



The Sisterhood

The Case for the Sheitel

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Elana Maryles Sztokman, in her recent Sisterhood blog post titled [“The Case Against the Sheitel,”](#) seems to be mistaken in her critique of the wigs that many married Orthodox women choose to wear. *Sheitels* are a model of how Jewish law is supposed to function and change. We will know that the Arab world has modernized when they, too, favor *sheitels* over headscarves.

Let me explain. Many religious communities, including traditional *halachic* ones, have deep-seated concerns about matters of modesty. Sure, these concerns seem quaint to some of my students — students with their belly buttons out for display, students who comfortably endorse sexual activity as a form of recreation. As one of them said to me, “Sex to us is like food to Jews; we use it to celebrate, and variety is the spice of life.” But the simple fact is that how one dresses and what one shows frequently does serve as a signal of how one is prepared to act.

In ancient times, hair covering was a sign of modesty. Jewish law codified that married women ought to cover their hair. According to the Talmud in Ketubot, as understood by most (but not all) authorities, this was an immutable rule reflecting their married status, regardless of whether uncovered hair was considered erotic. Indeed, unmarried Jewish women never developed the custom to cover their hair (other than in a few Islamic lands), since hair, as opposed to belly buttons, was never a central erotic fascination, and hair covering, at least in the Jewish tradition, was connected to marriage.

As the normative practice of secular people changed and modest secular women ceased covering their hair, the *sheitel* developed in Orthodox Jewish society as the perfect compromise: It allowed one to remain in conformity with the basic requirements of Jewish law (that one’s hair be covered), while simultaneously recognizing that uncovered hair was no longer strictly a sign of immodest conduct. If hair were really still erotic, then Dr. Sztokman would be right that one cannot cover (erotic) hair with fake hair any more than one can cover (erotic) breasts with fake breasts.

But the great Jewish law authorities of the last centuries are more perceptive of the reality than Dr. Sztolman gives them credit for being. Women who desire to obey Jewish law while fully functioning in our open and valuable Western society found wearing a hat or a scarf to be a burden. Hence, the *sheitel* became the perfect compromise because it promotes conformity with both Jewish law and Western culture.

One could ask why anyone should live their life around the Talmud — a document written 1,500 years ago by great rabbis seeking to reflect the will of the Divine, as they understood it. But that is exactly the mission of Orthodoxy, and it has been for centuries. And it seems to be working as well (or even better) than many contemporary versions of Judaism.

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