

Commentary

FEBRUARY 2008 JUDAISM

Why Beards?

The traditional Jewish penchant for facial hair is a marker of deep cultural (and countercultural) attitudes. towards life itself.

by **Meir Y. Soloveichik**

BECAUSE OF A BEARD, A PAPACY WAS LOST. THAT IS THE STORY OF JOHANNES BESSARION, A 15TH-CENTURY cardinal and convert from Greek Orthodoxy who strove to reunite Eastern and Western Christianity. Extraordinarily influential among the Catholic hierarchy, Bessarion was widely thought to be a likely successor to Pope Nicholas V. But at the conclave following Nicholas's death, a serious personal flaw was pointed out: retaining an Eastern Orthodox custom shunned by Rome, Bessarion still sported a full beard. As the historian Mark Zucker tells it:



Not only did this result in Bessarion's loss of the pontifical throne, but his beard was later to cause him even greater humiliation and suffering. For a slight breach of etiquette during an embassy to Louis XI in 1471, the French king pulled him by the beard, an insult so serious and so upsetting that it is said to have brought about his death, from shame and grief, a year later.

To anyone familiar with talmudic tales, Bessarion's story cannot help bringing to mind another, much earlier episode of contested religious leadership. It seems the sage Rabban Gamliel, the *nasi* or religious head of post-Temple Jewry, was temporarily relieved of his position on account of what his colleagues considered a heavy-handed exercise of authority. The rabbis' ultimate choice of a successor was Elazar ben Azaryah, a brilliant scion of prestigious lineage. But Elazar, too, had a flaw, though the opposite of Bessarion's: being only eighteen years old, he did not yet have the full growth of facial hair expected of a Jewish religious leader. Fortunately, according to the Talmud, a miracle was wrought overnight, and Elazar awoke to find himself the owner of a long white beard. The story concludes that he was wont to say of himself: "Behold, I am akin to a man of seventy years."

The contrast between these two tales highlights the truth behind at least one popular visual stereotype of traditional Jews, and particularly of rabbis. Indeed, the Jewish penchant for beards as a cultural marker traces all the way back to the Bible. In the book of Chronicles, we read of the insult visited upon a group of David's servants who had been sent to comfort the Ammonite king Hanun on the death of his father. Suspecting the delegation of having come on a mission of espionage, Hanun



took David's servants, and shaved them, and cut off their garments in the middle to their hips, and sent them away. Then there went certain persons, and told David how the men had been treated. And he sent to meet them: for the men were greatly ashamed. And the king said, "Stay at Jericho until your beards are grown, and then return."

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Nor was this ancient Jewish horror of barefacedness a merely cultural phenomenon; it was intimately connected with a religious commandment. “Do not cut the edges of your beard,” the Bible explicitly instructs, adding elsewhere: “the edges of your beard you shall not destroy.” This ban was considered by the rabbis to be among the 365 prohibitions in the Torah, and breaking it as serious a sin as the consumption of pork. And so it has remained ever since.



Why? And, given the force of the prohibition, how is it that, as cursory inspection confirms, so many devout Jews today in fact go beardless?

The second question is the more quickly dispensed with: many traditionalist Jewish men have availed themselves of an ancient exegetical exception. In forbidding shaving, the biblical text, as we have just seen, employs two different verbs, enjoining the Israelites first not to “cut” the beard and then not to “destroy” it. In order to reconcile this seeming ambiguity, the Talmud argues that the one truly forbidden action is razoring—that is, a method that both shears the facial hair and thoroughly removes it. Alternative approaches, such as trimming (cutting but not destroying) or, at the other end of the spectrum, using a tweezers (destroying but not actually cutting), are permitted.

Basing themselves on this ruling, yeshiva students in Europe would commonly use a depilatory cream (which destroys but not by cutting) in order to burn the whiskers off the face. The cream was quite painful, and if left on too long could remove skin as well as hair. Thankfully, in 20th-century America, a new technology appeared: electric shavers. Although some halakhic authorities have opposed the use of such devices, others have permitted them on the grounds that, since they are known not to cut as close as a razor, they do not actually “destroy.”

Be all that as it may, the careful reader of the Bible and the Talmud cannot but conclude that the spirit of the law, if not the letter, is quite clear: Jewish men are encouraged to have beards. Again the question is: why? To help answer it, we can turn to another ancient society—one in which beardlessness was quite common, and especially among priests and royalty.

The practice of shaving makes its first appearance in the Bible in connection with the story of Joseph, who as a young man was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt, where he was subsequently imprisoned on false charges. The ruler of Egypt, learning of the young Israelite's knack for dream interpretation, orders him released from his prison cell and taken to the palace. And so, as we read in Genesis, Joseph "was shaved, and his clothes were changed, and he was brought before Pharaoh."

In Egypt, then, one might appear in public, and certainly in high or royal society, only in a barefaced state. As the historian Lisbeth Fried has written:



In contrast to the majority of peoples in the ancient Near East, for the ancient Egyptians, at least from the time of the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 b.c.e.), the custom among men was to shave beard and mustache, and wear a false goatee on special occasions. Foreigners can be distinguished from native Egyptians in many Egyptian tomb paintings by the presence of full beards.

Why were the Egyptians so ardent on the subject of hair removal? In *The Beginning of Wisdom*, a study of the biblical book of Genesis, Leon Kass points out that *the* defining cultural feature of ancient Egypt was its obsession with achieving immortality. One sees this quite dramatically, he notes, in the practice of mummification, a ritual that the Egyptians believed would allow the corpse to traverse the underworld in a living and vital state. Kass's point is vividly illustrated in the description of the mummification procedure offered by the Greek historian Herodotus. It involved the removal of the brains and all internal organs and then "covering the corpse with natron for 70 days," washing it, and wrapping it "from head to toe in bandages of the finest linen anointed with gum." According to other sources, the procedure culminated in the pronouncement of a blessing: "You will live again, you will live for ever. Behold, *you are young again for ever*" (emphasis added).

Wherever we look, writes Kass, “we see in Egypt the rejection of [bodily] change and the denial of death.” Shaving was a key element in this rejection. “No shaggy outlines or blemishes mar the perfectly smooth look. What appears to be an unveiling [of the human face] is actually also a veiling of age and disorder.” With this in mind, it begins to seem no accident at all that the Hebrew Bible, which steadily sets itself against pagan practices of every kind, should have positively enjoined the opposite practice—that is, the wearing of beards—thus visibly and deliberately repudiating the false blessing of eternal youthfulness and underscoring the fact of our eventual and inevitable mortality. In biblical Hebrew, the very word for beard, *zakan*, shares a root with *zaken*, an elderly person.

Moving forward in time from the ancient world, a different but no less instructive contrast with Jewish law and custom is offered by the tradition of shaving that developed in the Catholic priesthood—the same tradition that would cost Johannes Bessarion the papacy. Here the key element was the ideal not of youthfulness but of celibacy. Indeed, as Zucker notes, it was one and the same pope, Gregory VII (1073-1085), who by decree “enforced not only celibacy among the clergy but shaving as well.”

To be sure, a desire to differentiate Christians from both bearded Jews and bearded Muslims must have played a part in the development of this practice. But at least as great a part seems to have been played by the association of beards with ordinary human carnality. Explaining the religious virtue of shaving, the medieval scholar Guglielmus Durandus argued that



cutting the hair of the beard . . . denotes that we ought to cut away the vices and sins which are a superfluous growth in us. Hence we shave our beards that we may seem purified by innocence and humility, and that we may be like the angels who remain always in the bloom of youth.

If, by contrast, the Jewish faith has always found religious value in facial hair, it is because Jews are not expected to embody angelic innocence.

This is hardly to say that Jews do not believe in immortality. Traditional Judaism has always embraced the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the ultimate resurrection of the dead. But immortality for Jews also lies elsewhere than in the eternity of one's body or of one's spirit. Rather, it lies in one's children, and in the legacy of Jewish faith passed on to those who follow.

“For I love him,” God says of Abraham in Genesis, “because he will command his children and household after Me, and they will keep the ways of the Lord, performing justice and righteousness.” The same moral, minus the explicitly religious precept, informs a famous talmudic tale about the sage Honi:



One day, as he was walking on the road, he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, “How long will it take this tree to bear fruit?” The man replied, “Seventy years.” He asked, “Are you quite sure you will live another seventy years to eat its fruit?” The man replied, “I myself found fully grown carob trees in the world; as my forebears planted for me, so am I planting for my children.”

By forbidding Jews to destroy their hair, the Bible warns them away from seeking the siren song of eternal youth. By encouraging Jews to grow beards, it reminds them that they will not be young forever, that they must prepare the ground for those who come after, just as their fathers did for them. In acknowledging their mortality, Jews are instructed to eschew aspiring to the condition of disembodied angels—for, as a midrash memorably instructs, angels cannot become parents who will instruct their children in the ways of the Lord:



R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on high, the ministering angels spoke before the Holy One: “Sovereign of the universe! What business has one born of woman among us?” He answered them: “He has come to receive the Torah.” They said to him, “That secret treasure—you desire to give it to flesh and blood?!” The Holy One said to Moses: “Return them an answer.” He then spoke before them: “. . . What is written therein? . . . ‘Honor your father and your mother.’ Do you have fathers and mothers?” Immediately they conceded to him.

Similarly, for Judaism, it is not the young or the celibate who are most worthy to be revered, but rather those who have already raised children and, even better, been blessed with grandchildren. Discussing this aspect of Jewish identity, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik observes the curious fact that, of the three biblical patriarchs, Jacob, the last of the three, is the one commonly referred to by the midrash as “the old one,” despite the fact that both his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham lived longer than he. The reason, Soloveitchik suggests, is that it was Jacob/Israel who truly created the Jewish people and embodied the principle of its continuity. This he did most strikingly when, leaping over the gulf of the generations, he gathered his son Joseph’s two children to himself, declared them “mine, no less than [my sons] Reuben and Simeon,” and blessed them by saying that they would be “called by the name of my forefathers Abraham and Isaac [and] grow into a great people.”

Such is the authority of old age. Embroidering the same idea in a different context, the midrash goes so far as to hint that physical manifestations of age are the indispensable substance from which we weave the moral fabric of society:



Until Abraham, there was no old age, so that one who wished to speak with Abraham might mistakenly find himself speaking to [his son] Isaac, or one who wished to speak with Isaac might mistakenly find himself speaking to Abraham. But when Abraham came, he pleaded for old age, saying, “Master of the universe, You must make a visible distinction between father and son, between a youth and an old man, *so that the old man may be honored by the youth.*” God replied, “As you live, I shall begin with you.” So Abraham went off, passed the night, and arose in the morning. When he arose, he saw that the hair of his head and of his beard had turned white. He said, “Master of the universe, if You have given me white hair as a mark of old age, [I do not find it attractive].” “On the contrary,” God replied, “the hoary head is a crown of glory” (Proverbs 16:31, emphasis added).

Which brings us to today, and to American society. Ours is decidedly not an age of Abrahams, Jacobs, or of youthful Elazars proud to be regarded as men of seventy. On the contrary, it is one in which the external signs of aging are avoided at all costs, youth is worshipped, and immortality is sought not in children but in Botox. Like the ancient Egyptians, we, too, go to our embalmers to be told: “Behold, you are young again for ever.”

Even for those who forgo trips to the dermatologist and plastic surgeon, our infatuation with youth remains embedded in daily habit. Yale University’s Stephen Carter, the author of *Reflections of an Affirmative-Action Baby* (1991), once complained that American blacks had fought for decades for the right to be called “Mr.” and

“Mrs.,” only to discover that such basic marks of respect had become obsolete across the board.

Writing in a similar vein of our culture of “perpetual adolescence,” Joseph Epstein observes on the basis of old newsreel films that even baseball games used to be attended by adults dressed “in a suit and a fedora or other serious adult hat.” Now, “informality has been institutionalized” to the point where captains of industry dress like children. If, Epstein writes, it was once assumed that life had a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that “the middle—adulthood—was the lengthiest and most earnest part, where everything serious happened and much was at stake,” today “the ideal almost everywhere is to seem young for as long as possible.”

Epstein’s words have helped me understand an interesting incongruity that I face again and again. According to the Talmud, a Jewish male becomes an adult at the age of thirteen, a female at twelve. And there was indeed a time, not so long ago, when the notion of a thirteen-year-old as an adult seemed perfectly sensible—when hungry mouths depended on a newly minted teenager’s finding a job, learning a trade, preparing to leave the care of his parents, and, soon enough, starting a family of his own. This was hardly peculiar to Jews. “How quickly the Depression generation was required to mature!” Epstein writes. “How many stories one used to hear about older brothers going to work at eighteen or earlier, so that a younger brother might be allowed to go to college, or simply to help keep the family afloat!”

No longer. Today, thanks in large part to our increasing wealth and the luxury it provides, the idea of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old adult seems ludicrous. There is thus always a touch of the comic in the air when a rabbi, facing the grinning bar-mitzvah boy before him, refers to him as a “man.” He is, after all, clearly still a child, one who has perhaps worked hard to prepare for this Sabbath day but mostly looks forward to hanging out afterward with his friends and returning to a life in which his every care and financial concern is seen to by his parents.

Like all other communities in America, Jews have reaped the benefits of an age of affluence and extended youthfulness, and Orthodox Jews, of whom I am one, are hardly an exception in this regard. The affluence is without question a great blessing, but within it there can be found a loss and even a potential curse—one that is nowhere more evident than at an Orthodox wedding. Typically such events are lavish and expensively catered affairs, and why not: Judaism stresses continuity, and a wedding is the happiest moment in a Jewish life. But inevitably there comes a moment when the groom and his extended family, followed by the bride's family and the bride herself, proceed down the aisle, and the crowd, having remained seated and chatting away as grandparents in their seventies or eighties have walked haltingly to their places, rises reverently before the young couple, beautiful and handsome, young and radiant.

While there may be a good reason for this relatively new practice, standing up for the bride and groom is not required by Jewish law; standing for the elderly, at any time, and any place, is a biblical obligation. The same chapter of Leviticus that instructs male Jews to grow a beard insists that we “rise before the aged, and glorify the face of an elder.” Is it possible—or probable—that even traditional Jews, whose very appearance ought to teach them to revere the aged, have forgotten why weddings are so special to Judaism: because we plant for those who come after us, just as those who preceded us planted on our behalf?

I, too, am a creature of the culture of extended youthfulness, and not just because I do not have a beard. I regularly call men twice my age by their first name (although I draw the line at men whom I do not yet know). And when I take my children to see the Mets play at Shea stadium, I certainly do not dress the way men dressed in the newsreels described by Epstein.

Nevertheless, and for the sake of my children, I hope that I will internalize the lesson embodied by the Jewish penchant for beards and reinforced by the Jewish religious system in general. I hope that I will have the strength to resist the sundry temptations of our benign American Egypt and embrace the path of Abraham, the man chosen by God to found a family that from generation to generation would communicate to the world the principles of justice and righteousness. And I hope I will also remember Joseph Epstein's admonition—that there is no quicker route to senility than through the all-consuming and utterly futile effort to stay young forever.

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