

THE BEARD

by Avram Yehoshua

The Bible tells us that a man should have a full, untrimmed beard, while trimming the hair on the head to an acceptable length. Much of this centers on the verse in Lev. 19:27 which should be translated:

'You must not shave or cut the corners of the hairs of your head and you are not to trim (mar or clip off) the edge (corners) of your beard.'

The word for 'shave' or "cut' is tah-kih-fu and means,

'to surround, compass' 'to go or come round, of time'.¹ 'To make or let go around' 'with men 'taking turns' at hosting banquets. In the sense of surround or encircle'.² 'Hunting nets are cast, drawn around (Job 19:6) and Israelites are forbidden to shave or trim around the head (leaving a tuft of hair on top, emulating pagan cultists - Lev. 19:27)'.³

From this we see that the prohibition in the first part of the verse, 'not to cut' or 'shave' does not mean that men shouldn't cut or trim their hair but that it shouldn't be like what many youth do today. They shave or cut a patch of hair above their ears, encircling their heads. This is a pagan custom, most likely having to do with grieving for the dead. Bellinger states,

'The phrase, Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head is probably a foreign mourning rite, as also may be the intentional cutting of the beard in some way.'⁴

James Freeman tells us that it could also be a form of divination:

'Among the ancients the hair was often used in divination. The worshippers of the stars and planets cut their hair evenly around, trimming the extremities. According to Herodotus the Arabs were accustomed to shave the hair around the head, and let a tuft stand up on the crown in honor of Bacchus. He says that same thing concerning the Macians, a people of Northern Africa. This custom is at present common in India and China. The Chinese let the tuft grow until it is long enough to be plaited into a tail.'⁵

Freeman goes on to say that cutting the hair at death was an ancient pagan practice for the dead:

'It was also an ancient superstitious custom to cut off the hair at the death of friends and throw it into the sepulcher on the corpse. It was sometimes laid on the face and breast of the deceased as an offering to the infernal gods.'⁶

As for not cutting or trimming the hair on one's head because of Lev. 19:27a, we have two cites in Scripture that tell us that cutting the hair is an acceptable practice and even encouraged. The first is found in Ezekiel:

Ezek. 44:20: '*And their heads they must not shave and long hair they must not grow. They must trim their heads.*'

Here we find that the hair on the head could be cut or trimmed. We are told that it should not be too long ('and long hair they must not grow'). Turning to the Nazarite Vow at the end of the Vow, the hair was to cut off:

'All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to YHVH. He shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long(Num. 6:5)

'The Nazarite shall then shave his dedicated head of hair at the doorway of the Tent of Meeting, and take the dedicated hair of his head and put it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of peace offerings(Num. 6:18)

During the Vow, if no razor could cut his hair, it shows us that the cutting of the hair was an acceptable practice. The prohibition not to cut the hair prevents one from doing what one would normally do. At the end of the Vow, the person was to shave their head. If the practice was to not cut the hair at all, the Nazarite could just go on with his life. Cutting the hair at the end of the Vow shows us that cutting the hair at other times was an acceptable practice.

Next we turn to the beard. Looking at the words for 'corners' and 'edge' we find 'pay-ah' which means, 'corner, e.g. of a field' 'corner or extremity of the beard'⁷ we find the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament describing Lev. 19:27b (and 21:5) as prohibitions that guarded against pagan practices for the dead:

'Both verses prohibit rounding off the hair at 'the edges' or trimming 'the edges' of ones' beard. These injunctions' 'are found listed with other abominations such as body laceration, tattooing, and even cultic prostitution. Presumably the references to the avoidance of cutting the edges of one's hair refer to the peculiar markings which the pagans put on themselves at their funerary rites (Jer. 9:26 (H 25); 25:23; 49:32). It is thought that their intention was to make the mourner incognito to the

spirits hovering round the deceased. In Israel such deference to the presence of evil spirits is prohibited.'⁸

The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament also declares that the trimming or cutting of the beard is a pagan practice that was associated with the dead:

'In Lev. 19:27a the Holiness Code forbids trimming the edges of the hair or cutting the edges of the beard; 21:5 repeats the latter prohibition explicitly for priests. This prohibition is probably aimed at offerings of hair for the dead, using hair cut from the head.'⁹

The question arises that if one is not cutting their beard in relation to mourning practices for the dead, is it acceptable to Adonai? We believe the answer is 'No.' Nowhere does Adonai state that cutting the beard is acceptable. So cutting it in relation to say, one's desires vs. paganism, is not acceptable either. One might ask another question that should help us to see the answer clearer. Is one free to celebrate Christmas if one doesn't worship Tamuz but Yeshua? Although we find no explicit reference in the Bible not to celebrate Christmas, there are many indirect references not to. ¹⁰ And although we find no explicit references not to trim one's beard outside the concept of paganism, we find numerous references to the untrimmed beard as being the standard, Lev. 19:27b forming the background.

Beginning with Orthodox Jewish understanding The Chumash speaks of the word that is translated in our verse as trim or mar and translates it as 'you shall not destroy' the beard. It states:

'There are five edges of the beard, each of which it is forbidden to shave (Rashi). But as a practical matter, since the exact areas of these edges are not clearly defined, it is forbidden to shave the entire beard.'¹¹

It would seem that whatever or however the Rabbis defined the five edges, the 'outer edges' or the 'ends' of one's beard would seem to be included in this. The Commentary on the Old Testament states,

'Neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard,' sc., by cutting it off (cf. ch. 21:5), which Pliny reports some of the Arabs to have done'¹²

James Freeman states that the beard was a sign of manhood. In reference to Hanun taking King David's messengers and shaving off one half of their beards (2nd Sam. 10:4) he writes that,

'According to Oriental sentiment a greater indignity could not have been put upon them. The beard is considered a symbol of manhood, and, in some places, of freedom - slaves being compelled to shave their beards in token of servitude. By shaving half their beard Hanun not only treated David's ambassadors with contempt, but made them objects of ridicule.

The beard is usually kept with care and neatness; and thus when David feigned madness in the presence of Achish, king of Gath, he 'let his spittle fall down upon his beard, ' which convinced the beholders that he must be bereft of his senses. 1 Sam. 21:13. So disgraceful is it considered to have the beard cut off, that some of the Orientals would prefer death to such a punishment.'¹³

Freeman comments on Joab's slaying of Amasa by first touching his beard:

'To touch the beard of another was an insult, unless done as an act of friendship and a token of respect. Joab therefore showed the base treachery of his heart by coming to Amasa in the manner of a friend, thus entirely concealing his murderous intent. He inquired after his health, gently touched his beard as if to give a kiss, and then suddenly grasped it with his right hand and quickly stabbed the unsuspecting Amasa with the unnoticed sword which he held in his left.'¹⁴

Freeman also notes that Jews didn't trim their beards. Citing Lev. 19:27 he states,

'By the idolaters the beard was also carefully trimmed round and even. This was forbidden to the Jews. Dr. Robinson says, that to this day the Jews in the East are distinguished in this respect from the Mohammedans the latter trimming their beard, the former allowing the extremities to grow naturally.'¹⁵

Under 'Beard', The Illustrated Bible Dictionary states,

Israelites and their neighbors generally wore full round beards which they tended scrupulously. The beard was a mark of vitality and of manly beauty (Ps. 133:2; cf. 2 Sa. 19:24); to shave or cover it was a sign of grief or mourning (Is. 15:2; Je. 48:37, etc.; cf. Lv. 19:27; 21:5, enacted probably against idolatrous practices), or of leprosy (Lv. 14:9). To mutilate another's beard was to dishonor him (2 Sa. 10:4; Is. 50:6).¹⁶

The cite for shaving or covering the beard (Is. 15:2), stresses the plight of another people (Moab), in being defeated (every head is bald and every beard cut off). Of course, this cannot be used to justify trimming one's beard. Jeremiah 48:37 also speaks of Moab and its destruction with the accompanying signs of this: the head is shaved and every beard cut off. That the leper was to shave the beard implies that all men were to have beards.

Under 'Beard', The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia' states that beards were not cut or trimmed:

'The Hebrews generally wore full rounded beards, as contrasted with the desert nomads who frequently clipped or cut their beards (cf. Jer. 9:26; 25:23; 49:32; etc.). The Egyptians were clean shaven, although high

officials wore artificial beards.' 'The Torah forbid trimming the edges of the beard (Lev. 19:27), though Ezekiel was told to shave off his beard as a token of coming destruction (Ezk. 5:1).'[17](#)

One of the humiliations of a conqueror was to shave or take off the beards of the men. This Ezekiel displays to the Jewish people as a picture of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, under the direct command from Adonai. Unger's Bible Dictionary, under 'Hair' states this about the beard:

'Among the Hebrews the beard was considered an ornament and was not shaven, only trimmed (2 Sam. 19:24).' 'The removal of the beard was a part of the ceremonial treatment proper to a leper (Lev. 14:9).' 'The custom in mourning was and is to shave or pluck out it and the hair (Isa. 15:2; 50:6; Jer. 41:5; 48:37; Ezra 9:3), to neglect it in seasons of permanent affliction (2 Sam 19:24), and to regard any insult to it as the last outrage that enmity can inflict (10:4-5). The beard was an object of salutation (20:9), and it was a custom to swear by it (Matt. 5:36). The law (sic) forbade the deforming of the head by cutting away the hair around it, and of the beard by cutting the corners (Lev. 19:27). This is understood to mean that the hair was not to be cut in a circle from one temple to another, as among the Arabs; neither might that portion of the face where the beard and hair met be shaved. [18](#) These regulations are thought by some to have reference to the fact that among some nations these customs are part of idolatrous worship.'[19](#)

Events or incidents recorded in the Tanach don't mean that Adonai endorsed them. For example, the mustache of Mephibosheth (which is cited above in terms of 'trimmed') doesn't tell us that God authorized trimming of the mustache. It records for us what might have been an acceptable practice in his day (versus what the Torah prescribes):

'Then Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the king; and he had neither cared for his feet, nor trimmed his mustache, nor washed his clothes, from the day the king departed until the day he came home in peace.' (2nd Sam. 19:24)

It doesn't tell us that all Israel trimmed their mustache or that King David trimmed his, only that one man did so. Therefore, this cite cannot be used to allow for the trimming of the mustache or the beard. And of course the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter by Jephthah doesn't mean that Adonai condoned child sacrifice. It just shows us how far he was from the Torah:

Judg. 11:30-31: '*Jephthah made a vow to YHVH and said, 'If You will indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be YHVH's and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.'*

Judg. 11:34-35: *'When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, behold, his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing. Now she was his one and only child; besides her he had no son or daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, 'Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to YHVH and I cannot take it back.'*

Judges only records Jephthah's vow. No mention is made of it being a gross sin and violation of Torah but obviously it was against God's will. This is what can happen when one is devoid of Torah knowledge and understanding. So Mephibosheth, not having trimmed his mustache during the time of David's hasty departure from Jerusalem, doesn't mean that one could trim their mustache or shave their beard and still be following what the God of Israel desired for His People.

The reason for both prohibitions in Lev. 19:27 have to do with pagan practices. Adonai told His People Israel not to shave their hair around the temples by the ears and around the head. This was not only a perversion of the hair of the head but also a practice of idolatry.

God commanded His People not to cut or to trim their beards because of grief toward the dead. This was another pagan practice. They were not to 'mar' or destroy their beards. From this, we can see that any trimming of the beard would be prohibited by the Lord, whether done for pagan or other reasons. It would seem too that the prohibition not to trim the beard extends to both the length of the beard as well as its origin upon the cheeks and the face. This was shown us by the cites from the various reference books on the customs of the ancient peoples.

Yeshua therefore, like Fathers Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and King David and Isaiah, etc., would have had a full, untrimmed beard. [20](#) We can well understand and imagine that all the Apostles and all the Jews who believed in Him (Acts 2:41, 21:20, etc.), walked the same way. Let us too avoid the appearance of evil (idolatry), by having full, untrimmed beards.

Also, Yeshua would not have had the long, flowing hair that is so prevalent in misrepresentations of him (e.g. the many pictures that are supposed to be Him). The verse in Ezekiel tells us that it is God's will for us to have our hair trimmed to an acceptable length. Also, as the Apostle Paul declares in 1st Cor. 11:14, 'Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him'?

One thing that I want to conclude with is the beard's relevance to spiritual things. All the Commandments are spiritual. [21](#) We just don't realize it until the Holy Spirit opens our eyes. This the Spirit did for me when I asked, 'Why the full, untrimmed beard, Lord?' The Spirit of the Holy One led me to this:

'If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it.'(Ex. 20:25 NASB)

The way that God has made Man is with a beard. [22](#) When we shave it to beautify [23](#) ourselves, as the ancient Greeks and Romans did, we alter God's design for us. It is a profaning or defiling of what God has made. The Hebrew word used in the translation, 'profane' is tih-hal-leh-hah, which means, to 'defile'. Benjamin Davidson says it means, 'to be pierced, wounded' 'to make common, to profane, pollute, defile' 'to violate, break, a covenant'.[24](#)

This verb is used of Yeshua being pierced through at His Death (Isaiah 53:5).[25](#) When we follow the world and shave, breaking God's Commandment, we are actually defiling ourselves. It would be if someone took the Mona Lisa and shot arrows through it. It would destroy the original intent of the artist.

I have also come to see it as one of God's ways to distinguish between a man and a woman. In this day when men have long hair and woman have shaved heads, it is hard to distinguish some men from some women. God never intended this. This is brought out in diverse passages as 'just weights and measures' and Yeshua's pronouncement of death to the fig tree.

In two places in the Torah, Adonai commands 'just weights and measures'.[26](#) This is a picture of righteousness and honesty. Telling someone that a weight for measuring is one pound or one kilo, while it is actually a little more or less, makes the one responsible, a robber of another's goods, in the ancient way of buying and selling. We are to present ourselves to others as who we are, not like the Pharisees represented themselves as righteous and honest when in fact, they were wicked.

When Yeshua cursed the fig tree, He didn't do it out of malice.[27](#) It was to be a picture for us of Judgment Day. When the fig tree has leaves on it, it should also have figs. The fig tree presented itself to Yeshua as having food on it but when Yeshua came to satisfy His hunger, He saw that the fig tree had 'lied' or misrepresented itself. Those who claim Yeshua with all the outward 'signs' (going to church, 'belief' in Jesus, etc.), but who do not have His Fruit (Gal. 5:22-23), will be similarly cursed on the Day of Judgment.

The People of Adonai, walking with Yeshua our Messiah, should have love for Him in our heart and walk in His ways. He had a full beard. It wasn't by chance. He is our example of holiness, from the inside out. There was no mistaking Yeshua for a woman in His day. Let there be no mistaking of us as men in ours.

ENDNOTES:

1. Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 562.

1. R. L. Harris, Editor; Gleason Archer, Jr. and Bruce Waltke, Associate Editors, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 599-600.
2. *Ibid.* p. 600.
3. W.H. Bellinger, Jr., *New International Biblical Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), p. 120.
4. Rev. James M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972; originally written around 1874), pp. 93-94, note 165. The word 'polled' is archaic and means, 'shorn of hair; bald'; J. M. Sinclair, General Consultant, Diana Treffry, Editorial Director, *Collins English Dictionary*, Fourth Edition (Glasgow, Scotland: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), p. 94-95, note 165.
5. *Ibid.* p. 94, note 165.
6. Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, p. 620.
7. Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, p. 713.
8. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, Editors; John Willis, Translator, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 463. Ellinger, HAT I/4, 261.
9. One such is Deut. 12:29-31 where the Lord says not to worship Him the way the pagans do (and Christmas is certainly pagan). It also states not to add to His Words and the celebration of Christmas is certainly adding to the holy days of Adonai.
10. Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, General Editors, *The Chumash*, 2nd edition: 2nd impression (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., Feb. 1994), p. 664, note 27.
11. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001; originally published by T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1866-91), pp. 602-603.
12. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, pp. 143-144, note 273.
13. *Ibid.* p. 149, note 288.
14. *Ibid.* p. 94, note 165.
15. J. D. Douglas, M.A., B.D., S.T.M., Ph.D., Organizing Editor, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Part 1 (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), p. 7.
16. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor, Everett F. Harrison, Roland K. Harrison and William Sanford LaSor, Associate Editors, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. one (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 442. So unusual was it for a Hebrew not to have a full beard that Adonai was able to use the absence of it as a sign of great destruction coming upon Jerusalem because the conqueror would humiliate the men by shaving their beards. (See also Ezra 9:3; Ps. 133.2)
17. The Mennonites practice this. Some shave the cheeks so that from a side view, there appears to be an 'L' shape and all shave the mustache. The shaving of the mustache was not done so as to avoid soup and drink from catching on it but was a theological statement. They did it in order not to look like a Jew. The word used in Jer. 49:32 is pay-ah which Davidson defines as 'corner or extremity of the beard, i.e. whiskers' with the exact phrase that is used in 49:32 kitz-zot-say pe-ah

- as, 'men having their whiskers clipped.' Some English renditions don't translate it as it should be. Benjamin Davidson, **The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon** (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 620. The phrase is also in Jer. 25:23 and 9:26, so the cites listed expressly speak of the beard even though the English may not seem to.
18. Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), pp. 516-517.
 19. As for the fact of His beard, Is. 50:6 states, 'I gave My back to those who strike Me and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard. I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.'
 20. One such place we note is Paul's greatest theological letter where he states what for him, was an obvious reality: 'For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into slavery to sin.' (Rom. 7:14)
 21. Not all men have the potential for a beard. This is not the issue though. If one can grow a beard, according to the Commandment, one should. If one cannot grow a beard, they are not sinning.
 22. The ancient Romans also shaved so that the enemy soldier wouldn't be able to grasp their beard with one hand and plunge a knife into their belly with the other. It was a tactical advantage the Romans had over their enemies.
 23. Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 260. The verb is a Piel future, 2nd person masculine singular with a 3rd person feminine singular suffix (her), p. 755.
 24. Some translations have 'wounded' but the more accurate rendering would be as stated.
 25. Lev. 19:36: 'You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin; I am YHVH your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt.' Deut. 25:13: 'You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small.' And Proverbs and Micah pick up on the theme of it. Here are two cites: Prov. 20:10: 'Differing weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to Adonai.' Mic. 6:11: 'Can I justify wicked scales and a bag of deceptive weights?'
 26. Matt. 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14, 19-26.