



## Ask the Rabbi: Why do you teach that men should wear a full beard and pe'ot (sidelocks)? Is there a Scriptural reason for this mitzvah?

**Answer:** As we study the Torah, we find two Scriptures that validate this *mitzvah* of wearing a beard and not cutting the side of the head. Let us study them and look at the traditional aspects of this *mitzvah*.

- **Wayyiqra-Lev.19:27.** You shall not round<sup>1</sup> the corners<sup>2</sup> (side-growth) of your heads, nor shall you mar<sup>3</sup> the corners (side-growth) of your beard.<sup>4</sup>
- **Wayyiqra-Leviticus:21:5.** They shall not make bald<sup>5</sup> any part of their head, nor shall they shave off<sup>6</sup> the corner of their beard, nor make any gashes<sup>7</sup> in their flesh.<sup>8</sup>

First let us look at some basic background information.

The characteristic manner in which the beard and hair were shaved, cut, curled, or groomed identified specific peoples in the ancient Middle East. Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian monuments depict the unique way various peoples groomed facial hair, thus illustrating their ethnic identity. The Semites appear with thick beards or with thin and groomed beards; the Lybians are shown with pointed beards, while the Hittites, Ethiopians, and Sea Peoples are portrayed as clean-shaven. The Babylonians and Persians are represented with curly and groomed beards, and the majority of the images of Egyptian males reveal clean-shaven faces, with the exception of a number of pharaohs who appear with plaited beards extending from the chin only.

- “Israelites and their neighbors generally wore full round beards, which they tended scrupulously. The beard was a mark of vitality, and manly beauty (Ps.133:2, 2 Sam. 19:24): to shave or cover it was a sign of grief or mourning (Is.15:2; Jer.48:37) or of leprosy. To mutilate another’s beard was to dishonor him. Jeremiah criticizes those who shave their temples (Jer.9:26)”. In Egypt the head and the face were shaved... The trimming [of the hair] of it had to be done in special ways; the forelock must never be cut (Lev.19:27), since this was a feature of some idolatrous cults (Deut.14:1). To this day Orthodox Jews observe this custom.” **New Bible Dictionary-Tyndale Second Edition**
- “According to Herodotus, the Egyptians only left the hair of their head and beard grow in the time of mourning, being at all at other times, shaved...Western Asiatics have always cherished the beard as the badge of the dignity of manhood...The Egyptians, on the contrary, shaved the hair of the face and head, and compelled their slaves to do the like... [Among Hebrews] Size and fullness of the beard are said to be regarded, at the present day, a mark of respectability and trustworthiness...The law forbade the deforming of the head by cutting away the hair around it, and of the beard by cutting the corners...neither may that portion of the face where the beard and hair met be shaved [like a goatee].” **Unger’s Bible Dictionary**

<sup>1</sup> **H5362** nâqaph 1) to strike, strike off 1a) (Piel) to strike off skin 2) to go around, compass, round 2a) (Qal) to go around 2b) (Hiphil) 2b1) to go around, surround, encompass, enclose 2b2) to make the round, complete the circuit 2b3) to make round, round of

<sup>2</sup> **H6285** pè’âh 1) corner, edge, side, quarter, extremity 1a) corner 1b) side

<sup>3</sup> **H7843** shâchath 1) to destroy, corrupt, go to ruin, decay 1a) (Niphal) to be marred, be spoiled, be corrupted, be corrupt, be injured, be ruined, be rotted 1b) (Piel) 1b1) to spoil, ruin 1b2) to pervert, corrupt, deal corruptly (morally) 1c) (Hiphil) 1c1) to spoil, ruin, destroy 1c2) to pervert, corrupt (morally) 1c3) destroyer (participle) 1d) (Hophal) spoiled, ruined (participle)

<sup>4</sup> **H2206** zâqân 1) beard, chin 1a) beard 1b) chin

<sup>5</sup> **H7144** qorchâh qorchâ’ kor-khaw’, kor-khaw’ From H7139; baldness: - bald (-ness), utterly.

<sup>6</sup> **H1548** gâlach gaw-lakh’ A primitive root; properly to be bald, that is, (causatively) to shave; figuratively to lay waste: - poll, shave (off).

<sup>7</sup> **H8296** šeret / 1) incision, cut

<sup>8</sup> According to Lev.19:27-28 this prohibition for the priests also applies to the lay Israelite (Jewish Study Bible)

- **Jer 9:26** Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the sons of Ammon, and Moab, and all those trimmed on the edges of their beards, who (hair of their temples clipped) dwell in the wilderness. For all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel, those uncircumcised of heart.
- “The beard was considered a symbol of manhood, and, in some places of freedom-slaves being compelled to shave their beards in token of servitude...So disgraceful is it considered to have the beard cut off, that some Orientals would prefer death to such punishment.” *Manners and Customs of the Bible by James Freeman*
- “Rounding off refers to the removal of hair from the sideburns area- the edges-of the head...But as a practical matter, since the exact areas of these edges (the 5 edges) are not clearly defined, IT IS FORBIDDEN TO SHAVE THE ENTIRE BEARD. It is forbidden to remove the sideburns even by means of plucking or with scissors.” *Artscroll Chumash*
- “Some say that it is forbidden even to cut it (the beard) off very close with a scissors (*Tur, Yoreh Deah 181*)...sides of the head-this is the area of the temples and upper sideburns, between the forehead and behind the ear (*Rashi, Makkoth, 20a*)” *The Living Torah by Aryeh Kaplan*
- “The modern Oriental cultivates his beard as the sign and ornament of manhood: he swears by his beard, touching it...The frequent assertion that the upper lip was shaved is incorrect...To mutilate the beard of another by cutting or shaving is, consequently, considered a great disgrace...Of the other nations coming in contact with Israel, the Hittites and the Ellamite nations shaved the beard completely, as the earliest Babylonians had done. *The Jewish Encyclopedia*

Shaving was performed either by the individual himself or by a barber (Heb. *galav*). Razors were made from metal or from flint blades fixed in a stone handle. Shaving was also connected with cosmetic treatment of the face.

According to **Wayyiqra 19:27** and **21:5** is an apparent reference to the hair between the head and the cheeks (sidelocks-*pe'ot*) it is forbidden to destroy the "corners" of the beard.

It is possible that it was promulgated in order to differentiate Yisraelites from the nations around them. Also shaving specific areas of the face was associated with the pagan religious cults or symbolized the priests who ministered to their g-ds. The Torah opposes imitation of any pagan practices so it opposes this form of ritual shaving. In the Scriptures shaving of the head and beard is considered a sign of mourning (**Job 1:20**) and degradation. Shaving was identified with the spontaneous plucking of the beard, an expression of great sorrow (**Ezek. 5:1**).

- **Job 1:20** Then Iyov arose, and tore his robe, and shaved his head, and fell down on the ground, and worshiped.
- **Ezek 5:1** You, son of man, take a sharp sword; [as] a barber's razor shall you take it to you, and shall cause it to pass on your head and on your beard: then take balances to weigh, and divide the hair.

To humiliate a man, it was the practice to forcibly shave half of the beard as found in **II Samuel 10:5**, where the elders, because of this humiliation, were commanded to hide in Jericho until their beards grew again.

- **2Sa 10:5** When they told it to David, he sent to meet them; for the men were greatly ashamed. The king said, Wait at Yericho until your beards be grown, and then return.

Shaving is also part of rituals of purification according to **Vayikra 14:8**; and **Bemidbar 6:9; 8:7**.

- **Lev 14:8** “He who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water; and he shall be clean. After that he shall come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent seven days.
- **Num 6:9** “If any man dies very suddenly beside him, and he defiles the head of his separation; then he shall shave his head in the day of his cleansing. On the seventh day he shall shave it.
- **Num 8:7** Thus shall you do to them, to cleanse them: sprinkle the water of cleansing on them, let them shave their whole bodies with a razor, and let them wash their clothes, and cleanse themselves.

*Kohenim* were forbidden to shave the "edges" of their beards, and "the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok" were forbidden to neither shave their heads nor let their hair grow long, but only to trim their hair (**Ezek. 44:20**).

- **Ezek 44:20** Neither shall they shave their heads, nor allow their locks to grow long; they shall only cut off the hair of their heads.

The “*Apostolic Constitutions*”, i3, lay insistence on the Scriptural prohibition against removal of the beard of a Believer, as does Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus, chap 3, ed.Migne pgs. 580-592*). The fourth council Carthage (389) decided “*clericus nec comam nutirat nec barbam radat*”, the clergy shall not let his hair grow, neither shall he remove his beard. Even centuries later the Church insisted upon the wearing of the beard by the clergy.<sup>9</sup>

In the Medieval Times, the Yehudim among the Mohammedan nations wore long beards. The German rabbis as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> Century forbid the cutting of the beard because many Jews were being assimilated by ignoring the *Halakah* that forbids the cutting of the beard.

### The Talmud and Tradition

According to the Talmud the beard is "the adornment of a man's face" (*BM 84a*); a man without a beard was compared to a eunuch (*Yev. 80b; Shab. 152a*).

- A certain eunuch [gawzaah] said to R. Joshua b. Karhah [Baldhead]: ‘How far is it from here to Karhina [Baldtown]? ‘As far as from here to Gawzania [Eunuchtown],’ he replied.<sup>15</sup> Said the Sadducee to him, ‘A bald buck is worth four denarii.’ ‘A goat, if castrated, is worth eight,’ he retorted. Now, he [the Sadducee] saw that he [R. Joshua] was not wearing shoes, [whereupon] he remarked, ‘He [who rides] on a horse is a king, upon an ass, is a free man, and he who has shoes on his feet is a human being; but he who has none of these, one who is dead<sup>16</sup> and buried is better off.’ ‘O eunuch, O eunuch,’ he retorted, ‘you have enumerated three things to me, [and now] you will hear three things: the **glory of a face is its beard**; the rejoicing of one's heart is a wife; the heritage of the Lord is children; <sup>17</sup> blessed be the Omnipresent, Who has denied you all these!’ ‘O quarrelsome baldhead,’ he jeered at him. ‘A castrated buck and [you will] reprove!’<sup>18</sup> he retorted. *Shabbat 152a*

*Kohenim* whose beards had not yet grown were not permitted to bless the people (*TJ, Suk. 3:14, 54a*).

- Our Rabbis taught: He whose **beard is fully grown is qualified** to act as the representative of a community, 6 to descend before the Ark<sup>7</sup> and to pronounce the priestly benediction.<sup>8</sup> When does he [the priest] become qualified for Temple service? When he produces two hairs. Rabbi says: I say, only when he is twenty years old. R. Hisda asked: What is Rabbi's reason? — Because it is written: And they appointed the Levites from twenty years old and upward to have oversight of the work of the house of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> And the other Tanna? He maintains that ‘to have oversight’ is quite a different matter.<sup>10</sup> But is not this verse stated in connection with the Levites? <sup>11</sup> One must accept the statement of R. Joshua b. Levi...cont.
- For R. Joshua b. Levi said: In twenty-four passages the priests are referred to as Levites, and the following is an example: And the priests the Levites the sons of Zadok.<sup>12</sup> *Chullin 24b*

Sennacherib was punished by YHWH by having his beard shaved off (*Sanh. 95b–96a*).

- R. Abbahu said: Were not the [following] verse written, it would have been impossible to conceive of it: viz., In the same day shall the Lord shave with a razor that is hired, namely, by the riverside, by the king of Assyria, the head, and the hair of the feet: and it shall consume the beard.<sup>41</sup> The Holy one, blessed be He, went and appeared before him [Sennacherib] as an old man, and said to him, ‘When thou goest to the kings of the east and the west, whose sons thou didst lead [to battle]<sup>42</sup> and cause their death, what wilt thou say to them?’ He replied, ‘I<sup>43</sup> too entertain that fear. What then shall I do?’ asked he. ‘Go,’ He replied. *Sanhedrin 95b*

Rabbinic authorities permitted only those who had frequent dealings with the Roman authorities to clip their beard with forceps (*kom; BK 83a*). Objection to the removal of the beard was on the ground that YHWH gave it to man to distinguish him from woman; to shave it, was therefore an offense against nature (Abrabanel to Lev. 19:27). However, intercourse with the Greeks and Romans during the period had no effect on the Semite esteem for the beard: instead it seemed to have the contrary effect; for it led to the beards consideration as something specifically belonging to an Yisraelite.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Antiquities of the Christian Church 1.ii 15-16, Bingham

<sup>10</sup> The Jewish Encyclopedia Vol.2 pg612

Yehudim living in Islamic countries grew long beards while those in Europe clipped them only with scissors. This was permitted by *halakhah* (**Sh. Ar., YD 181:10**). Rabbinical courts punished adulterers by cutting off their beards (C. M. Horowitz, *Toratan shel Rishonim*, 1 (1881), 29; 2 (1881), 18).

The post of *chazzan* (cantor) was bestowed only upon a man with a beard (**Bah, OH 53**). Ancient Kabbalists ascribed mystical powers to the beard and hair. Isaac Luria refrained from even touching his beard in case he should cause any hairs to fall out (**Ba'er Hetev, YD 181:5**). With the spread of mysticism to Eastern Europe, trimming the beard was gradually prohibited by leading rabbinic authorities (**Noda bi-Yhudah, Mahadura Tinyana, YD 80**) and with the rise of *Chasidism*, the removal of the beard became tantamount to a formal break with tradition. *Halakhah* forbids the shaving proper of the beard; this is defined as the act of removing the hair with an instrument with one cutting edge. Chemical means such as depilatory powder, scissors, or an electric shaver with two cutting edges, are permitted. Tradition forbids using a razor for five parts of the face. The question of cutting the beard on *hol ha-mo'ed*, prohibited by the Talmud (**MK 3:1**), was a matter of much controversy at the turn of the 19th century. The traditional opinion of the **Shulhan Arukh (OH 531)** prevails among observant Jews, who also refrain from cutting their beard during the Omer period (*Sefirah*) and the Three Weeks. To trim the beard and have a haircut in honor of the *Shabbat* and the festivals is regarded as a pious duty. Several rulers (e.g., Nicholas I of Russia) tried to force the Jewish population to cut off their beard and earlocks; others rulers ordered Jews to have beards so as to be easily singled out as a foreign element by their Christian neighbors. Today in Poland and the other Slavic countries the removal of the beard is considered a rejection of rabbinical Judaism and tradition.

- DAUGHTER OF JERUSALEM: O daughter who fears and makes peace<sup>1</sup> with Me. WHAT SHALL I EQUAL TO THEE, THAT I MAY COMFORT THEE? R. Jacob of Kefar Hanan said: When I [Elohim] shall become equal to you--as It is written, And I will walk among you and be your Elohim, and ye shall be My people (Lev. XXVI, 12)--at that time will I comfort you. I, in My glory, will come and comfort you.<sup>2</sup> VIRGIN DAUGHTER OF ZION: i.e. sons distinguished (mezuyyanim) <sup>3</sup> by circumcision. [the prohibition against] beard-cutting<sup>4</sup> and zizith. **Midrash Rabah Lamentations 2:1**

The Kabbalists considered even the cutting or trimming of the beard a great sin. Isaac Luria, the great Kabbalist, would not even touch his beard lest a hair would be plucked from it.

### Sidelocks

*Pe'ot* ("corners") or sidelocks are grown in accordance with the prohibition of the Torah that "Ye shall not round the corners of your heads" (**Lev. 19:27**). The Talmud has interpreted this to mean that it is forbidden to "level the growth of hair on the temple from the back of the ears to the forehead" (**Mak. 20b**).

The hair in this area may not be removed. Women are exempt from leaving *pe'ot* since the parallel prohibition against "marring the corners of the beard" (Lev. 19:27; Kid. 1:7; Kid. 35b) obviously does not apply to women. According to Maimonides a minimum of 40 hairs must be left for *pe'ot* (**Yad, Avodat Kokhavim, 12:6**).

However, the **Shulhan Arukh (YD 181:9)** rules in accordance with Rashi (**Mak. 20a**) that hair must be allowed to grow in front of the ears until it reaches the upper cheekbones (zygomatic arch). The maximum length of *pe'ot* has been determined by the custom of a particular time and place rather than by *halakhah*. The kabbalistic writings of Isaac Luria attribute great significance to *pe'ot* because the numerical value of *pe'ah*, 86 is the same as the numerical value of *Elohim*. It has become customary for *Chasidim* and Orthodox to leave *pe'ot*, either short ones which are curled behind the ears or long ones hanging down at the sides of the head.

### The Answer

The answer to your question is –YES– Scripture does command us not to shave our beard or cut our sidelocks. Yisrael needs to look and act like Yisrael and not the nations around us. I know in today's society and the social norms are very difficult to oppose. We must stand strong in the Torah of YHWH and do the right thing despite opposition from the world.