

Hair

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This is “bad hair time” in religious Jewry land. Men may not shave nor have a haircut till the 33rd day (Lag) of the Omer, if you are Sephardi, or three days before Shavuot if Ashkenazi (no, harmonization is not one of our strengths).

Hair, whether facial or on one’s head, makes a lot of statements about who a person is. In my youth, almost every male in England would go into a barbershop and ask for a “short back and sides”. It was not until the era of the Beatles that anyone, apart from a few eccentrics, considered letting his hair grow into a floppy imitation of a juvenile sheepdog. Looking back at it now, one is amazed that anyone could have thought it to have been a protest against authority. But that was also the era when most middle class males went to work in London with a bowler hat and a furled umbrella.

Since then, hairstyles have proliferated. A bald pate no longer automatically suggests one might be ill or even an employee of the Israeli Secret Service! A Mohawk cut is no longer the preserve of the Mohawks. Punk rockers gave us every color and shape option, and hair gel has allowed every strand to go in a different direction. One’s hairstyle tells us a great deal about the person.

The messages that hair sends is an ancient human tradition (let alone amongst animals). Anthropologists have written about the way hair delineates different levels in what we like to call more primitive societies. In ancient Egypt priests shaved their heads. In many other societies, only the wealthy had the leisure and assistance to cut or shave their hair, so beards became associated with the poor and barbarians. Beards were forbidden in the British armed forces, except the navy (it was too difficult to shave on a rolling ship). Look at photos of, say, George Orwell, and you will see how upper class Englishmen actually did shave their sideburns almost all the way up to mid-skull (or, if you are a soccer fan, look at Meireles of Chelsea). Whenever I was sent to have my hair cut I had to tell them to leave my sideburns in place and not to use a razor.

All this goes to explain the peculiarities of Jewish attitudes to hair. In my youth, dispensation was the norm, as Jews working in city firms or chambers simply could not hold down their jobs if they looked scruffy. It was almost unheard of then for a Jew to be seen wearing a kippah in any company or firm except his own.

But now our societies are less homogeneous. Laws protect the rights of religious minorities to dress in accordance with their customs. Sikhs can cover their heads, wear beards, and carry daggers. Rastafarians display dreadlocks. And, slightly off subject, everyone seems to be showing off tattoos nowadays, which in my youth were a sign of the lowest, least educated strata of society.

The Torah asks us not to remove the hair around our heads and faces. Priests had additional restrictions and it is pretty obvious that this was intended to contrast with the pagan traditions of priests being clean-shaven or tonsured. Christianity itself reflects the cultural varieties from clean shaven Catholics to bearded Orthodox. The Talmud refers to special kinds of haircuts that the clean-shaven upper class Greeks and Romans sported. Jews were forbidden to imitate unless they had to appear in diplomatic roles and did not want to undermine their suits by being hirsute!

Males wore beards and covered their heads. Married women covered their heads because that was what both Christian and Muslim societies expected of good, modest wives. As modernity slowly affected Jewish communities, ways had to be found of looking more integrated. A distinction was made between shaving with a blade directly against the skin and shaving with a foil that intervened. If you think that was a fiddle, and many did, what about the fact that instead of a woman covering her hair with a scarf or a hat, many rabbis allowed her to wear a wig? In some ex-Carpathian communities, they wear a hat on top of a wig on top of a shaven head. Both issues are still contentious, even in the most Orthodox of circles.

Chasidism went the other way when it set out to look as different to everyone else as possible. Before every festival, if you happen to be in a Charedi neighborhood, you will see freshly shaved male heads, zero all round except for where their payot sprout out of their upper temples. It's a variation of the Mohawk. Instead of the ridge, Balotelli style (back to soccer—he's a controversial Nigerian/Italian soccer player currently at Manchester City), if you walk behind a Chasid you will see the snowy white close shaven back of the head peeping out from under the black hat and kippah. It looks as weird to me as a punk! But hey, if people actually want to look different isn't that what freedom is for? The only thing that worries me is when anyone preserves peculiarity for himself but refuses to countenance it in others.

In Israel one sees all sorts of weird haircuts. For some reason the secular love to sport last year's style as though it were still current—mini pigtailed for example. But I guess that's because wherever you get one trend there's always a countertrend. Compare Mormon haircuts with San Francisco's. The weirder Charedi kids look, the weirder the secular ones are bound to go.

I do see a value in dressing modestly, whether male or female. I resent that in post-winter USA we are subjected to so much unsightly bare flesh wherever you look. I never understood why only Muslim women were expected to cover up and not Muslim men. But then religious worlds are still male dominated. Even in the Charedi world, where men are indeed expected to be modestly dressed as much as women, they still seem to think women are to blame for encouraging male sexual predators. The latest nonsense I have heard is that it is forbidden for girls to have dresses with zips down the back in case randy male tries to unfasten them!

Being different for the sake of difference is, I suggest, a trivial pursuit. But being different to remind oneself of a higher calling, of a moral imperative, can be beneficial. In truth "difference" is often just a matter of degree. You can make the point in a modest way without needing to shove it

in someone else's face. After all, the Torah only commanded us to put fringes on our garments. It did not tell us to wear dhotis.

So shave your head, by all means, and leave your payot naked to view, but don't then turn up at nightclubs (as I am reliably informed happens from Tel Aviv to London to NewYork) as if you went through the wrong door by mistake. Either it is to identify and behave as a religious person or it is no more than a fashion statement, and a not very attractive one at that! At least we have some time before the next shearing.