

The Symbolism of Removing Hair

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Parashat Metzora

A curious aspect of the purification of a person who had been declared a Metzora.

When the individual smitten with Tzora'at (the bodily affliction described in Parshiot Tazria and Metzora that results in first quarantine and then ostracism from the encampment for the duration of the condition) is finally declared ritually cured, one of the more curious prerequisites by which the individual ends his/her exile and rejoins the community is the removal of his bodily hair.

(VaYikra 14:8-9) "And the one that is to be cleansed will wash his clothes, AND SHAVE OFF ALL OF HIS HAIR, and bathe him in water, and he shall be clean; after that he may come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent for seven days. And it shall be on the seventh day, he shall SHAVE off his HEAD and his BEARD¹ and his eyebrows, even all his HAIR he shall SHAVE off; and he shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water, and he shall be clean."

Other contexts where the removal of hair is a feature of a ritual process leading to a change in status.

The recognition that the removal of bodily hair² is not exclusively a function of someone recovering from a spiritual disease like Tzora'at, but may have broader positive symbolic significance, is raised in two additional cases, i.e., when 1) the Nazir shaves his head at the conclusion of his period of Naziritehood,

(BaMidbar 6:13,18) And this is the law of the Nazirite, when the days of his consecration are fulfilled: he shall bring it unto the door of the tent of meeting... And the Nazirite shall SHAVE his consecrated HEAD at the door of the tent of meeting, and shall take the hair of his consecrated head, and put it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of peace-offerings.

and 2) a Levi, upon being sanctified for community service, also has to undergo a process of defoliation,

(BaMidbar 8:7) "And this you will do unto them to cleanse them: sprinkle the water of purification upon them, and let them cause a RAZOR TO PASS OVER ALL OF THEIR FLESH, and let them wash their clothes and cleanse themselves."

¹VaYikra 13:29, 38 state that Tzora'at can equally affect both men and women. Furthermore, the paradigm for the association between Tzora'at and Lashon HaRa (evil speech) is Miriam in BaMidbar 12. Consequently, if the Tora includes the shaving of the BEARD among the parts of the body where hair must be removed at the time of the purification of the Metzora, it is assumed that rather than being a term intended to exclude women from not only this process, but perhaps the entire category of Tzora'at, the word is simply an example, and will come into play only when referring to a specific gender and his purification.

² Only hair that is visible and bunched in singular areas must be removed.

A commentator advances an hypothesis to account for this particular aspect of the ritual of purification of the Metzora.

R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in more of an essay than commentary³ at the conclusion of VaYikra 13, in addition to demonstrating that Tzora'at ought not to be identified with leprosy and what the various stages of the disease may signify, attempts to offer an approach that includes accounting for the requirement to remove one's hair prior to regaining the status of purity.

R. Hirsch understands Devarim 24:8-9 as serving as the jumping off point for reflecting upon the significance of the Tzora'at phenomenon in general:

Take heed of the plague of Tzora'at and observe diligently and do according to all that the Kohanim, the Levi'im teach you, as I have Commanded them, you shall observe to do. Remember what the Lord your God Did to Miriam on the way, during your exodus from Egypt.

Although the story of Miriam's slandering Moshe in BaMidbar 12 could be understood as an isolated incident, whereby an individual on a high spiritual level is subject to a relatively extreme⁴ Heavenly Rebuke for engaging in a verbal attack on her younger brother,⁵ the recalling of the incident in Devarim in stark association with ALL other occurrences of Tzora'at, serves to universalize what Miriam did and what happened to her as a result of her actions. The Tora's using Miriam's case as a paradigm of this malady requires us to conclude that whether the victim of Tzora'at be important or only of minor significance in terms of his spiritual standing and accomplishments, certain actions will result in conditions that can affect not only one's property,⁶ but also his person to the point where he will suffer social banishment for as long as the condition is not declared cured by a Kohen.

R. Hirsch accepts the Rabbinic contention that Tzora'at is the result of various sins.

R. Hirsch then summarizes the primary sources of Jewish tradition in which the causes of Tzora'at are enumerated, based upon interpretations of verses throughout TaNaCh:

Arachin 16a—Seven sins bring about “Tzora'at”:

- 1) “Lashon HaRa” (speaking badly about another, even if the report is accurate)
- 2) “Shfichat Damim” (the spilling of blood)⁷

³ After commenting on the individual verses in VaYikra 13, the commentator inserts a lengthy discussion (pp. 355-67) entitled, “Negaim” (afflictions).

⁴ Other examples of the principle of “Huh Medakdek Im HaTzadikim Afilu KeChut HaSa'ara” (He is Demanding with the Righteous even to a hairsbreadth) could include the deaths of Nadav and Avihu whose error may have been relatively insignificant (VaYikra 10:1-2) and Moshe's being refused entry into the land of Israel possibly for striking rather than speaking to the rock to obtain water from within it (BaMidbar 20:11-12).

⁵ For a different treatment of Miriam's transgression, see www.kmsynagogue.org/KiTetze1.html

⁶ In addition to Tzora'at affecting one's skin and hair, it also is described as attacking clothing (VaYikra 13:47 ff.); furniture (Ibid. 48 ff.); and houses (Ibid. 14:34 ff.)

⁷ While a literal understanding of this phrase connotes murder, the term is also used metaphorically to apply to embarrassing someone in public, making him/her blush, and consequently causing blood to leave

- 3) “Shevuat Shav” (an oath that is needless)
- 4) “Gilui Arayot” (sexual impropriety)
- 5) “Gasut HaRuach” (arrogance, crudity)
- 6) “Gezel” (thievery)
- 7) “Tzorat HaAyin” (cupidity, unkind selfishness)

Ibid. 16b—The “Metzora” causes separation between man and wife, friend and friend. Therefore it is only proper that a separation be imposed upon him and the community in general, i.e., first by means of quarantine and then exile from the community for the duration of the malady.

His sin offering includes a bird⁸ because he was guilty of “chattering” like a bird.

VaYikra Rabba 16:1—Eight evil character traits and actions, the majority of which are associated with specific parts of the body, are causes for Tzora’at:

- 1) Einayim Ramot (lit. proud eyes; arrogance)
- 2) Lashon Sheker (lit. a lying tongue; lies)
- 3) VeYadayim Shofchot Dam Naki (hands that spill innocent blood)
- 4) Lev Choresh Machshevet Avon (a heart that constantly is considering iniquity)
- 5) Raglayim Memaharot LaRutz LaRa’a (feet that are rushing off to do evil)
- 6) Mishloach Madanim Bein Achim (intentionally aims to cause discord among brothers)
- 7) Yafiach Kezavim (spreads falsehoods)
- 8) Eid Sheker (false witness)

VaYikra Rabba 16:6—The Metzora transgresses the prohibition of Motzee Shem Ra (casting false aspersions on another).⁹ (The Midrash is engaging in word play, breaking up the word “Metzora” into “Motzee” and “Ra”.)

The cause-and-effect relationship between various sins and Tzora’at¹⁰ leads to the conclusion that the Metzora’s isolation is an attempt to engender reflection and repentance.

one part of the body and concentrate in another. Such an interpretation would probably be more consistent with the general topic of slander.

⁸ VaYikra 14:4-7.

⁹ Devarim 22:13-9 serves as the paradigmatic example of this particular sin, but the term applies to all cases of character assassination based upon lies.

¹⁰ While I can understand why from individual examples in TaNaCh, it appears that Tzora’at comes about not only because of Lashon HaRa, nevertheless, these longer lists seem to me to confuse the issue. If a person who suffers Tzora’at would be assured that his condition is resulting from a single sin, then he could begin to reflect when, to whom and how he had been guilty of such an infraction and begin to deal with repenting for it. This is particularly necessary since this is a sin between man and man, and part of the Teshuva process involves appeasing the offended individual. But as soon as the list of possible causes is expanded, it becomes that much more difficult for the individual to know why he is being afflicted and therefore what to do about it. Furthermore, it is possible that he had done something inadvertently—this

R. Hirsch contends that already during quarantine,¹¹ a preliminary stage that precedes permanent exile, the afflicted individual has time to reflect upon the types of anti-social and destructive behavior in which he may have been engaging, specifically because he has been totally deprived of the context in which he has been perpetrating his malfeasance.

And indeed, the enforced loneliness of the isolating Hasger--weeks may well be suited for exercising a most beneficial influence and bring the culprit to a serious contemplation and examination of how he has hitherto behaved in word, feelings and acts in his social contact with his fellow men from whom he is now separated, and so induce him towards a serious change in his attitude and feelings towards them, and to seriously make up his mind to improve, and so to emerge from this preliminary testing period already in a 'pure' state.¹²

The commentator's evocative explanation of the symbolism of this particular indicator, i.e. Tzora'at, of unresolved sin.

But why should a person who lacks social graces and empathy for his fellow be beset specifically by diseases of skin and hair, as opposed to some other sort of calamity or personal setback? The commentator offers the following hypothesis: The skin is the aspect of the body by which an individual senses everything in existence outside of himself, e.g., we recognize textures by means of our tactile sense, environmental temperature as well as humidity and precipitation are detected by our skin's reaction to meteorological conditions, threats to our physical well-being are sensed when we experience pain as a result of a blow or corrosive material, etc. What applies physiologically to the skin can also be understood metaphorically. We are the poorer when we are not open to that which takes place around us, and reflect selfishness rather than caring for our fellow human being. Not only should we constantly try to learn from the positive examples of those who inhabit our surroundings, but it is important to be a positive pro-active contributor to general society and our fellow human beings. Consequently, should our skin become tainted as a result of Divine Fiat, it constitutes an objective message to us that there is a "moral unhealthiness" in the manner by which we are comprehending and relating to the outside world. If we have been advancing only strife, contention, pettiness in interactions with those who comprise our outside world, as represented by the types of behaviors listed above in the four primary sources summarizing what engenders Tzora'at, as opposed to the Heavenly Preference for our relating to others by means of goodness, ethical behavior, and truth and justice, then the intermediary between the individual and the outside world, the skin, will be supernaturally afflicted leading to social ostracism until such time as a significant attitude change for the better takes place.

The relationship between skin and hair.

even applies to Lashon HaRa. How will he then be able to repent in any way other than in general? This situation seems to me to encapsulate our dilemma during the Aseret Yemai Teshuva (the Ten Days of Repentance.) We may be judged at that time, but as long as we have not been presented with a specific accusation or indictment, how can we repent in a specific and therapeutic manner other than for things that we transgressed intentionally (BeMeizid) and that we recall with clarity?

¹¹ E.g., VaYikra 13:4,11.

¹² Hirsch, p. 362.

This brings R. Hirsch to human hair—its contamination by Tzora'at whereby not only the skin but the hair growing on that part of the body becomes discolored¹³ and the need to remove bodily hair when one reaches the point of ritual purification. In the commentator's view, hair is essentially a protective cover extending from the individual that rather than sensing and processing the stimuli from the outside world, as does the skin, instead serves as a manifestation of one's internal reality, as well as a barrier between a person's external environment and his internal identity. Hair insulates the skin against the cold, and mitigates the pain of a blow that would otherwise land upon an unprotected patch of skin.

Developing the analogy further to reflect the interaction between skin and hair in terms of how we learn and grow, it could be relatively clearly demonstrated that an individual's values and beliefs can be understood to be made up of a confluence of inside and outside influences, i.e., the poles represented by the dialectic of "nurture" and "nature". On the one hand, it is possible that outside trends, general culture and the people that represent them are inspiring and affirming. In such a case, it is important to be significantly open to such influences in order to actualize one's potential in accordance with the models and stimulating positive ideas that inhabit the outside world = "healthy skin". However, there are also times when one is required to mount defenses that will protect him from destructive values and outlooks that happen to be informing general civilization = "healthy hair". Typically, each person is confronted from without with a mixture of ideas and principles, both good and bad, and must determine how to sort through them, which to accept and internalize, and which to reject and immunize oneself against; where must the individual follow his personal instincts and sensibilities, and where must he defer to the conceptualizations and attitudes that are abroad.

Now transporting this idea of hair from the physiological to the psychic sphere, the spreading of the Nega into the hair would express the idea that not only good and true impressions are lacking, but that positively bad ones which should be kept away, are finding entrance.¹⁴

Developing the concept of a type of "membrane" that stands between the individual and his surrounding environment.

Instead of the individual asserting his own understandings of propriety in the face of what is taking place in general society, his own self-expression, as manifested in hair, further supports evil and negativity. Apparently, social influences have been internalized to such an extent, that the individual now becomes a representative of the very mindset that he should have vigorously opposed. Since he demonstrates belief in the assumptions of the world that he should have been quick to reject, hair is no longer a barrier, but rather a statement of acceptance, assimilation and readiness to participate in society's negative trends and behaviors. Consequently, just as these questionable personal values have to be altered for the good so that the Tzora'at can be cured, the hair that represented the individual's past commitment to such negative values, must also be completely sheared off as part of this process.

To completely strip a body of all hair, would be to expose it naked to all of the influences of the outer world, would be well-suited to awaken thoughts of removing isolating selfishness...the giving up of the unlawful selfish life with its

¹³ E.g., Ibid. 13:3, 4, 10, 20, 21, etc.

¹⁴ Hirsch p. 363.

lack of consideration for his fellowmen has brought to his mind by the representative of the Sanctuary of the Tora, by a Kohen.¹⁵

Connecting hair removal of the Metzora with the cases of the Nazir and the Levi:

The absence of present-day cases of Tzora'at¹⁶ do not render the Tora's description and R. Hirsch's interpretation of the phenomena and its antidote, moot and theoretical. Just as Sanhedrin 71a states that even if there never was an individual who actually qualified as a Ben Sorer U'Moreh (a stubborn and rebellious son), nevertheless "Derosh VeKabel Sechar" (interpret it and thereby be rewarded), all the more so with respect to Tzora'at which based upon numerous accounts in TaNaCh, clearly did exist at some time, it is important to attempt to draw as many lessons as possible for contemporary students of Jewish tradition. The idea that we must be on our guard regarding internalizing negative outer influences as well as not defending and preserving personal misguided values and perceptions, will always be an important principle for all human beings endowed with free will.

R. Hirsch equates the hair of the Metzora that to a degree reflected the mistaken value judgments that resulted in sin, to the hair of the Nazir, that while not representing sinfulness per se, still is a literal and figurative outgrowth of an anti-social lifestyle. While sometimes such a manner of conducting oneself might be temporarily necessary in order to readjust a flawed personality,¹⁷ in effect paralleling the quarantine and exile of the Metzora, it is less than ideal from the Tora point of view as a permanent philosophy of life:

R. S.R. Hirsch on BaMidbar 6:18

...If letting the hair grow (on the part of the Nazir) was the sign of a sanctifying separation and withdrawal into oneself, the complete shaving is the expression of thenceforth ceasing this separation and thenceforth completely entering again the whole social life of the community. This completely entering into the whole social life of the community is not merely something permissible, it is a Mitzva, duty. And so much does a happy life enjoyed in the Shelamim (Peace Offering) sense¹⁸ transcend in value and importance a life merely lived in guarding the power of one's senses by renunciation and abstemiousness in Nazaritism, so much has the latter only value if it leads to the former, that, for the holy Shelamim offering, the hitherto untouched hair of the Nazirite's head is

¹⁵ Hirsch p. 374.

¹⁶ There are those who claim that Tzora'at still exists, but we do not have qualified Kohanim to determine whether someone or something is actually afflicted with this malady. Yet it seems to me that if Tzora'at is a supernatural indication that a transgression has been committed by the person whom this condition has stricken, wouldn't the rubric of "Hester Panim" (the Hiding of the Divine Face) which predicates that overt miracles no longer take place, suggest that such a phenomenon is no longer extant? Aside from the issue of whether Tzora'at parallels other dermatological conditions that are currently occurring, the idea that there is a sequence that moves from the walls of a house, to furniture, to clothing and then finally to an individual's physical person, as VaYikra Rabba 17:4, upon which RaMBaM, Hilchot Tumat Tzoraat 16:10 is based, contends it would be difficult to attribute such a course of events to natural causes.

¹⁷ See, for example, Nedarim 9b.

¹⁸ The Shlamim sacrifice, whereby part is burnt on the altar, part is consumed by the Kohen, and part is given back to the individual bringing the sacrifice, represents the interconnection between man and God, in contrast to the Olah offering, where most of the animal is burnt, symbolizing the attitude of Kulo HaShem (being entirely given over to God, without a concern for one's fellow man).

given over to the razor and is then placed in the fire under the pot in which the meal-of-Peace-Offering is being cooked in a holy place.

Finally, while the removal of hair of the Metzora and the Nazir suggest to R. Hirsch a reorientation from a state of imbalance to a condition of forgiveness and normalcy between the individual and both God and general society, the Levi's removal of hair had a much more positive, idealistic vector associated with it:

R. S.R. Hirsch on BaMidbar 8:7.

...completely shaving all over is meant to impress the mind with giving up all isolating selfishness...If then this complete shaving ... brought home in the minds of the Levi'im in the most impressive manner the complete cessation of any hitherto living for themselves, and a complete giving up their whole lives to the service of the community, it is easily understood how such a stripping of the "man of action" from all belonging to himself, such placing his person in the service of national purposes demonstrated the entry of the man of action into the realm of moral freedom in the most positive manner...

Conclusion

Consequently, the removal of hair according to R. Hirsch runs the spectrum from eliminating a barrier that prevents a person from changing his ways for the better, to undoing an obstacle that had set apart a person from general communal life while undergoing a personality change, leading up to the symbolic stripping away of ego and personal considerations in favor of communal service devoid of ulterior motives and thoughts of honor and self-advancement.