

The Care and Feeding of a Beard

by Zalman Velvel

At 45, I had a library full of self-improvement books. The goal of these books was to make me richer, healthier, and more popular, thus, more fulfilled.

Well, the fulfillment didn't happen. I was less connected than ever to the world around me. There was still a hollow space where my soul was supposed to be. After half a lifetime of searching for wisdom from books that had a shelf-life of maybe five years, I emptied my library shelves except for one book, a book that has been on the best-seller list for over three millennium. In this ancient book there are 613 guides to living your life, the ten most famous of which were carved into stone tablets.

I grew to love this book. The stories and guidelines showed me how to live with myself, my family, my community, and my God. It was the Manufacturer's Instructions, just like you see on clothes' labels. Like the Manufacturer's Instructions, you have the right to ignore them, or obey. You have the freedom to wind up with a shrunken, discolored shirt, or a clean, fresh one. The choice is yours.

My book also came with a cheerleader, called a Rabbi, who challenged me to not only read it, but to live it. In my third year of study, he pointed to the following guideline, or commandment:

"Thou shalt not cut the edges of thy beard." - Leviticus 19:27

Not shave? What does shaving have to do with fulfillment?

Now, one of the things I enjoy about this special book is that every so often, it goes from the mundane, like how to slaughter a chicken, or plant a field, to the very mystical. There are guides about not making fires one day each week, trimming the skin in a certain sensitive area, and creating a magical potion from the ashes of a red heifer, to name just a few.

Since I had begun following these guidelines, I found myself sleeping better, smiling alot, and enjoying my family and friends more. So I decided, what the heck, let's try this commandment on for size. If wearing a beard was another of those mystical guides that had to be accepted on faith, then so be it.

I threw out the Sunbeam electric shaver, the Bic double edge, the Foamy shaving creme, the Old Spice aftershave, the antiseptic pencil, and the tiny Band-Aids. Gone was the morning scraping of my face.

Also gone was the slicing, ripping, bleeding, and yelling "Oh my God!" as the alcohol in the aftershave hit the open wounds. The first fateful morning, I simply brushed my teeth, got dressed, and left the house. *Free at last! Great God Almighty, free at last!*

After three days, the snide comments started.

"Forget something this morning, did we?" Then there was: "You'll find the razor works better when you put in a blade." Or, for those less wordy: "You look like a bum."

Wonderful.

A little bit of retaliation was needed.

"No, I'm not growing a beard, my beard is growing a face." Take that, you pompous little ****. Or "My beard isn't getting longer, my face is shrinking." Now shut up and go away. For the less wordy: "I am a bum, and could you spare some change?" Ask for money, end a conversation. That's how this mature adult responded to the snidicisms. It is not a guideline given in the book, but sometimes immaturity is best fought on its own battleground.

The itching was a different matter. That war was within. When it became unbearable, I sought the council of one with legendary beard experience, someone outside the fold, a native son.

"Itch? Yeah. I think it used to. Hard to remember." Jimmy Joe had a long red beard, and a ponytail running down between his shoulders.

"Don't cut none of it no more. Haven't for ten years. Just tie it in back and let it hang in front." He checked his shotgun, returned it to its perch along the rear window, and drove away in his pickup.

Not much help there.

So I scratched. And scratched. One morning, after a month of torture, just as I was reaching for my wife's pink Lady Gillette, the itching stopped. *Thank you, Lord!*

Then the food problems began.

I had hair around my lips. Long protruding hair. I ate with those same lips. When I ate, sometimes the food was bigger than my mouth, things like a hamburger, pastrami sandwiches, or pizza, to name a few. Result: food got all over my beard.

When I was a clean-shaven heathen, I took a napkin and wiped the stuff off. No big deal. With a beard, it felt like the crumbs, the ketchup, and the grease were absorbed into the follicles. No amount of wiping made me feel clean. I had to go and wash.

There is a positive side to this. For those who like to snack between meals, a beard is a handy storage medium. But first you should make sure you will be alone. Others will find it quite unappetizing to see you carrying around little bits of food on your face.

Then there was the final humiliation.

I was in the mall during the third week in December. I was sitting on a bench, minding my own business, waiting for my wife to finish shopping at J.C. Penny's. A cute little boy of about five, holding a sticky candy, climbed into my lap.

"I want an 'lectric jeep and roller blades," he said.

His mother ran up, red-faced, and pulled him away. "No Billy, that's not Santa Claus."

My wife timed her return to witness this scene.

"Tell your father I'm sorry," the woman said to my wife as she ran off.

Okay, so maybe I do have a lot of gray in my beard, and I could lose a few pounds. After my wife stopped laughing and wiped the tears from her face, I told her I didn't think this incident was the least bit funny. I have to constantly remind her that it wasn't funny. I also have to remind her I don't like it when she calls me her 'old man'.

If pleading for compassion does not stop my wife, I say, "*Lo tashheet ate pat zikanechah.*" I pronounce it ultra-guttural so that it sounds like swearing in Hebrew.

When she asks what I am saying, I refuse to translate, and this evens the score.

I will tell you what it means, only if you promise not to tell her. Do you promise?

Okay. It means "Thou shalt not cut the edges of thy beard," the holy words that got me into trouble in the first place.

Along with the growing of my beard, I have also begun wearing a yarmulke, or skullcap. This is not a commandment, but a widespread custom intended to remind us there is always One above us.

A few months ago, I was returning from a business trip, sitting by myself on a plane from New York. I was wearing a dark suit, a yarmulke, and of course, my beard. A man in his fifties came up and sat down next to me.

"Rabbi," he said, "I just buried my mother."

Before I could correct his impression of me, he began pouring out his grief and love.

"Could I have a blessing for her?" he asked when he was done. He wiped his eyes.

"Yivorecha adonoy vayishmorecha," I said, touching his bowed head. I translated, "May the Lord bless you and watch over you." That also comes from the old book.

He thanked me and left. When no one was looking, I wiped my eyes.

While I am on the subject of Rabbis, let me tell you that my Rabbi's reaction to my emerging beard was heartwarming. He is a young man of 28, with a luxuriant dark beard he has never shaved. When he gazed upon my face after a year of growth, he said, "Zalman, your beard looks beautiful!"

No man ever said a part of me was beautiful. I found it ... pleasing.

My Rabbi also has a playful side. Sporting a sly look, he stroked his beard and asked, "So, Zalman, do you feel more spiritual?"

"More spiritual? Hmmmm ..." I responded. I stared up at the sky, lost in thought.

Finally, after the appropriate amount of deliberation, I said, "Sometimes, Rabbi ..."

Then I added, " ... and sometimes, I feel like a Jewish Santa Claus."

He did not know of the incident at the mall, and I did not educate him about it. I have learned that bearded people are shrouded in many things, and one of them is mystery.

THE END

Gift Section

Dear _____

This Story is a special Gift for a Special Person
on the occasion of your _____ .

I love you,

Person Giving Gift

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