later—is the famous O. Henry story “The Gift of the Magi,” in which the heroine also examines her reflection and is struck by her hair: “Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass... Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length... Della's beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her.” Della sells her hair so that she might have enough money to purchase a Christmas present for her beloved husband Jim; she buys him a fob for his watch, unaware that he has sold his watch to buy her combs for her rippling, shining hair. By the end of the story, it is clear that Della and Jim have given each other the most meaningful gifts of all, because their gifts symbolize the sacrifices they are prepared to make for one another.

Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that the Nazir is commanded to grow long hair and then offer it in sacrifice to God. In the Torah's synecdoche, the hair of the Nazir substitutes for the entire person, and thus the Nazir sacrifices his or her hair as a way of symbolically sacrificing himself or herself. Hair is a renewable part of our body; when we give it up, we are not endangering ourselves, but rather enacting the gesture of sacrificing something we value deeply for the sake of another ideal. We might shave our hair to burn on the altar, or sell it to buy a present for a spouse; but we might also donate our hair to organizations that make wigs for cancer patients, thereby allowing someone else to feel beautiful again. The Nazir challenges us to think about other creative ways we can give of ourselves, and how, in so doing, we might find ourselves transformed.