

Beards

Do you believe that men should wear beards?

It is not difficult for people to acknowledge how wearing beards (Heb. sing. *zaqan*, זָקַן), or facial hair in general, is quite commonplace among many male Jews. Many Jewish cultural features have been rooted within the instruction of Leviticus 19:27, “You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads nor harm the edges of your beard” (NASU).¹ There has been internal debate within Judaism what “the side-growth of your beard” (NJPS) actually means, though, with varied applications of this present among modern Jews.²

Some interpret this command as relating to a man’s full beard, others only his sideburns, and others the extremities of the beard. Some believe that a man’s facial hair has actual “boundaries,” more or less defined, and others believe that the hair on a man’s face should just grow without any type of grooming. Some believe that a man can trim and groom his beard. Others believe that a man can shave his beard, provided it is with an electric razor. And, others even think that a man can shave his beard with a conventional depilatory razor, provided that it has at least two blades, and not a single cutting edge. Consequently, the same variance of interpretations has made its way into the Messianic movement, and one will see a wide array of applications. Ronald L. Eisenberg offers the following summary on wearing the beard, trimming, and shaving within the broad Jewish tradition:

“The Torah expressly prohibits shaving the ‘side-growth of your beard’ (Lev. 19:27, 21:5), which was interpreted to mean the hair between the head and the cheeks. The long and curly hair at the side of the head, known as *payot* (in Hebrew) and *poyes* (in Yiddish), has become a sign of ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic Jews. The reason for the ban on shaving this area of the beard was presumably to distinguish the Israelites from the priests of pagan cults, who ritually shaved certain areas of their faces to designate their sacred status. Another interpretation is that leaving the corner of the head uncut serves as a visual reminder of the commandment to also leave the unharvested corner of the field (*pe’ah*) and designate it for the poor, thus emphasizing the ethical requirement to provide for the needy (Lev. 19:9).

“In biblical times, the beard was regarded as a symbol of male attractiveness and virility and a natural feature distinguishing men from women. Thus a shaved face was a sign of humiliation. When Hanun, king of Ammon, accused the envoys of King David of being spies plotting to overthrow his government, he ‘clipped off one side of their beards and cut away half of their garments at the buttocks, and sent them off’ (2 Sam. 10:4). Understanding their deep humiliation, David ordered the men to hide in Jericho until their beards had grown again. Similarly, shaving the head and beard was an indication of intense grief and bereavement. In Jeremiah’s (48:37) prophecy about the demise of Moab, he declared: ‘every head [will be] bald, and every beard [will be] shorn.’ Ezra (9:3) stated that when hearing about the assimilation and idolatry committed by the Israelites, ‘I rent my garment and robe, I tore my hair out of my head and beard, and I sat desolate.’

“Tearing one’s clothing is still a sign of mourning, but ironically, since many Jewish men are now clean shaven, growing a beard—as opposed to shaving—has become a sign of mourning. Shaving the head and body was mandated for those who had been stricken with the skin disease *tzara’at* (Lev. 14:8) as well as for the Nazirite contaminated through contact with the dead (Num. 6:9). Pulling a man by his beard may have been a show of affection (2 Sam. 20:9).

“The Mishnah codified the biblical law not to ‘mar’ the corners of the beard (Mak. 3:5), and the Talmud termed the beard ‘the glory of the face’ (Shab. 152a), a sign of maturity and piety. Young priests in the Temple had to wait until their beards were ‘fully grown’ to ‘act as the representative of the community and to descend before the ark [lead the congregation in prayer] and to pronounce the priestly benediction’ (Hul. 24b). In general, though, clipping the beard was tolerated and only shaving with a razor prohibited. One person was

¹ For a further review, consult “Beards and Hairstyles in the Biblical World,” in Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1084.

² Consult Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), pp 590-592 for a summary of how the issue of beards, grooming beards, and shaving is approached in the mainline Jewish Synagogue.

permitted 'to cut his hair in the gentile fashion as he was in close contact [had frequent dealings] with the government' (BK 83a).

"During the early Middle Ages, Jews living in Islamic countries wore long beards; those living in Christian-dominated portions of Europe clipped them with scissors. As one of the main factors distinguishing men from women, shaving was effectively a violation of the commandment prohibiting men and women from adopting the clothing and other practices associated with the other sex (Deut. 22:5). Maimonides suggested that the reason for the biblical prohibition on shaving was that idolatrous priests were clean shaven. Still, the Shulchan Arukh ruled that as long as a razor is not used, it is acceptable to remove all facial hair (YD 181:10).

"....Some European rulers (such as Nicholas I of Russia) demanded that Jews shave off their beards and sidelocks, whereas others (for example, Maria Theresa of Austria) required that Jews keep their beards to be easily differentiated from Christians.

"Today, some strictly observant Jews do not shave their beards, as a sign of their devotion to tradition. Many more Jews do not cut their beards (or shave) during the *Sefirah* period of counting the Omer....and for the three weeks preceding Tisha b'Av...in accordance with the mournful tone of these periods. Despite the rabbinic pronouncements against it, shaving the beard is halakhically permitted if one uses scissors, a chemical depilatory, or an electric shaver with two cutting edges. Only instruments with a single cutting edge are forbidden."³

In approaching the word of Leviticus 19:27, today's Messianic people should acknowledge the diversity of opinions within Judaism. Whatever interpretation you might hold about beards, you should respect others.

It is notable that there is a distinct Messianic subculture which would insist that all men wear beards, and there are those who will often be judgmental and quite harsh of men who do not have them. This might even extend to various jobs, particularly those in law enforcement or the military, where having a beard might be perceived as a safety hazard.

Having or not having a full beard is not an issue of a man's spirituality, as one's relationship with the Lord is contingent on having a heart and mind which have been transformed by the Holy Spirit, demonstrating God's love to others in the world. The issue of beards is definitely a place where God's reminder to the Prophet Samuel should be acknowledged: "God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the LORD sees into the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7, Common English Bible).

Some men are incapable of growing beards, or even a moustache or goatee, and that is the way God made them. Are they less spiritual because they cannot have a beard? Others have beards as a matter of personal preference, and not necessarily because they think the Bible requires them. In some Messianic congregations, you will find that facial hair on men is not an issue, where in others it is an issue. Many men in Messianic congregations, while recognizing the diversity of views within Judaism regarding facial hair, may decide to have a beard partially out of personal preference, partially out of a dislike of shaving, and perhaps at least passively to keep a Torah instruction.

Concurrent with the variance of views, concerning beards and facial hair within Judaism, is how much of Orthodox Judaism practices the custom of wearing *payot* (פְּאוֹת). This interpretation stems from the meaning of the Hebrew word for "corner" in Leviticus 19:27, *peah* (פֶּאֵה), "side, edge, border" (BDB).⁴ *Payot* are often curls that extend down from the area of the sideburns, and they vary in length from a few inches, to even eighteen inches. Not very many in the Messianic community, however, practice the custom of having *payot*.

³ Eisenberg, pp 590-592.

⁴ BDB, 802.