



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

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Elazar <keabram@ibm.net> wrote:

I am looking for source material about the Jewish tradition of the 'upfshearnin' or cutting a boy's hair at three years old. Where does the term 'upfshearnin' originate from, and is there a halacha in reference to same? Thank you

Dear Elazar,

'Upfshearnin' is a Yiddish word that means 'cutting off.' Cutting a boy's hair at age three is a wide-spread Jewish custom. Three is also when a boy usually starts wearing a yarmulke and tzitzit, if he doesn't already wear them.

By age three, a child usually understands enough to begin learning about the commandments. The first haircut is a way to train the child in the commandment of 'payot' — the prohibition against too closely cropping the hair on the sides of the head.

On a deeper level, this custom is rooted in the commandment of 'orlah': The Torah says if you plant a tree, all fruits which grow during the first three years are 'orlah' — off-limits.

The Torah is the Tree of Life. Just as a tree is off-limits in its first three years, so too, the Torah is 'off-limits' to a child until age three, due to the child's limited understanding. At three, when the child's understanding has developed, then his parents can start teaching him the Torah and he can start doing some of its commandments. He finally gets to taste the sweet fruits from the 'Tree of Life.'

Some people honor the first haircut with a festive celebration. They express thanks to Hashem for allowing them to teach Torah to their child. Many are accustomed to take their child to a great Torah scholar who cuts the first snip. Not everyone has this custom, however. I found this out when my son was about to turn three, and I approached a renowned Jerusalem rabbi, asking if he would like to take the first snip. "Ani lo sapor" he said — "I'm not a barber."

Some people weigh the cut hair and give that weight in gold or silver to charity, especially a charity which promotes Torah study.

After everyone gets a snip, the child is usually taken to a barber to finish the job.

A man and little boy walk into a barber shop together. "Billy," says the man, "I'll get my hair cut first, and then it will be your turn." The man sits down in the barber's chair and gets his hair cut.

Then the man stands up, picks up the little boy and sets him down in the barber's chair. "Make it nice and short," says the man to the barber. Then to the little boy he says, "Billy, you sit real still while the barber cuts your hair. I'm going next door to the pharmacy for a few minutes."

When the barber finishes cutting the boy's hair, he says, "Little boy, shouldn't your father be back by now?"

"That's not my father," says the little boy. "He's just some nice man who said, 'Come with me little boy, and we'll both get a free haircut.'"

Sources:

- Responsa Arugot Habosem
- Meam Loez on Devarim 11:19
- Sefer Hachinuch LeYisrael page 239
- Sha'arei Teshuvah, Orach Chaim 17:2

Gershom P. Barros <gbarros@ids.net> wrote:

Is it true that Jews today may no longer take up residency in Spain due to the inquisition that took place in 1492? If so, what is the status of Germany? Are Jews allowed to take up residency in Germany after the most recent attempt at genocide?

Dear Gershom P. Barros,

It's well known that following the expulsion of Jews from Spain, the rabbinic authorities of that generation prohibited establishing residence in Spain. Opinions vary as to whether this ban applied to all Jews, or only to those actually expelled from Spain.

Some authorities maintain that the ban against entering Spain was actually a Torah prohibition: Ferdinand and Isabella decreed that any Jew found in Spain must chose Christianity or death. Hence, entering Spain meant pretending to be Christian, which is forbidden for a Jew to do. In effect, therefore, the Torah itself — not a rabbinic ban — forbade the return to Spain.

According to this view, there is no prohibition nowadays against living in Spain, since today you can live there and practice Judaism. (The Inquisition was not *officially* revoked until last century.)

In conclusion, most authorities do permit living in Spain today. As far as I know, no similar ban was ever issued against living in Germany.

Sources:

- Contemporary Halachic Problems, Vol. 1 (Rabbi J. David Bleich), published by Ktav, pp. 206-209

Yiddle Riddle

Last week we asked: "I've always been healthy and I'm a first born male, my parents are observant Jews and I'm exempt from circumcision. Who am I?"

Thanks to Eli Weisz from Zurich

Answer: A first-born of triplets, born Friday after sunset, whose brothers — born after dark — died due to circumcision. If, G-d forbid, two brothers die from circumcision, any other brother born to that family is exempt from circumcision.

In the above case, the younger brothers are circumcised first, before the older brother, for the following reason:

A circumcision can be performed on Shabbat only if Shabbat is the eighth day from the birth. Since the younger brothers were indeed born on Shabbat, they are circumcised eight days later, on Shabbat.

But the eldest was born during the doubtful 'twilight' period, when we're not sure if Shabbat started or not. So he can't be circumcised the following Shabbat, for fear that it's not the eighth day. Circumcising him would then be a desecration of Shabbat. He can't be circumcised on Friday, either, because it might be too early. Therefore, his circumcision would be on Sunday, nine days later.

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