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Kol Rinah
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One thing my family is doing in the next couple of days is camp haircuts. That meant crew cuts when my dad was a kid—I've seen the pictures. And I need a haircut too.

When I was a little kid, maybe three years old, my mother took me for a haircut. I had honey-blond hair with curls, back then. I told my mom, "Don't let them cut off my curls." "They'll grow back," she said. They never grew back.

It's ok—I only know the story because my mom has told me it. I've both forgotten and forgiven! But there's a power to hair, to haircuts.

You've perhaps heard of the custom of giving a Jewish boy his first haircut at age three. It marks the age of the beginning of Torah study.

Think about other intentional haircutting times. I got a haircut before Pesach, and then on Lag B'Omer, but not during the Omer, which is traditionally a time of mourning. Haircutting can be a sign of celebration, or of life as normal, marking an emergence from mourning.

Let's go the parasha now—a few careful readers may anticipate why I'm talking about this this Shabbat.

First, I'll say that there are some sections of Torah that if you carefully snipped out of my chumash, I'd notice. But the instructions for purifying the Levites in Numbers 8:5-22? I wouldn't have missed them, and I think I'd never noticed them before.

So what's happening here?

In Numbers 3 (vv. 11-13, 40-51), as well as in Numbers 8 (vv. 16-18), God says God is taking the Levites in place of all the first born, which at the time of the Tenth Plague, God consecrated to God's self. So the Levites are replacing the first born. And these Levites are assigned the duties of taking care of the Mishkan. To do that work though, they need to be ritually pure, and so required not a sanctification or inauguration, as the Kohanim needed in Leviticus 8 when they start their service, but a purification ritual at the beginning of their service. Water of purification is sprinkled over them, a razor goes over their whole body (except one's "secret areas," per Torah Temima on Numbers 8:7), and they wash their clothes, and offer sacrifices.

Why is it the Levites who are chosen, and not some other tribe? Midrashim suggest that in Egypt, only the Levites kept the mitzvah of circumcision, and that in the desert, only the Levites were not involved in the sin of the golden calf.

But why do they need to be purified? In what way are they ritually impure, as a group? If it's from the ritual impurity of being in contact with corpses, then the part of the ritual that involves shaving doesn't fit—that's not part of the regular corpse contact purification ritual.

Moreover, it seems like this is something that was to happen once in history—this was not a procedure for welcoming new or impure Levites, but rather, it was a collective, one-time ritual (see Sefer ha-Chinuch, Mitzvah #377 and Mishna Negaim 14:4 with the Rambam's commentary).

The key is the shaving, suggests Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who lived in Germany from 1808 to 1888, and wrote perhaps the outstanding Jewish commentary in German on the

Torah. He understands shaving as being about reentering community, whether shaving the head, in the case of the *metzora*, the “leper,” who has been isolated and is going to reenter community after the shaving, or the *Nazir*, who has taken on certain additional but unnecessary strictures separating themselves from the community, and shaves their head at the end of the period of their nazirite vow—in all of these cases shaving “symbolizes the nullification of isolating self” (Hirsch on Numbers 8:7). That makes sense regarding the *metzora* and the *nazir*, but the Levites? As Hirsch puts it, their shaving their whole bodies, and not just their heads, “indicated to them at their induction into office that they must cease from living only for themselves; rather, they are obligated to devote their whole lives to the service of the community.... [This person] sheds all selfish desire and devotes themselves to the service of national aims.”

The idea is that lifelong, or really, generations-long, commitment, needs to be more physically transformative than a little water sprinkled. It speaks to a need for embodied representation of life change. What are the changes in our lives that shouldn't be reflected in our bodies, and what are the changes that maybe could or should? If I were an attorney, switching law firms may not be a significant change in this way; but being married, becoming a parent, becoming a rabbi, or a nurse, or a teacher, dedicating oneself to art, retiring—I've never been someone interested in tattoos, and I'm still not, but I understand why someone might want to mark a major change in identity in a way that is embodied, felt, and seen.

But I want to offer one competing view of this reading, which comes from Rabbi Eli(e) Munk, who lived from 1900-1981. He grew up in Germany, in the institutions that Hirsch two generations before, had been a part of, and became the leader of the Paris Jewish community, surviving the Shoah in Switzerland, but then coming back to Paris to take care of the Jewish community there, along with the many Algerian Jewish immigrants to France. His Torah commentary, *Kol HaTorah*, “The Voice of the Torah,” may be the outstanding Jewish Torah commentary written in French. (There have been many Torah commentaries written in France—Rashi, for example, but in French, not as many.)

Munk summarizes Hirsch's position, but then offers what to me is an even more compelling view. (For all of this, see *Kol HaTorah*, “The Call of Torah,” on Numbers 8:7).

The Zohar, the Jewish mystical source text, says Munk, sees the Kohanim as embodying *chesed*, kindness, love, mercy, whereas the Levites embody *din*, justice. Not only were the Levites innocent during the sin of the golden calf, but the Torah tells us that they were the ones who undertook the punishment of those who sinned—as exemplifying their embodying the trait of justice and judgement.

But now, says Munk, “less than a year later, the Levites had to change roles completely.... Hence, at their dedication, they were to shave their entire bodies thereby symbolically stripping themselves of their previous character.” They had to atone for their role in meting out justice, and take on a new character. Thus it was a purification, “the cleaning out of an existing character.”

Whereas for Hirsch, the ritual, and the shaving, was about dedicating their lives to the community, for Munk, it's about changing their role, their qualities, about letting go of a kind of righteousness, or self-righteousness, and moving to a role of service. A physical component can aid in a major change in role, status, character.

I would add that we do sometimes understand that hair has totemic, powerful-giving. Remember Samson, who could not be defeated until his hair was cut? Perhaps this is a relinquishing of control, or judgement, of zealotry, and a movement to peace, and service.

In the way that a group of people all getting the same haircut (imagine new military recruits all getting their hair cut), it can be a way of bringing together a group on equal footing—something that might also have been important as the Levites were taking on these new roles as a group.

Really, every time we get a haircut, or every time we shave, we have the opportunity to think about who we want to be, who we want to become, what qualities we want to shed, and what qualities we want take on.

I need a haircut. I'm so excited for it now.