



Tackle the World: Wear a Beard

If you walked through Williamsburg and saw a guy with a long beard, would you say he's a Chassid—or a hipster?

The Beard Crisis

Good Shabbos!

In the past decade, at least in the trendiest neighborhoods of America's trendiest cities, sporting a beard has become quite trendy. Besides the fact that it's trendy to be what's called a hipster, it's even trendier for a hipster to sport substantial facial hair. Young men who want to feel cool now don't shave.

In fact, popular TV talk show host Jimmy Kimmel once hosted a silly game entitled, "Hipster or Hasidic?" The audience was shown close-up video of the mouths and chins of unidentified men on the Brooklyn streets, and they had to divine if the beards belonged to hipsters or "Hasidim."

In most cases, to everyone's amusement, they got it wrong. But it only went to show just how popular beards have become in today's world.

There's an interesting story about a Chabad soldier and his beard.

During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the State of Israel was attacked on several fronts. Several days after the war broke out, an order came down from Israel's high command to soldiers stationed on the southern border that there was a serious concern that Egypt would attack Israel with chemical weapons. And so, to protect the soldiers, they were to be equipped with gas masks—and for the masks to be sealed and airtight on the face, soldiers with beards would have to shave.

Well, in one of the divisions in the Sinai that received this order, there

were three religious soldiers, one of them a Chabadnik by the name of Ephraim Mull. Now, you have to understand that in the Chasidic world in general and in Chabad in particular, wearing a beard is essential and critically important to the Chasidic identity. The Rebbe says in a sichah that you can tell if a young man got a Chasidic education if he puts on two pairs of tefilin and doesn't touch his beard (Teves 24, 5741, Sichos Kodesh Vol. II, pg. 34). But here, a Chabadnik suddenly got an order that required him to shave his beard! His eyes practically went dark. He later related that it was like a nightmare—he could not imagine himself without a beard!

In his unit, there were several other religious soldiers who used specialized shaving devices that functioned sort of like scissors (not razor), in a manner permissible under halachah according to several opinions. These soldiers in turn argued that it would be okay for Ephraim Mull to shave like that, especially since they were in a life-threatening situation.

But as a Chabadnik, Ephraim Mull was not ready to even hear such a thing. He approached his commanding officer, who loved him, and said that while he knew it was an order from the top, he was concerned that if he were to shave his beard, he would no longer be the same soldier.

He'd be a mop, a nothing. He went on to tell the commanding officer that none other than Shimshon HaGibor, the legendary Samson the Mighty himself, had lost all his strength when they cut off his hair—and so if he were to shave, he'd be left with no strength, too.

"But it's an order from the general!" the commanding officer responded.

"Did you ever hear of the Lubavitcher Rebbe?" asked the Chabadnik.

Definitely, answered the officer.

So the Chabadnik asked him for permission to ask the Rebbe whether it was truly a life threatening situation or not—and if the Rebbe said yes, then he and his friends would shave their beards. The officer agreed.

Now Ephraim Mull contacted his family, who immediately reached out to the Rebbe's office. Two nights went by. He then was told to call home. Doing so, his wife informed him that they'd received a response from the Rebbe.

In it, the Rebbe had replied that A: It was clear that there'd be no gas attacks and B: the soldier could in fact wear a mask without the beard interfering at all—and for more security, the soldier could carry a pair of scissors with him such that if there would actually be a need, he could remove the beard in a moment.

And then the Rebbe added something interesting: During the First World War, which was the first time chemical weapons were widely used, all the armies involved used gas masks, including England—but they still allowed Sikh Indian soldiers of the British military to not remove their beards; and they were known to be excellent soldiers.

So our Chabadnik went back to his commanding office and said, “The Rebbe said that there will be no chemical attack.” The officer asked him how the Rebbe could possibly know when the Rebbe didn't work in intelligence. The Chabadnik answered that if the Rebbe said so, then he knows—and so he was not prepared to shave his beard. The commanding officer signed off on the dispensation that due to religious reasons, the soldier in question could not shave his beard—and today, we know that in fact, during the Yom Kippur War, there were no gas attacks. (My Story, Issue 10.)

And that brings us right to this week's Torah portion.

The Big Gimmel

In the Parshah of Tazria, we learn about the laws of tumah and taharah, ritual impurity and purity, at great length. The Torah tells us, “And should a man or woman have an affliction on the head or in the beard...” (Vayikra 13:29). What the Torah is talking about is a person who has a disease or stain where the hair is—for a woman, on the head and for a man, in the beard. Then, the Torah says that it's incumbent upon the Kohen, the priest, to inspect the stain and decide if it's Tzora'as or not. But if it's hard for a Kohein to conclude what it exactly is, then the Torah prescribes an unusual resolution of the situation: “And he shall shave [the affliction]”: it is then required by the man with the affliction to shave his beard so that the Kohein can decide whether he's pure or not.

So when we look at the actual text of the Torah in the original Hebrew, and look at the word “v'his'galach,” and he shall shave, we discover something very unusual: the letter “gimmel” in that word is greatly enlarged.

Now, there are over 304,000 individual letters in the actual text of a hand-written Torah scroll. Most of these are written at normal size. But

there are places throughout the scroll where specific letters are written smaller than usual. For example, at the start of the Book of Vayikra, the “aleph” in the word “Vayikra” is smaller than the other letters.

Conversely, there are certain letters throughout the Torah that are penned larger than usual. For example, in the most famous verse of all, “Shma Yisrael...” (Devarim 6:2), the “ayin” of the word “Shma” and the “daled” of the word “echad” are larger than the other letters.

Changes like these always prompt questions as to why there are these sudden changes to the sizes of the letters. And almost in every case, the change is there to emphasize something—the Torah wants to interrupt the flow of the reading to draw attention to a hidden lesson in the word in question.

So now we can ask: what is the deeper message behind the enlarged letter *gimmel* in the word *v’hisgalach*?

The Talmud (Kiddushin 30a) notes that the verse containing *v’hisgalach* falls at the very center of the entire Torah, which may help explain why the *gimmel* is unusually large. But the Baal HaTurim offers a different insight. He writes: “The *gimmel* in *v’hisgalach* is enlarged because there are three—(*gimmel* being the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet)—who are commanded to shave in various places where hair grows: the *Nazir*, the *Metzora*, and the *Levi’im*.”

Let’s elaborate: there are three cases in the Torah where someone is instructed to shave all the hair from their body.

First, the *Metzora*—someone afflicted with *tzara’as*—must shave their entire body after healing, as part of their purification process, followed by bringing a korban.

Second, the *Nazir*, a person who takes on a vow of abstinence to reach a heightened level of holiness, refrains from wine, contact with the dead, and cutting their hair for at least 30 days. At the conclusion of their term of *Nezirus*, the Torah commands them to shave their head.

Third, the *Levi’im*. In Bamidbar (8:6), G-d commands Aharon, “Take the Levi’im from among the Children of Israel and purify them.” The Torah then details the process: “Sprinkle upon them the purifying waters and pass a razor over all their flesh, and they shall wash their garments and be purified.” In preparation for their service in the Mishkan, they had to remove all body hair as part of their spiritual initiation.

So the enlarged *gimmel*—numerically equivalent to three—hints to these three cases where Torah commands a full-body shaving.

The Deeper Meaning

But perhaps there's another layer here. The large *gimmel* may also highlight just how difficult this command is, especially for someone who grows a beard out of religious devotion. According to Kabbalah, the beard represents and channels the *Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim*—the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. The Rebbe often quoted this idea and added that growing a beard is a *segulah*—a spiritual conduit—for *parnassah*, livelihood.

So the fact that in recent years, and by Divine Providence, of course, thousands if not millions of men around the world are now growing out their beards, is so that a greater presence of the Thirteen Attributes is channeled into our universe—meaning, that G-d is showing greater mercy on all inhabitants of the world and as a result, prompting people to be kinder and more helpful to each other.

So for any man who wants to do good work, the first order of business is: grow out your beard! After all, you don't need to be a "Hasid" today to have a beard—just ask Jimmy Kimmel! Even the hipsters have beards. Good Shabbos!