



tidbits

for chinuch beginnings
& the upsherin



The *Upsherin minhag* has become more widespread in recent years. Even amongst those who do not celebrate the upsherin in a formal manner (my father, Rabbi Zlotowitz z"l included), it is very common that at age three a toddler is considered to be transitioning to being a young boy. The minhag varies as to if and how the occasion is marked and which customs are observed.

The Beginnings of Boyhood

The occasion of a boy's third birthday is considered to be his introduction to performing mitzvos, a primary aspect of his transformation from a toddler to a young boy. This also marks the beginning of the father's formal mitzvah of chinuch, to train his son in performing mitzvos. Many have the child formally begin learning Torah at this stage, beginning with the letters of the Torah, the Alef-Beis (Rema Y.D. 245:8). Highlighting this transformation is the haircut along with the donning of yarmulke and tzitzis. Many celebrate this occasion and it is commonly referred to as the *upsherin* or *chalakah*, which refers to the haircut. Some write that a primary highlight of this occasion is the boy's introduction specifically to the mitzvah of *peyos ha'rosh*, leaving intact the peyos of the head, as this is considered a sign of Jewishness (Shaarei Teshuvah 531:7).

The Arizal brought his son to Miron for his first haircut and celebrated the occasion there with his family. This is a source of the significance of the *upsherin* and celebrating it as a festive occasion. This is also a source for the practice of those who perform the *upsherin* in Miron.

When's the Upsherin?

In most communities the *upsherin* is performed when the boy reaches three years of age. A primary source for the age of three is the Midrash Tanchumah (Kedoshim 14) which interprets the pesukim in the *Parashah of Orlah (Vayikra 19:23-25)* the laws of a young sapling, as referring to a young boy. The first three years of the child's life he is not yet developed and does not talk or produce anything significant. Once he enters his fourth year, "his praises shall be for Hashem", he is now developed and we teach him the letters of the Torah so he can recite words of Torah and begin learning at age five. Also, as he is

now developed he is ready to begin mitzvah performance. Additionally, the Yalkut in Tehillim (82) says that Hashem told Avraham that his children will sit in the *batei kenesiyos* and *batei midrashos* from age three or four.

Some are careful not to delay the *upsherin* past the third birthdate of the child. Some are careful as well not to perform it earlier. Many however, will adjust the date even for minor reasons. When the birthday falls on Shabbos or Yom Tov there are varying opinions on how to proceed. Prevalent practice is not to make an *upsherin* on Chol Hamoed, although in some communities the *upsherin* is held specifically on Chol Hamoed to enable a more festive and well attended event. There are some who allow the haircut during the Three Weeks and *Sefirah* as well. Some adjust the date of the event so it can be held on Lag Ba'omer.

The Haircut

On the occasion of the *upsherin*, the boy's hair is cut into a mature hairstyle which includes leaving the peyos hairs intact. Many do not cut their son's hair at all until the *upsherin*.

Many honor the attendees with cutting some hair. Some ask Rabbanim to participate in the cutting. One who cuts this small amount of hair need not wash *netillas yadayim* afterwards. Some say that the first haircut should be given by a Jew (Darkei Teshuvah 154,4). Some start the haircut from the *peyos* section of the head so as to begin with a mitzvah and explain this mitzvah to the child.

Yarmulke & Tzitzis

Common practice is for a boy to begin wearing a *yarmulke* from the time of the *upsherin* and onward. The *yarmulke* infuses a boy with *yiras shamayim* (Magen Avraham 2,6; see Shabbos 156). It is also a sign of respect and humility before Hashem, our Creator. An uncovered head has the converse effect.

Common practice by many is for a boy to wear tzitzis from the time of his *upsherin*, if the child is properly toilet trained. The tzitzis garment should always reach down to a boy's waist.

Learning Torah

Many have the minhag to take the child to a Rebbi in school as a formal orientation to Torah learning. Some have the practice to carry the boy wrapped in a Tallis to maintain his purity and protect him from seeing forbidden sights. Typically, the boy sits with the Rebbi and they review the alef-beis from a printed chart. Honey is then placed over the letters on the chart and the boy tastes the honey, symbolizing the sweetness of Torah (see Sefer Rokeach - 296). Others have the father review the letters at home with the child. Some recite or sing the passage of "Torah tzivah lanu Moshe" with the child.

This space was left blank because...

When you have nothing to say, say nothing.

-Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz z"l

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