

Beards and Jews



Question: Is it traditional for Jews to have beards? Response: When Jews are requested to visualize an image of an authentic Torah leader, I am positive that hardly any will present a picture of a clean-shaven rabbi. Do not the great deans of Yeshivot and Hassidic rebbes all have beards? Indeed, the Shulhan Arukh specifically expresses a preference for a bearded hazzan (Orah Hayyim 53:6). It's reported that Rav Isaac Luria, the famed kabbalist, refrained from touching his beard for fear that he might remove some hair (Be'er Heitev, YoreDeah 181:5). The Chabad Hassidim, moreover, explicitly prohibit shaving as included in the negative commandment which prohibits a man from wearing a woman's garment (Deut. 22:5; see also Responsa, Tzemah Tzedek). Accordingly, it appears that halakha, Hassidut, and common custom indicate that beards are rooted in Jewish tradition and serve as a mark of a religious man. It's true – beards are in. Yet, there is a quite another tradition that most pre-beard advocates simply neglect to consider. In Mesivta Rabbenu Chaim Berlin in the late 1950s, I distinctly recall fewer than five yeshiva students with beards in a bait hamidrash of over 300 young men. Photographs of the famed Slabodka Yeshiva in Europe disclose that the overwhelming majority of students did not have beards. This is also reported for the Yeshivat Mir as well as others. Many Jews relate that they have personally seen pictures of renowned Lithuanian roshei yeshivot who were beardless. German Jews were known to be clean shaven. Were these customs a violation of halakha? Does it mean that beardless are not as frum as the bearded? Are the thousands of rabbanim, b'nai Torah, and pious clean-shaven laymen simply going against Jewish customs and traditions? No way! There are simply two streams of thought relating to beards. Indeed, the Shulhan Arukh's preference for bearded hazzanim is explicitly modified with the Codes to mean a person who has the ability to grow a beard, and does not rule out those who are clean shaven (Orah Hayyim 53:8). All segments of Jewry acknowledge that the Hatam Sofer was a staunch defender of even so-called minor aspects of Jewish customs and traditions. It was he who coined the phrase "all innovations are prohibited" (hadash asur). His piety and encyclopedic knowledge, coupled with his brilliant mind, are unquestioned within the world of Torah. Accordingly, the following comments of the Hatam Sofer should clear the air on this issue and provide a strong defense for the pro-shaving advocates. The Hatam Sofer testifies "that there is no source in Shas, Poskim, and outside sefarim indicating any distinction between Jews and non-Jews relating to having a beard. [Indeed] in ancient times, even the Gentiles had beards" (See Shabbat 152a and Bereishith Rabbah 111:7). As to the work of the mekubalim (mystics) where it is written not to touch a beard, Hatam Sofer notes that he has no involvement with such secret, mystical matters. Yet, should one utilize kabbalistic sources to challenge the propriety of shaving, it should be noted that the kabbalists themselves are a main source for the custom of shaving beards. "All the sages of Italy shaved their beards and relied on [the customs of] Rav Menahem Azaryah [1310-1385], the patriarch of the mekubalim, who [frequently] shaved and was known not to leave even one hair [in his beard]". So also testified other mystics who contended that according to the wisdom of kabbalah, "it is not proper for one in the Diaspora to have a beard". In addition, during the pogrom of 856, Jews shaved their beards so as not to be identified by the enemies of Israel. (In that age, it became a common custom to shave in order to emulate the role model of a Polish king who could not grow a beard.) The Torah sages ruled that it was halakhically permissible for Jews to shave their beards. Indeed, says the Hatam Sofer, the minhag to shave does not even contain a scintilla (rei'ah) of prohibition (see Responsa, Hatam Sofer, Orah Hayyim 159). The ruling and testimony of the Hatam Sofer is certainly a reliable authority for the pro-shaving Torah community to rely upon. Caveat: This discussion, of course, relates only to methods of shaving that do not violate halakha. The above noted responsum

of the Hatam Sofer also reviews this issue.

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