

# Shave and a Haircut: Says Who? Getting to the Roots of an Unusual Restriction

By David Nelson

The time from the second evening of Pesach until the eve of Shavuot is called the period of the counting of the Omer (see Leviticus 23:15-16 for background).

One of the strangest customs of this season (mentioned but rarely explained by authors who detail the customs and laws of the Omer) is the prohibition of haircuts. This prohibition is lifted on Lag B'omer, the 33rd day of the count. On Lag B'omer, the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, visitors to Meron, near Tsfat, can see large numbers of Hasidic families bringing their three-year-old sons to the grave of this father of Jewish mysticism for their very first haircut. The practice of not cutting a boy's hair until age three is often related to the biblical law (Leviticus 19:23-25) prohibiting the harvest of the first three years of a fruit tree's yield.

Once I begin pondering these various haircutting restrictions, I continue inevitably to the laws of the nazirite (Numbers, ch.6), an ascetic who "sets himself apart for the Lord" and whose hair may not be cut for the duration of the nazirite vow, and to the story of Samson (Judges, ch. 13) who was decreed a nazirite from birth. All of these texts and traditions share a deep-seated sense of the importance of hair and haircuts.

The Omer restrictions are often understood as stemming from a primal worry about the agricultural harvest, which is in its first, most vulnerable stage in the mid- to late spring. Why should the cutting of hair present a danger to the welfare of the crops? In addition to its agricultural roots, the prohibition of not cutting a toddler boy's hair also seems a way of preserving the child's original infant nature (although, paradoxically, Jewish tradition commands that his pristine state be changed on the eighth day with circumcision!). I am often intrigued by the gender neutrality of these unshorn little boys, who are largely indistinguishable from toddler girls until the ritual haircut.

With regard to nazirites in general, and Samson in particular, we see that the hair is a critical part of their enhanced sacred status, and that cutting it signals or brings about the end of sacredness. At the conclusion of the nazirite period, the cut hair is sacrificed on the altar—a clear indication that it is a central part of the heightened sanctity achieved by the nazirite during the period of the vow.

In our modern society, four instances of meaningful haircutting (or abstention from haircutting) bear mention:

1. A crucial part of the military induction process, by which a civilian is transformed into a soldier is the shaving of the head (although, interestingly, this is not done to female recruits!). This has the effect of making recruits look much more uniform (an interesting word in its own right, and one dear to the hearts of all military organizations!), depriving them of an element of their individuality.
2. In a similar ritual, imprisonment is often begun with the shaving or cutting of a prisoner's hair. Again, the result is uniformity of appearance, as well as a definition of the power dynamic that holds between the prisoner and his keepers. The act of imprisonment signifies the denial of a great deal of personal power, and the haircut becomes a symbol of powerlessness-an echo of Samson's fate.
3. Baby-boomers will recall that the growing of long hair, primarily by men, was one of the most important symbols of the youth rebellion of the late 1960's (we need only recall the Broadway musical "Hair"). Here the growing of hair was a statement of independence, and the rejection of traditional norms of appearance.
4. At least some portion of our society regards male baldness as a problem serious enough to be addressed by taking powerful drugs, or undergoing surgical hair transplants. Most advertisements for baldness remedies imply that hair is connected to virility, youth and power.

In light of these various traditions, customs, laws and historical observations, how would you interpret the importance of hair (especially male hair), in Jewish life? What do you think it stands for or represents? What is the significance of cutting it or not doing so?