

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Naso Redux**

Since last Shabbat was also a holiday, some communities read a Torah portion for the holiday rather than the one regular to the cycle. In an effort to maintain uniformity in the reading cycle, even with divergent traditions, the rest of us will revisit the same text again. So, I thought about a different angle for this week's commentary. I found myself getting lost in the moment, and hearkened back to Susan Cowsill. Now, no young people will know this name, but for folks of my age, the Cowsill name is iconic. Susan and her family are most famous for the classic hit, "HAIR." Susan was about a year older than me, and, of course, had no idea who I was, but we did go to school together. I fantasized her talking about the song "HAIR," and its origins. "The Bible tells us that we are supposed to dedicate ourselves to God, and to show this, we are not allowed to cut our hair, as if God said, 'Give me a head with hair, long beautiful hair ...'" Ok, it was a weird day dream. I have never seen a commentary linking the musical to this text, but one exists now. The musical was a direct response to the biblical commands regarding the shaving of one's head.

In one place in text, we are told that in order to be holy, one must not shave the corners of one's beard. In this week's Torah portion, we receive the command regarding the Nazirite; the one who dedicates himself to God's service. Amongst the requirements placed upon such a person is the command not to cut one's hair. Colloquially from the Torah we learn that God likes long hair.

This may sound tongue in cheek, but it sort of bears out in history. Think about the depictions of pagan civilizations. Their priests (and often kings) all had shaved heads, as if to say that they consciously and affirmatively rejected God, in pursuit of their pagan ways. The Bible evolves over time and was not recognized as a canon, until relatively late in ancient history. It is not too far a stretch to think that the Torah might very well be, amongst all of its other purposes, a commentary on the ways of our historic oppressors. At the same time the canon formalizes, statues of closely shorn Roman emperors proliferate. Thus the Torah stands in symbolic protest to our oppressors. Maybe it is not that God likes long hair but rather that in great revolutionary fashion, God likes a justice based protest.

As history would have it, often one day's victim is the next day's dictator. The Bible that was so revolutionary in its own day has become the cause of so much pain ever since. Historically, more blood has been spilled over biblical disagreements and rejections than any other stated cause. For so many, it is the tool employed to reject or oppress others. No differently than the farm tools that fed us became, for many, the weapons of war that destroy us, the Bible morphed from the source of healing and inspiration, to a weapon producing personal exile and nightmare. Those who created the canon never intended the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms, or the Shoah (Holocaust). And while all farmers never stopped using tools for growing food, the Torah never stopped speaking words of peace and respect, it was just that many chose not to hear them.

The opening scene of HAIR has Claude, the leader of the tribe of misfits and renegades, cut his hair in protest against what he sees as an abusive society, stuck in a civil war of racial oppression and a global war in Vietnam. In the same sense that the Torah depicts our holy people protesting paganism by keeping their hair, this musical protests the "Biblically motivated" establishment's oppression by shedding it.

The magic of Torah is that it changed the world order. It taught us to stand up and be counted, even (and especially) in the face of those who would seek to destroy us. That magic becomes a nightmare when we use it to cause each other pain; to argue our supremacy over others outside of a single reading of the book. Torah's call to action is foundational in our tradition. The teachings of our sages all remind us that we are to pursue justice at all times, in every endeavor, at all costs. We cannot stand idly while our neighbor bleeds. We must help lift the fallen ox, even if it is our enemy's. We may not profit from goods we find if there is any chance that its owner can be found and the profits or asset growth remain the property of the original owner. We must protect our own rights, but must equally protect the rights of others around us ... and both at the same time. We do not usually teach the Bible as a source of revolution, but if we deny its origin, we deny the very ethical underpinnings in which we claim to hold faith today. Ultimately, the command of Torah calls on us to challenge the oppressor, to speak out against injustice, and to pursue respect. Where we fail to do so, we abandon our roots. Where we use the source of the command to justice as the weapon of oppression, we blaspheme and bring darkness upon the world. Let all who breath praise the source of justice and love, and "let the sun shine." Shabbat Shalom.