ACHAREI MOS (LEVITICUS 16:1-20:27)

Hanging Out on the Corner

2012 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

PESACH SHEINI

This Sunday, one month after the Eve of Passover, is known as "Pesach Sheini". In Temple times, this "Second Passover" provided an opportunity to those who had been unable to bring the Passover offering. Even today, when there is no opportunity to bring that offering, Pesach Sheini teaches us an important lesson:

Read more about Pesach Sheini here.

"Hanging Out on the Corner"

As the story goes, a secular Jew got on a subway in New York City. This fellow, who had come to America from Poland, shuddered when he found himself face to face with two VERY Jewish looking fellows with long beards and big black hats.

Our "hero" had spent the last 40 years doing everything in his power to "fit in" among the gentiles and assimilated Jews in his neighborhood. He wanted to distance himself as much as possible from anything that remotely resembled the "*Shtetel*." This was America! Europe belonged to the past! And now he was confronted by two walking anachronisms known as *Chassidim*.

He was repulsed. He could barely hold back the venom in his voice. "What's the matter with you *Chassidim*?" he demanded in his still-Yiddish-accented English. "Why must you call attention to yourselves in front of the *Goyim*? This is America, notPoland! I'm embarrassed to be seen with you!"

The two "*Chassidim*" looked at each other and then at him with confusion. "I don't know what you're talking about," said one of them. "What's a '*Goyim*?' We're not from Poland. We're from Pennsylvania Dutch Country. We're Amish."

Our belligerent Jewish anti-Semite instantly became an advocate of diversity. "Oh, I'm so-o-o-o sorry!" he gushed with a scarlet face. "I have so much respect for you people. I think it's so wonderful that you continue to follow your traditions and don't let modern society influence your lifestyle!"

The "Amish" fellow looked back at him with a smile, and asked him, in Yiddish, "So why was it so terrible when I was *Chassidic*?"

One of the things about *Chassidim* (and others) that confound the uninitiated is the concept of *Payos*, literally "*corners*." Some let these "side curls" hang "freestyle" down the sides of their heads, resting on their shoulders and below.

Others wrap them several times around their ears, and others tuck them under their hats. The more "moderate" style of sporting *Payos*, also popular among many non-*Chassidim*, is to keep them relatively short, guiding them over and behind the ear.

What are *Payos*? Why do some people have them, while others don't? Why are there so many ways to wear them? Which way is right? What is their significance?

Actually, EVERYBODY is supposed to wear *Payos*! So where, you may ask if you've seen my picture, are MY *Payos*? It really depends upon how you define them!

Do not round the Payos -- corners, of your heads, and do not destroy the Payos -- corners of your beard. (Leviticus, 19:29)

The prohibition of "*rounding*" is to cut one's hair in such a way that there is one continuous circle of hair from the forehead to the temple to behind the ear, and all the way around. (Envision a monk's haircut.) The prohibition of "*destroying*" the beard refers to using a razor blade to shave one's beard. (As opposed to the use of depilatories and certain types of electric shavers, which use a different technique than a straight edge. -- The rules pertaining to the nuances of beard shaving are beyond the scope of this week's message.)

Among the various explanations given for the Torah's rules of hair cutting is that these were done by other religions, and we are required to distance ourselves from these practices. (Sefer Hachinuch) Ibn Ezra explains that it is appropriate for there to be a distinctly "Jewish appearance."

The bottom line, when it comes to *Payos*, is to allow a minimal amount of hair growth to remain at the side of the head. Almost everyone today, Jew and Gentile, fulfils this as a matter of course. (Although some of the "mushroom" haircuts would seem to violate this Commandment.)

What many groups, most notably Yemenite and *Chassidic* Jews, have done, is to emphasize this *Mitzvah*. Not only do they not cut the hair short, they allow it to grow long! In my neighborhood, I will often see *Chassidim* riding by on bikes or motorcycles, with their *Payos* flying behind them in the wind!

Some Jews, like the apocryphal fellow sited above, are uncomfortable seeing fellow Jews who dress in a manner that is so conspicuous and different. My feeling, although I don't personally dress that way, is, what could be more Jewish! The Talmud says that one of the reasons that the ancient Israelites merited to be taken out of Egypt is that they maintained a uniquely Jewish mode of dress.

There is a story told about a conversation the leaders of two *Chassidic* groups. One of these groups is very strict about growing long, untrimmed beards. However, most members of this group do not grow longer *Payos*. (They stick with the minimum, mentioned above.) In the other group, some men trim or shave their beards, but they all have *Payos*, at least long enough to go over and behind the ear.

The leader of the "beard" group asked the other leader why his group places more emphasis on *Payos* than it does on beards. His answer: "I've seen priests with beards. I've never seen a priest with *Payos*!"

Have a great Shabbos.

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