

They shall not make a bald spot on their heads, and they shall not shave an edge of their beard; and in their flesh, they shall not cut a gash... They shall be holy to their G-d. (21:5-6)

Horav Yehoshua Leib Diskin, zl, explains the continuity of these *pesukim*. The pagan priests of that day would mark their bodies to show their distinction from the average pagan. They cut their hair differently and made markings in their skin for all to see that they were priests. They did this because, in their basic rectitude and moral compass, no distinction existed between them and the average devotee who viewed them as spiritually elevated. Their lifestyle was as morally profligate as that of other idol worshippers. Thus, in order to garner respect from the populace, they required creative physical signs indelibly marked into their bodies as a declaration of being different. When people saw someone whose skin showed signs of gashes, whose hair was torn out in sections of their heads, they assumed they were priests. These signs of mourning were the identifying marks of their vocation.

The *kohanim*, the spiritual elite of *Klal Yisrael*, need not mark their skin to get attention. They represent and manifest a unique holiness which is evident in their total demeanor. One can take one look at them to realize beyond the shadow of a doubt that they are Hashem's blessed children.

Perhaps we can expand on the above. The *Baalei Machshavah* state that all objects in Creation are broken down into two components: *chomer*, the physical substance of the object; and *tzurah*, its spiritual essence. Intellectual ideas can likewise be divided, with the *chomer* of an idea its expression in thought and words, and the *tzurah* the manner in which the idea expands and expresses itself in one's heart. The *chomer* of an idea, the external expression via oral and cognitive articulation, has very little variance between people. It is in the *tzurah* that we are able to notice major differences between people. When one's entire life is devoted to intellectual growth, the *tzurah* of the ideas which he has assimilated within himself change and grow. As a result, it will be quite noticeable that this is a profoundly elevated *tzurah*.

The greatness of our *gedolim* is not measured by the *chomer* of their knowledge. A brilliant mind can grasp many messages of *Shas*, but, if his learning is not incorporated into changing his *tzurah*, then he has not grown spiritually. Their greatness is manifest in the *tzurah* of the *chochmah*, wisdom of the *gedolim*: *Chochmas adam tair panav*, "The wisdom of an individual illuminates his face" (*Koheles 8*). The wisdom of a great person is evidenced by the radiance of his *tzurah*. The pagan priests represented a person who possessed *chomer*, but was empty of any form of *tzurah*. Thus, they sought ways to make themselves appear different. It did not work. They were the same pagans – only cut up with gashes in their skin and hair torn out of their heads.

A *Rosh Yeshivah*, a *Mashgiach*, a *Rebbe*, and a Torah leader emanate from a synthesis of *chomer* and *tzurah*. They have devoted their lives to study the profundities of Torah and assimilated its

verities into their being. Their every action becomes a living testament to the truth, embodying the essence of Torah values. Even the simplest act reflects profound thought, self-discipline, and unwavering devotion to Hashem. Their deeds are not arbitrary, but the result of years of rigorous Torah learning and refined *middos*, character traits. This authenticity evokes not just admiration, but also inspiration as it becomes evident that every decision, every gesture, is a manifestation of the eternal truths of the Torah.

Torah giants do not merely teach Torah; they live it. The spiritual integrity of a Torah leader is not questioned, because his life is transparent – his actions align with his values. *Horav Meir Chodosh zl, Mashgiach of Yeshivas Chevron*, represented such an image. He absorbed from his revered Rebbe, the *Alter M'Slabodka*, that a human being is the crown of Creation, his soul having been carved from the *Kisei Ha'Kavod*, Heavenly Throne. *Gadlus ha'adam*, the greatness of man, was the catch word in Slabodka – the mandate for its *talmidim* to achieve greatness and an unwillingness to be content with mediocrity.

One year on *Rosh Hashanah*, the *Mashgiach* was called up to the Torah. When the *baal korei*, Torah reader, came to the words, “Drive out the slave woman (Hagar) with her son (Yishmael)... And the matter greatly distressed Avraham regarding his son” (*Bereishis* 21:10-11), the *Mashgiach* suddenly burst out in copious weeping. His voice grew louder as he read the words with the *baal korei*.

Seeing this, the students were taken aback, wondering what it was about those words that could provoke such a reaction from their beloved *Rebbe*. Shortly thereafter, he explained his reaction to the students: “*Chazal* say that Yishmael was a person who was guilty of the three cardinal sins. He was a person who represented moral profligacy at its nadir. He certainly deserved to be driven from the Patriarch’s home. Nonetheless, the Torah states clearly that the matter greatly distressed Avraham *Avinu*, ‘He is my son; how can I drive him from my home?’” At that point, the *Mashgiach* broke down again in heavy weeping. He called out, “*Ribono Shel Olam*, if we are Your children, You are our Father. You, too, have driven us out of our home (the *Bais Hamikdash*)! We certainly are not as flawed as Yishmael. Our sins in no way remotely approach the levels of Yishmael’s degradation. Is it not proper for us to request that, as Your children, You should have mercy and redeem us?”

A student who was present during this short talk commented, “Happy was the eye that saw and the ear that heard that spectacle.”