

Spiritual Schadenfreude: The Case of Matisyahu's Beard

Many people are familiar with the story of the Satmar Rebbe and the beard. Following the war, the Satmar Rebbe was lavishing praise on a certain Jew who, much to the surprise of his Hassidim, was clean shaven. In response to his Hassidim's protests, the Satmar Rebbe responded,:

When this Jew comes to heaven they will ask him, "Yid, yid, where is your beard?" When you go to heaven they will ask, "Beard, beard, where is your yid?"

By now most people have heard that Matisyahu, the famed Hassidic reggae star, has shaved his beard. Instead of focusing on the speculation of what his decision portends for his musical career and spiritual future, I would like to consider, for a moment, why we love such speculation and events. Of course, news outlets will regale in response to any drastic fashion move by a noted star, let alone a religious fashion statement, but of true interest is the general phenomenon of how the Jewish community responds to any form of religious lapse.

In this regard, Matisyahu is not unique. I have seen many a yeshiva student slowly transition from black and white to subtle stripes, to full blown solids. We have all seen the black hat disappear into the lone velvet kippah which in turn can transform into suide or a srugy. What was once consistently wool charcoal has become khaki or denim. Leaving aside the mind-numbing reiteration that its whats on the inside that matters, I think our collective reaction to the subtle and not-so-subtle shifts of others' outsides should provide thoughtful pause. Why are such transitions so jarring for us to witness? Though there may be several reasons I would like to focus on two:

1. **Spiritual Schadenfreude:** Schadenfreude refers to the pleasure one derives at another's misfortune. In that sense, when we watch someone else grapple with religious uncertainty it provides a momentary distraction from our own confusion. The KBY student who stopped showing up to davening makes it a little easier to feel proud of our own observance; a clever diversion from our own indifference. In a similar vein, these situations allow us to collectively exhale, "I told you so." When someone's religious observance is called into question it gives us a great opportunity to proclaim that you had anticipated such devolution. Maybe it was because you knew the person in question's ideology was suspect. Or you knew his commitment was lacking from the start. Either way, the apparent confusion of one individual allows others to reinforce their certitude.
2. **"Does he know something I don't know?"** Particularly when the perpetrator of religious confusion is a notable or respected figure there is an inaudible question being hummed in the comments of the masses, "Did this person just find out something about my religious practices that I should know about? Should my own observance be called into question if someone I

know or respect has seemingly decided to pursue or emphasize other endeavors? Is there some pasuk in the Torah I missed that calls this whole thing into question?" These questions, while infrequently articulated, definitely exist whenever we see someone in our circles decide to move elsewhere. Additionally, we may find ourselves wondering if this person decided to change, who might be next? Uncertainty looms-not only because of the person who changed, but of the questions that arise for the people who have stayed the same. Sadly, it can be comforting to find out that the person in question changed his religious beliefs due to an external factor such as an oppressive teacher or misguided parenting. If such is the case, we tell ourselves, it is not our religious ideologies that are in question, but rather this poor person's unfortunate circumstances.

Whatever the case may be, those who secretly (or not so secretly) struggle with these reactions, should be mindful of their implications. People will always fluctuate religiously if they are truly religious people. Witnessing such struggles can be jarring or confusing. But instead of thinking about it like you've just seen a car crash, remember it's more like looking under the hood of a car; another reminder that religious life can be complex and cause for confusion. It might be fair to watch and even comment, but the ultimate judgment these events call for should be on our selves.