

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted May 8, 2003 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

HOLY HAIRDRESSING © Judith Z. Abrams, 2003

The period of counting the 49 days of the omer is well underway now. We have already learned two passages describing how Rabbi Akiba grew to be a sage with thousands of disciples (http://www.maqom.com/jun3_99.html, http://www.maqom.com/may20_99.htm). These students, however, did not advance the cause of rabbinic learning and died.

Rabbi Akiba had twelve thousand pairs of disciples between G'vat and Antipras. And all of them died at the same time because they did not treat each other with respect...It was taught: All those, [previous students] died between Pesach and Shavuot [i.e., during the counting of the omer]. (B. Yebamot 62b)

It has become the custom that the counting of the omer is a dolorous time. Jews are not to shave as a visible sign of sadness. These restrictions are lifted on the thirty-third day of the Omer. Not only may men shave, but this day is usually the one on which a child gets his first haircut in a ceremony called opsherenish at the age of three. All but the sidelocks (pei'ot) are shaved off. From that day on, the child begins to practice wearing a tallit katan (tsitsit worn under garments) and saying the morning blessings, the Grace After Meals and the bedtime prayers.

Hair has customarily been believed to contain a person's strength and vitality. (Just think what happened to Samson when he had his cut!) So a child's first haircut became a ritual. It signified that he was strong enough to have some of his life force (in the hair) taken away from him. There was often a feast and the hair was weighed and its equivalent in coins was given to charity. In Israel, large crowds gather at the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and build a huge bonfire (echoed by an almost full moon in the sky) while music is played on instruments. Then the master of ceremonies, so to speak, clips the hair of each boy, one after another. The ceremony seems to be an amalgam of so many Jewish rites: the fires that light up the night on Lag Ba'omer are like those described in the Temple at the end of Sukkot; the fear in the heart of the child as its hair is first cut reminiscent of both brit milah and the binding of Isaac; a sad time turning into joy one and the music and dancing remind us of Purim.

One of my students, citing the teachings Hazan Robert Esformes and Reb Zalman, pointed out that there are 50 days between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashanah and that some people practice a sort of "reverse omer", counting down to Rosh Hashanah in contrast to this omer where we count up to Shavuot.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the growing and cutting of hair effect you? Does your hair communicate a message? If so, what is it? In Orthodox Judaism women's hair signifies sexual allure and so is covered by wigs or scarves. What message does "wig hair" send?
2. Should we treat the omer as a time of mourning? Couldn't it be a time of gladness? After all, Rabbi Akiba's truly effective teaching only comes after he realizes that large numbers of students are not the way to transmit Judaism most effectively.
3. Have you been with a child getting its first haircut? How did it go?
4. If you have long hair and want to do a mitzvah with it go to <http://www.locksoflove.org/>. You can donate your

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hair to make wigs for children with long-term hair loss. I believe there are other charitable organizations that use human hair for wigs for those undergoing cancer treatments. If you are sure they are reputable, please pass that information along. Thanks!