

HAIRCUTS AND SHAVING DURING THE THREE WEEKS

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

The Talmud[1] tells us that only one who has properly mourned the Temple's destruction will merit to see its rebuilding. Accordingly, the three-week period between the fast of the seventeenth of Tammuz and Tishah b'Av, known as Bein ha-Metzarim, was established by the Rabbis[2] as a period of mourning over the destruction of the two Batei ha-Mikdash. To create an atmosphere of mourning, they restricted certain activities that are normally permitted. What are these restrictions? One of them[3] is the injunction against men, women and children taking a haircut or a shave. These are the basic rules[4] :

1. It is permitted to trim a mustache that interferes with eating.[5]
2. It is permitted to pluck one's eyebrows or eyelashes.[6]
3. Married women may cut hair that is protruding from their head covering[7].
4. It is permitted to comb one's hair even though some hair will get torn out while combing[8].
5. Nail cutting is permitted[9].
6. A mourner who completed his mourning period during the Three Weeks may take a haircut and a shave[10].
7. The prohibition of haircutting applies even to small children under the age of chinuch[11]. Thus if an upsheren falls during the Three Weeks, it should either be moved up or postponed[12].
8. If absolutely necessary, it is permitted to take a haircut or a shave on the evening preceding the Fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz[13].
9. On the day of a baby's bris[14], the father, the sandak and the mohel may take a haircut[15].

Question: In some communities it has become customary to shave or trim one's beard on erev Shabbos during the Three Weeks in honor of Shabbos. Is there a halachic source for this leniency?

Discussion: Yes, there is. It is based on the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch,[16] which permits laundering [during the Nine Days] for Shabbos if one has no other garments to wear. Magen Avraham, quoted by all later authorities and the Mishnah Berurah[17], wonders why a similar leniency does not exist concerning haircutting as well. He answers that haircutting is not permitted for Shabbos since people do not take a haircut every week, while everyone needs clean clothing every week. Thus the Rabbis allowed laundering for Shabbos under certain circumstances but did not

allow haircutting.

Based on this Magen Avraham, it may be argued^[18] that this restriction applies only to taking a haircut but not to shaving. Many men shave several times a week or even daily, so that shaving is comparable to laundering, not to haircutting. Accordingly, it would be permitted to shave on erev Shabbos, and possibly this is the source for those who do so^[19]. While those who have this custom are permitted to rely upon it^[20], most communities did not accept this leniency^[21]. As with all established customs, one may not deviate from his traditional custom.

Question: Many people involved in the business, academic or professional world shave or trim their beards throughout the Three Weeks. Is this allowed?

Discussion: While Shulchan Aruch and Mishnah Berurah do not mention such a leniency, it is mentioned by several contemporary poskim^[22]. Rav M. Feinstein^[23] rules that the custom not to shave during the Three Weeks does not apply to situations where a monetary loss would result. Accordingly, if one would incur a loss by not shaving, he may shave. Rav Feinstein writes that this leniency does not apply to the week of Tishah b'Av itself (i.e., from the Sunday before Tishah b'Av until Tishah b'Av), where it would be prohibited to shave even if a monetary loss would be sustained.

Rav Feinstein further explains^[24] that shaving is permitted only if otherwise a loss would be incurred. If appearing unshaven would merely engender ridicule [or would cause one to suffer embarrassment], the leniency does not apply.

Based on Rav Feinstein's rulings, the following rules apply:

1. Before one relies on the leniency of shaving during the Three Weeks, he must ascertain whether or not doing so would actually cause him a financial loss. With the relaxed standards of dress prevalent in today's world, it is difficult to find situations where one would actually lose his job or suffer monetary loss if he did not shave. When in doubt, one should discuss his case with a rabbi.
2. The leniency applies only to those days or those times when one must attend business meetings or discharge professional obligations, etc. It is not a blanket permit which allows any businessman, academician or professional to shave any time during the Three Weeks. Nowhere is it suggested that since it is permitted for a businessman to shave under extenuating circumstances, he may therefore dispense with the prohibition altogether. The prohibition remains in full force and it is lifted only when there is no other choice. Accordingly, a businessman who goes on vacation or is away from his office for several days over the weekend or a legal holiday, is not permitted to shave during that time.
3. Some people who became accustomed to shaving during their years of employment continue to do so even upon retirement. This is not permitted.

1. Ta'anis 31b, quoted in Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 554:25.

2. This is the custom of the Ashkenazic community, as recorded by Rama, O.C. 551:4. Sephardic communities have different customs.
3. The others are: 1. Getting married or participating in a wedding; 2. Listening to music and dancing; 3. Reciting shehecheyanu. See The Weekly Halachah Discussion, pgs. 423-428, for the details.
4. The Three Weeks period includes another period of more intensive mourning, called the Nine Days. The halachos of those days -from Rosh Chodesh Av through midday of the tenth of Av -are more restrictive in several areas. We are discussing the laws of the Three Weeks only, not the special, more stringent, halachos of the Nine Days.
5. O.C. 551:13.
6. Bein Pesach l'Shavuot, pg. 241, quoting an oral ruling from Rav S.Z. Auerbach and Rav S. Wosner.
7. Mishnah Berurah 551:79. When necessary, women may shave their legs; Rav M. Feinstein (Oholei Yeshurun, pg. 9). See also Igros Moshe, Y.D. 2:137 where he allows women to take haircuts when necessary during the Three Weeks. When necessary, a girl of marriageable age may take a haircut; Rav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Beisah, pg. 371).
8. Mishnah Berurah 551:20.
9. Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 122:5.
10. Mishnah Berurah 551:87.
11. Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 551:91. Aruch ha-Shulchan 551:31, however, seems to hold that only children above the age of chinuch are prohibited from taking a haircut. See also Igros Moshe, Y.D. 1:224, who agrees with this opinion.
12. Mishnas Yaakov, O.C. 551 quoting Rav Y.Y. Teitelbaum (Satmar Rav).
13. Igros Moshe O.C. 4:112-2. See also She'arim Metzuyanin b'Halachah 122:1, based on Igros Moshe O.C. 1:168.
14. Or the evening before; Mishnah Berurah 493:13. If the bris is on Shabbos, it is permitted to take a haircut on Friday; ibid. If the bris is on Sunday, most poskim do not permit taking a haircut on Friday; see Kaf ha-Chayim 493:36.
15. Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 122:15; Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 551:4, quoting Chasam Sofer; Kaf ha-Chayim 551:10; Pischei Teshuvah 551:1; She'arim Metzuyanin b'Halachah 122:16. See, however, Be'er Heitev 551:3, who rules stringently.
16. Rama O.C. 551:3.
17. 551:32.

18. See Chasam Sofer, Y.D. 348, who advances this argument.
19. She'arim Metzuyanim b'Halachah 122:5. See also Rav Akiva Eiger and Beirur Halachah (551:3), who quote the view of Tosafos which even allows haircutting in honor of Shabbos, just as laundering is permitted.
20. Kaf ha-Chayim 551:66. See also Nefesh ha-Rav, pg. 191.
21. Shemiras Shabbos K'hilchasah 42:52. One of the reasons suggested is that most people who rely on this leniency are not really doing so for the sake of honoring the Shabbos but rather for their own sake... (Teshuvos Sha'ar ha-Zekeinim, quoted by Pischei Teshuvah and Kaf ha-Chayim 551:66).
22. A possible source is Chasam Sofer, O.C. 158, who discusses permitting a mourner who had to attend an important business meeting to take a haircut during shivah and sheloshim.
23. Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:102. See also She'arim Metzuyanim b'Halachah 122:5.
24. Igros Moshe, C.M 1:93.

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