

Talmud Passage of the Week

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Look for new passages approximately every 2 weeks (next passage approximately 11/20/96).

BH

What Your Haircut Says About You

Dear Friends,

Greetings! Our new programs are getting off the ground quite nicely. Check out the new Jewish-Christian dialogue at the website! Our prayer requests have also begun for those of you who have illness among you. We wish for God to bring you a speedy, complete healing.

Now, on to our passage.

Bavli Ta'anit 17a, Steinsaltz, Volume 14, pp. 34-36:

Our Rabbis taught: A king cuts his hair every day, a High Priest from Friday to Friday, an ordinary priest once in thirty days.

"A king cuts his hair every day." What is the reason? Rabbi Abba bar Zavda said: The verse says: "Your eyes shall see the king in his beauty. (Isaiah 33:17)"

"A High Priest from Friday to Friday" What is the reason? Rav Shmuel bar Yitshak said: Because the *mishmarot* change.

"An ordinary priest once in thirty days." From where [do we know this]? "*Pera*" [here] is derived from "*pera*" regarding a Nazirite. It is written here: "And they shall not shave their heads and their long locks [*pera*] they shall not let grow (Ezekiel 44:20). And there the verse says [about the Nazirite]: "He shall be holy and he shall let the long locks [*pera*] of the hair of his head grow. (Numbers 6:5)" Just as there [it means] thirty [days] so too here [it means] thirty [days].

And from where [do we know about] the Nazirite himself? Rav Matnah said: An unspecified Naziriteship is 30 days. From where [do we know this]? The verse says: "He shall be (Numbers 6:5)", the numerological value [of which] is 30.

Rav Pappa said to Abaye: But perhaps Scripture meant this: They shall not let them grow long at all! He said to him: If it had been written: "They shall not let their locks grow long" [it might have been] as you aid. Now that it is written: "And their long locks they shall not let grow" they may be long, [but] they may not be grown [without restriction].

Background

Hierarchy

This baraita clearly shows us a hierarchy: the more important one is the more one has to attend to one's physical beauty. The King, here, outranks the High Priest who in turn outranks a regular priest. Their physical glory is an inspiration and reward to the average Israelite and they must take care to honor this responsibility. As we have already learned, the *mishmarot*, the groups of priests officiating in the Temple, change every Shabbat. It behooves the High Priest, then, to have his first impression on the new *mishmar* be a good one. Therefore, he trims his hair on Fridays in order to look especially good on Shabbat.

Note that the appearance of the sage is not mentioned.

Gezeirah Shavah

How do we know that a regular priest ought to trim his hair every 30 days? The technique of a *gezeirah shavah*, a verbal analogy, draws a comparison between the way a word is used in one place to the way it's used in another. The word *pera*, locks of hair, is used to refer to the priest (the verse from Ezekiel 44:20) where it is stated that a priest should not let his hair grow.

Nor shall they [the priests] shave their heads, nor suffer their locks (*pera*) to grow long but they shall crop their heads. Nor shall any priest drink wine, when they enter into the inner court. Nor shall they take a widow, or a divorced woman for wives but they shall take virgins of the seed of the House of Israel or a widow that is the widow of a priest. (Ezekiel 44:20-22)

This is just part of Ezekiel's long mandate to the priests. It is striking that the injunction to keep their hair trimmed is so strong and placed next to so important a precept as maintenance of the priestly lineage. Obviously, keeping one's hair trimmed was an important part of being a priest.

This word *pera* is used only three times in Scriptures (the other time is Deuteronomy 32:42), so it's no wonder that the sages need to use a *gezeirah shavah* to understand it. This is, after all, what you would do if you did not have a dictionary: you'd look to see how a word was used in other contexts. The section describing the Nazirite (Numbers 6) includes the following injunction:

All the days of his vow of separation there shall no razor come on his head until the days are fulfilled, during which he separates himself to the Lord he shall be holy and shall let the locks (*pera*) of the hair of his head grow. (Numbers 6:5)

The Nazirite must also maintain a state of ritual purity, avoiding contact with corpses and refrain from drinking wine. In these ways, the priest is quite similar to the Nazirite. The main difference between them is that the priest *must* cut his hair and the Nazirite may not.

Numerology

The verse from Numbers says that the Nazirite "will be" holy. In Hebrew, "will be" is spelled yud-heh-yud-heh. Numerologically, this is 30

yud = 5

heh = 10

yud = 5

heh = 10

Total: 30.

From this, the sages derive that the holiness of a person who takes a Nazirite vow must be 30 days long.

Priests' Hair

The conclusion, reached through the clarification of Rav Pappa and Abaye is that a priest may grow some hair but it may not be completely untrimmed. However, he need not be shaved bald.

Discussion Questions

1. This passage brings out the importance of people, their roles and the way their physical appearance embodies those roles and how important that is. Why do you think the physical appearance of kings and priests are mentioned, but not sages? How is embodiment, role and grooming important today? What would you think of an unkempt president or physician?

2. The Nazirites have a modern corollary today. There are those who eat only organically grown food, take special care that everything they eat is pure according to their standards and who often grow their hair long. What does their embodiment say to us? To them? What other ways do you see the dynamics about embodiment and social groups at play in our society?