

The concept that men should have full, un-trimmed beards comes from a mis-applied reading of two verses: W ayikra/Leviticus 19:27 and 21:5. Looking at both of these though in context indicates a more culturally connected issue.

"Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard" (19:27 JPS) My oh my, how does one 'round' the head or 'mar' the corner of the beard??

The first thing to notice is that the verse before forbids eating "with blood", divination and soothsaying. The verse after forbids cutting your flesh for the dead and making marks (tattoos??). So in context here, Yahweh is not speaking of normal grooming practices, but of things being used for pagan ritual or necromancy. In fact, one of the pagan cultural practices of the time was deforming the facial hair and cutting the skin as a form of mourning for the dead.

The interesting thing here which is missed unless this is read in Hebrew is that verses 27 and 28 go together. Verse 28 starts with AND (the waw) - it is a continuation of the sentence. Remember the 'verse numbers' are not part of the original text. So the sentence reads 'don't round the corners of your head, and don't mar the corners of your beard, and make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead'

The literal Hebrew reads "No round sides your head and no destroy sides your beard and cuttings for the soul no make in your flesh and any marks no make/put on you"

Makes it a bit clearer, nu? What was being condemned was pagan mourning practices, not grooming.

Let's look the at the actual words used. NAQAP (5362) in the hiphil stem means to make round. PE'AH (6285) is a noun which comes from the verb POH - 'here/there this side/that side', and it properly means 'the side'. Rounding the sides of the head is an ancient pagan practice of cutting off the hair on the sides of the head thus leaving but a disc of hair on top to represent the sun-god. In pre-Roman times of the Mysteries this was called 'tonsure', and, yes, this is exactly where the modern Kippah originates. It is directly spoken against in Torah.

Next, we are told not to SHAKAT (7843) 'to spoil, ruin, or destroy' the PE'AH (side) of our beard. Note that this is not a normal shave, but a destruction and deformation. More on that in a minute.

The thought CONTINUES in verse 28 not to SERET (8296) 'cut' our flesh (BASAR) or make any QA'AQAH (7085) on ourselves. The later is often viewed as tattoos, or marks, but such is far from certain. The root verb QOAH (6972) like QA'AQAH only appears once in the Tanakh, and can also mean 'to cut'. My personal view of this linguistically is that what is being condemned is NOT tattoos, but cutting our own bodies or placing cut-off body parts on ourselves, another pagan practice associated with mourning and quite barbaric indeed.

So, in short, this entire passage speaks to pagan mourning for the dead.

Coming to Wayikra/Leviticus 21, we see the same thing now in connection with the priests. Right off in verse 1, Yahweh sets the stage, directing the edicts to the priests, and related to the dead. They are not to make themselves unclean for any but close

relatives, then verse 5 becomes a bit broader, reminding them of the Mitzvot for everyone, but with a twist:

"They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corners of their beard, nor make any cuttings in their flesh"

The only difference here is that now baldness is spoken of, not just the sides of the head, but the whole head, and likewise, the beard is not to be GALACH (1548) 'shaved OFF'. This is an interesting key as it does NOT speak against having a trimmed beard, but against its total removal!

Before, what was spoken of was destruction (partial pulling out in mourning). Remember how one of the tortures of Y'shua at the hands of the priests was the pulling out of sections of His beard? Where such might be done by the common man out of grief, the priest would shave. Since this section is addressed to the priests, it is only natural that mourning customs associated with the priests should be addressed. Again, culture is important. The Israelites had just come out of Egypt, where the pagan priests did shave off all their hair, head, beard, and all.

Again, all of this is in the context of mourning for the dead, not regular appearance.

So what we see is that on close examination of both these passages, it is not a man's hairstyle at issue, but a prohibition against pagan practices.

Shalom,

-Rav. David