

THE TORAH OF A LONGHAIR

By Rabbi Randy Fleisher on the occasion of his 40th Birthday

It really never occurred to me that at 40, I'd be at the other end of a generation gap, but apparently it is almost impossible to stay hip. No matter how hard I try to interest Zoey, my 5-year old daughter, in rock and roll; whether it's poppy early Beatles, the latest hits, kids' music sung by Springsteen, or a song that I tell her is IMPORTANT like:

*Gimme a head with hair, long beautiful hair... Give me down to there, hair!
...Shoulder length or longer*

To all of that she says..."Daddy, I don't want to hear your yelling music!" (by which she means rock music).
"Put on pretty music." (by which she means classical).

Quick! How do you picture the biblical Joseph? If your image is something like a hippie dreamer with a flowing technicolor robe, you've been influenced by the midrash of Andrew Lloyd Weber. Why is Joseph, who overcame both the cruelty of his brothers and his own brattiness to feed the world and model emotionally open forgiveness and reconciliation, portrayed with long hair?

The Torah herself offers us the model of the nazir. An individual who wished to enter into a mystical-like union with God and walk an extremely holy and pure path, would take the nazirite vow and agree to a ban on haircuts for the duration of the vow's term: "the locks of the hair on his head shall grow untrimmed." Hair, free and wild, as it would grow naturally. Long hair was a public sign of holiness; a way for the nazir to constantly testify to his special position by his appearance.

This seems to hold true in other cultural contexts as well. Native Americans and other aboriginal peoples who represent authenticity, freedom and spirit to many who are conscious of the limitations of the logical mind and materialistic social order, often wear their hair long and untamed. The omnipresent youth culture in the 60s included the paradigm of young people as its own primitive tribe with all of the most positive stereotypes of indigenous behaviors and values included: This new long-haired nation was idealized as communitarian, environmentally wise, learning to live in harmony with one another and with nature, and like the nazirim, holy and pure.

I was not a child of the sixties; I was a child IN the sixties. However, I have carried a major cultural assumption from that era with me for most of my life: If a male has long hair, he must be an

individual, as contemporary liturgy describes, who 'transcends strength with gentleness.' As Charles Reich, author of *The Greening of America*, described it, the men of the Consciousness III generation, those who dared to grow their hair below the collar, achieved a way of being with other people that is more like the way women have always related to one another - that is closer, warmer, more open, more sensitive, more accepting, and more capable of sharing.

I've been ruminating on the subject of long hair for a long time. I wrote the following 'essay' while home with the chicken pox in the second grade.

Hippys are umanbeans-
Just like me and you
Nothing madders
Just becus they have -
long hier doesnt--
mak a diffrints

Later, as I navigated the highs and lows of junior high, I purchased a used copy of Jerry Rubin's sixties manifesto, *Do It!* In it, he writes,

"America asks us, 'Why the beards and long hair,' but we say to America: hair naturally grows...Why do you do the unnatural act of cutting your hair and shaving your face? When we, the children of the white middle class, wear our hair long, we feel like Indians, blacks - all of the outsiders in American history...Having long hair is like saying hello to everybody you see...it tells people where we stand; it is like being a walking picket sign."

And those words took me back again to childhood rides in the back of my parents' station wagon through the city of Chicago where the only people who would return the waves and smiles of my brother and I were the long-haired hippies of Old Town.

And what do you know? Within the Jewish tradition, there is a Hassidic and Sephardic custom: 'Like the fruit of the tree, the hair of a Jewish son grows wild for his first three years!' The Reform movement has always preached 'informed choice;' that we should learn about the array of Jewish rituals and customs and choose those relevant and meaningful to our families and communities. Well...we have made an informed Jewish choice - to let our 2-year-old son Gabe's hair grow long!

Like the hair of a nazir, Gabriel's hair is an additional connection to God and godliness in that it looks the way it does without much human intervention (We do brush it...). Perhaps that connection will help him

to internalize the positive values that I associate with those men even older who leave their hair untrimmed; put him in touch with his inner Shekhinah. In any event, Gabe will be able to make up his own mind about his hair after his third birthday when we will celebrate his *upsherin*, his first haircut.

If Zoey's musical counter-rebellion is any indication, early November may be the last time my son is ever seen with long hair.