

A Haircut in Manhattan

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

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Those of you who are regulars may notice something different this week, something that changed from last week.

Yes, it's true. I got a haircut.

I don't usually speak about something this personal, but there is a *mayseh*, a story behind the haircut. I was in New York the other day, and had a little extra time between a meeting of the Board of the Rabbinic Cabinet of Israel bonds and with a person interested in learning what converting to Judaism entails. As I walked down the street, someone handed me a flyer -- \$ 5 off on a haircut with the flyer.

Several things went through my mind when the gentleman gave me the discount - The first was -- I need to get a haircut, and really won't have any time in the next week to do so. The second was - Far be it from me to pass up a bargain. And the third was - it is after Lag B'Omer, so I can and should get a haircut.

Allow me to digress for a moment. Lag B'Omer is the thirty third day of the period between Passover and Shavuot. According to a legend in the Talmud on this day, a terrible plague that struck the disciples of Rabbi Akiva came to an end, and so the preceding days in the period of the Omer are a time of sadness and mourning. But since on this day, the plague ended, the mourning period was suspended. One aspect of mourning is not to cut one's hair, and so many traditional Jews will cut their hair on this day, and some will resume cutting their hair after it. This incidentally is the reason why this time of year is one of the periods on the Jewish calendar when a Jewish wedding cannot take place.

Back to the story. Little could I imagine what I was in for when I proceeded to enter the barber shop.

I walked around the block and went into a small shop, where I was taken right away as the next customer. I noticed that the 4 or 5 young guys working there were speaking a foreign language that sounded like Farsi, Persian. Then I noticed that one of them was wearing a Magen David, a Star of David around his neck. I looked around and saw that one of the other barbers was wearing a yarmulke. I figured they must all be Jews who had escaped from Iran.

As I started inquiring of the barber who was cutting my hair, I learned that they were Jews not from Iran, but from Bukhara, known as Bukhari Jews. It is a part of Uzbekistan, of the Former Soviet Union. He explained to me that several centuries ago a king invited Jews from Iran to come and settle to develop the agriculture in the region, since he had heard that they were good in this field. That was why the language seemed to be similar to Farsi. The Jews speak what I later learned is known as Judeo Tajiki, a

dialect of Farsi which has many Hebrew words incorporated into it, just as Yiddish is a Germanic based language, with Hebrew and other languages mixed in.

When I got home I did some research on the Bukhari Jews since my only familiarity with them was of walking through the colorful *Shechunat Bukhari*, the Bukhari neighborhood in Jerusalem.

Nowhere did I come across any legend about a king inviting them to settle in the area. What I did learn was that Bukhari Jews once formed a sizeable community in Central Asia. Although they have lived there for a long time, it is uncertain how and when they got to this remote area. Some claim they are descendants of the Lost Tribes of Issachar, Naphtali and Ephraim and that the migration occurred as long ago as the seventh century BCE. Others believe they came to the area a little later, in the time of Cyrus the Great of Persia. Regardless of when and how they got there, it is clear that the community's origins are very old.

I was fascinated to learn that they were cut off from the rest of the Jewish world for practically 2,000 years. Subjected to much discrimination, persecution, at one time many were forced against their will to convert to Islam. There are records that in the 16th century the Bukhari Jews had to wear a distinguishing badge and pay a special annual tax levied only on Jews which was accompanied by a humiliating slap in the face.

Yet somehow they managed to survive and to preserve their Jewish identity and heritage. With their own distinct customs and traditions over the centuries they developed a rich culture and traditions of their own, including uniquely colorful clothing, beautiful ceremonial jewelry associated with wedding ceremonies, and foods of their own.

I did not know all of this at the time. All I knew was that my hair was being cut by a young man from Bukhari who by now knew that I was a rabbi.

When he finished, I paid my bill including a nice tip, and then acceded to his request for an additional unconventional tip. He asked me if before I left I would give him a blessing. He asked to be blessed with more children, since he and his wife only had one child.

And that, my friends is the story of an unusual haircut on a sunny day in Manhattan – which brings us to our Torah portion this week.

The Book of Numbers as we just heard opens with a census, a counting of the people in the Wilderness. It is perplexing, since it comes so soon, only a few months after the census that had just been taken at Mt. Sinai. One of the things that is different between the two reckonings however, is that in this second instance, the people are counted according to their families, and in tribal units. In Exodus, the first instance, they are counted as a whole, whereas here the members of the tribes are counted separately.

Commenting on this “*Malei HaOmer*” notes that the tribal families are specifically mentioned here because it is the key to understanding how the Jewish people withstood the difficulties in Egypt and elsewhere. Their clinging to their family traditions is what enabled them to preserve their identity, and to succeed in resisting attempts at assimilation and destruction while facing slavery. This is why he suggests the term *beit avot*, family household is mentioned in the narrative. Preserving Jewish the traditions inherited from our homes would be the key, he explained to the future survival and preservation of the Jewish people for all time, as well as in Egypt.

Clearly the Jews of Bukhari, and Jewish communities elsewhere, scattered across the globe throughout the ages have managed to keep Judaism alive. And they have done it by remaining faithful to Jewish traditions, by studying Torah, by keeping it alive in their family and by clinging to their community. Jewish identity is not accidental. It comes only when we embrace those distinctly Jewish customs we share, and which set us apart from others. It occurs when we actively participate in the life of our people, when we practice and observe Judaism in our homes, our families, and identify as part of a larger Jewish people.

As I learned in a barber shop in Manhattan and from the Torah portion, what was true in the desert, as well as in the remote mountains of Central Asia is no less true for us here today.

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potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org