

Shaving during Sefirah

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The Gemara (Yevamos 62b) tells us that during the days between pesach and shavuos 12,000 pairs of Rabbi Akiva's talmidim died. The gemara describes that they all died from a plague called ascarah. It was understood in retrospect that the reason for this was because they did not treat each other with the proper respect. The poskim also identify this time period a general time in which many decrees were passed against the Jewish people living in France and Germany. Due to these tragedies, we have the minhag to observe various forms of aveilus during this period. Two such observances which have been accepted by the Jewish community are shaving and haircutting. What follows is a discussion of the permissibility or prohibition of shaving during sefiras ha'omer.

Defining Tisporet

As mentioned above, the aveilus that is observed during sefirah is a minhag. No mention of this minhag is found in the Gemarah or the early rishonim. When the Ritz Gi'at mentions the mourning during sefirah, he only prohibits weddings. The earliest source that is found for this issur is in the writings of the Ri Ibbin Shu'eb (drashah l'shmuni shel pesach) and his opinion is quoted by the Tur (493). These Rishonim write that the minhag is "shelo lhistaper" not to get a haircut. Whether shaving is included in this issur is unclear. When defining the word Tisporet, the gemarah has two examples. In Maseches Smachos (7:11) the Braisah teaches us aveilus prohibits the cutting of facial hair in addition to the hair on the head. However, the gemarah in Mo'ed Kattan (24a) seems to only prohibit cutting the hair on one's head. The Rambam (avel 5:2) paskens that the main issur is to cut the hair on one's head. He adds: "Just as an avel cannot cut the hair on his head, so too is he prohibited from cutting the hair of his beard and all other hair." Thus, it seems that although the word tisporet refers mainly to haircutting, shaving is also included in the prohibition.

Practical Halacha

Concerning the permissibility or prohibition of shaving, there are three major opinions. The vast majority of orthodox Jews assume that the Shulchan Aruch's ruling against haircutting applies to shaving as well, and completely prohibit shaving during the assigned sefirah period. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (nefesh harav p. 191) was of the opinion that shaving was permissible during sefirah. He reasons that when the bnei yisrael accept a new minhag, that minhag must be patterned after an existing halacha, either mid'oraisah or mid'rabanah. An aveil observes three major steps in his mourning: 1) the 'shivah' period, observed during the first week, 2) the 'shloshim' which is the remaining thirty days, 3) the remaining twelve months. Rav Soloveitchik assumed that the aveilus of sefirah was patterned after the aveilus of the twelve months. During this period, both shaving and haircuts are prohibited. However, the gemarah (mo'ed kattan 22b) writes that if he becomes disheveled 'ad sheyig'ar bo chaverav'-until his friends scold him, he may cut his hair and shave. Thus, one who normally shaves every day,

and refrains from doing so for a few days would be considered to have reached this point. Thus, it is permissible for him to shave during this period. (It is important to note that Rav Soloveitchik himself did not trim his beard during sefirah, because he did not consider that to be sufficiently unkempt to apply this din.) Rav Soloveitchik's opinion is obviously not the mainstream shittah, but it has been accepted by some of his Talmidim.

A third approach to this inyan is that it is assur to shave during the week, but permissible on erev shabbos in order to give honor to the upcoming holy day. This is the opinion of Rav Ahron Lichtenstein, and I have been told that it is also the minhag in Yeshivas Chafetz Chaim. Obviously, one should not simply choose one of these three opinions arbitrarily, but should discuss the issue with his Rav. In a situation when one has a situation in which he will lose money, or possibly his job, Rav Moshe Feinstein writes (O.C. 4: siman 102) that it is permissible to shave. However, during the week in which Tish'a b'av falls out, since it is halachikly assur m'drabanan to shave, one may not do so under these circumstances.

In honor of a Simchah

The Rema (493:2) writes that it is permissible for the father of a boy receiving a bris milah may take a haircut (and shave) in honor of the simchah of the bris. The Mishnah Berurah (s.k. 12) explains that this includes the sandek and the mohel as well. In a case where the bris milah takes place on a shabbos, the Mishnah Berurah writes (s.k. 13) that one may shave on Friday, even early in the day. The same might be true if the bris falls out on Sunday (as will be explained later).

The Dagul Mer'vavah writes (ibid:3) that a choson who is having his aliyah l'torah on the shabbos before his wedding (Aufruf) may shave on erev shabbos. Shaving is also permitted for a Choson during the week of Sheva Brachos.

The same cannot be said for a boy celebrating his Bar-Mitzvah. The Mishneh Halachot writes (chelek 6, siman 45) that even though there are sources that proclaim it a mitzvah to make a meal for a bar mitzvah celebration, the bar mitzvah himself does not have the halachos of a choson, and his simchah doesn't override the aveilus. In a situation where his hair is exceedingly long and he is not presentable, the She'arim Metzuyanim B'halachah (siman102) paskens that he can cut his hair while he is still a kattan.

If one was invited to a wedding which takes place during sefirah, Rav Moshe Feinstein paskens (O.C. 2 siman 95) that one may attend the wedding, since it is a mitzvah to be mesameach the choson and kallah. Whether he is allowed to shave for such an event depends on whether he would otherwise attend the chasunah. If he would be too embarrassed to show up and bring joy to the ba'alei simchah, he may shave, but if he would attend anyway, then he may not.

Rosh Chodesh

Generally, it is forbidden to shave in honor of Rosh Chodesh Iyar (if one begins his aveilus immediately following yom tov). However, if Rosh Chodesh falls out on Friday

and shabbos, or shabbos and Sunday (it is a two day Rosh Chodesh) the Mishnah Berurah paskens (s.k. 5) that one can shave on Friday due to the double simchah.

Lag Ba'omer

Regardless of during which part of sefirah one observes aveilus, virtually all of klal yisrael suspends its mourning in honor of lag ba'omer. The poskim are divided as to whether this begins in the evening of the 33rd day, or must one wait until the next morning. The Rema (s'if 3) writes that one suspends the aveilus beginning in the morning. However, the Mishnah Berurah (s.k. 11) quotes from achronim who are lenient and allow shaving on lag ba'omer eve. The generally accepted practice is to wait until morning. If one attends a wedding on the eve of lag ba'omer, he may shave in order to attend.

When lag ba'omer falls out on Sunday, the Rema quotes the Maharil who writes that it is mutar to shave on erev shabbos. Perhaps one can explain reason for this in the following way: if one were to enter into shabbos having not shaved, and then were to shave on Sunday morning, it would disgrace the honor of the shabbos. Therefore, we permit shaving on erev shabbos so as to add kavod to the shabbos. Under the circumstances it would seem logical to simply wait until Monday morning before shaving, but this would constitute too great of a chumrah for something that is a minhag b'almah. Thus the Rema is lenient and allows shaving on erev shabbos, the 32nd day of the Omer. Along these lines, it seems that one should be equally lenient if he is having his son's bris milah on Sunday. However, the Kaf Hachaim (37) writes that in this case he should shave on Sunday Morning. Rav Shimon Eider (p. 329) cites poskim who side with the Rema's logic, and this seems to be the more accepted practice.

Regardless of which shita one accepts and whether one does or does not shave during sefirah, it is incumbent upon all of us to remember the reason why we are mourning. Let our sefirah beards be a lesson to us every time we look in the mirror, and remind us to always be noheig kavod zeh bazeh and to fervently observe Rebbi Akiva's klal gadol batorah.