



Ask The Rabbi...



January 10, 1994 Issue #5

This edition contains:

1. Why men wear sidelocks (peyot)
2. How to submit questions
3. How to retrieve back issues of Ohr Somayach publications

Our first reader from University of Maryland writes:

Dear Rabbi,

I've always been fascinated by the dress of Hassidic Jews and wondered why it is that the men grow long sidelocks?

*signed,
Curious in College Park*

Dear Curious,

Let us approach this question in two parts, briefly.

First of all, the Torah commandment is not only for Hassidim, but intended for every Jewish male. The Torah teaches:

"Do not cut off the hair on the sides of your head..."
Vayikra 19:27.

A Jewish male must leave sideburns (peyot) down to the joints of the jaw that are opposite the ear, approximately a third of the way down the ear.

Secondly, the custom to wear long peyot is mentioned in the Talmudic commentary of Tosefot (compiled in Touques, France, approx. 1300 CE :

"One has to be exceedingly careful not to remove his Peyot even with a scissors because they are like a razor; therefore the accepted custom has been to leave long peyot on children when they have their first haircut."
(Nazir 41b)

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary on the Torah suggests that peyot form a symbolic separation between the front part of the brain and the rear part. The front part is the intellectual, the rear part is the more physical, the more sensual. The wearer of peyot is thus making a statement that he is aware of both facets of his mind, and intends to keep them to their appointed tasks.

The previous answer first appeared on soc.culture.jewish, before the ASK THE RABBI list began. When it did, Howard at Mt. Holyoke wrote to us asking:

If the Torah commands that men (I assume there's another passage somewhere that makes this commandment refer only to males) "not cut off their hair on the sides of [their] heads," then why are the sideburns cut off "approximately a third of the way down the ear?" Either we are commanded to not cut the hair, or we are commanded to let it grow to a certain length.

Where did the length interpretation come from?

Good question!

The length interpretation is based on the word "peyot", which means "corners", referring to the corners of the head. See Rashi on the verse in Vayikra 19:27; Rashi also gives a lengthy description (sorry!) of the locations of the "corners", and why they are called "corners".

The reader in Mt. Holyoke is correct in his assumption that only MEN are obligated to wear peyot. This is further explained in the Gemara in Kiddushin 35b.

Questions are welcomed from ALL readers at ALL levels for inclusion in the Ask the Rabbi column. Questions of interest to our general readership may be answered in this column; for those of a more personal nature, we will try to answer personally via e-mail.

To submit a question, address it to: ohr@jer1.co.il to insure correct handling, set the subject to "ASK THE RABBI"

To subscribe to ASK THE RABBI, send the message:
sub ask {your full name} to: listproc@jer1.co.il

Remember, all Ohr Somayach lists are now archived on the jerusalem1 gopher. Back issues of torah weekly, parasha Q&A and ask the rabbi are now only an FTP connection away!

To access the jerusalem1 gopher, type:
gopher jerusalem1.datasrv.co.il

at your prompt, or just find "Jerusalem1" listed on the gopher you already have access to. Once you are in, look for "List Archives." CompuServe users already have access to back issues directly from the Religion Forum, Library #3!

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to ohr@jer1.co.il. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

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