

PARSHAS NOSO – LONG OR SHORT HAIR? - MOSHE DOVID SPITZER

In our time, it is generally conventional for men to wear their hair short. Certainly in our Jewish circles, it is unusual to see men with flowing locks; in fact Chasidim are noted for cutting their hair extremely short. Does the Torah have anything to say about this? Is it better for men to shave their hair (except for the peiyos), or to have short hair, or long?

In halacha, long hair on a man seems to be considered unsightly:

- Haircuts are forbidden to mourners, during the Omer and the Three Weeks
- It is a mitzva to cut long hair in honour of Shabbos (Remo, Orach Chaim 260:1)
- A kohen had a monthly haircut, a kohen gadol weekly and a king every day (Sanhedrin 22b)

And there are also halachic problems with long hair:

- Tefillin – it might be a chatzitza, or get in the way of proper positioning (Mishna Berura 27:15)
- It might be considered to be following “chukas hagoy”, and might be considered excessively preening and haughty (see Yoreh Deah 178:1 & Be'er Heitev there)

Proofs from the Rishonim

Last year I came across an argument between Rashi and Rabbeinu Gershom (Krisos 26a). We know that a nozir must avoid wine and grow his hair. The gemora says that a nozir is actually considered to have sinned by depriving himself of wine. How does he atone for this sin?

- Rashi:** by having to **grow his hair** (during his nezirus) and look unsightly
R' Gershom: by having to **cut his hair** (at the end of his nezirus) and look unsightly

It seems that Rashi holds that long hair is unsightly, and Rabbeinu Gershom appears to favour long hair over a shaven head. I subsequently found that the Sefer Hachinuch (374) writes that *both long hair and shaven hair* are unsightly. Maybe both Rashi and Rabbeinu Gershom agree to this: they just disagree over which is more unsightly than the other. For Rashi it is long hair, whereas for Rabbeinu Gershom shaven hair looks worse.

The nozir from the south

The Gemora (Nedorim 9b) seems to praise the appearance of someone with long hair:

Shimon Hatzadik said... there came a nozir from the south, whose appearance was pleasing and whose locks hung down in curls. I asked him, “my son, why did you decide to cut your beautiful hair?” He replied: “I was shepherding my father’s sheep, and I came across a pool. I saw my reflection, and was seized with the urge to sin... I decided to shave my hair for the sake of Heaven.” I stood and kissed his head, and exclaimed “my son, I wish there would be more nezirim like you”.

I am not sure how this can be resolved with the sources above. In fact, I was surprised to find that the Sefer Hachinuch quotes this story to prove that long hair is *not* ideal!

Some other points to consider

Are the fashions and customs of each time and place relevant here?

Rather than discussing long/short hair, can we instead distinguish between hair that is kempt/unkempt? Short hair is generally neat and tidy; when it grows longer it can look neat or messy, depending on how it is cared for. [The Ramban (5:6) writes that a nozir grows his hair, “in contrast to the boys who curl their hair to become attractive”. We can debate whether the contrast is that the boys’ hair is short and curly and the nozir’s is long (Rabbi Chavel) – indicating that long hair is unattractive – or because the boys’ hair is long and curly whereas the nozir’s is long and unkempt (Artsroll) – suggesting that long, well groomed hair is attractive.]

A friend of mine pointed out that some long-haired people in Tanach are described as handsome, for example Avshalom (Shmuel 2, 14:25).

Women: it seems that a shaven head is considered unsightly. We see this from the yefas toar, a female prisoner of war (Ki Seitzei) – a Jew was allowed to marry her, but only after she had shaved her hair to make herself look ugly.

Interestingly, the Rogatchover Gaon (R' Yosef Rozin, 1858-1936 – pictured) was known to have unusually long hair. We don't know why, but one of the suggested reasons is that he didn't want to give up learning for the short period he would have to spend during the haircut with his head uncovered!

