**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

**Head-Covering 4: How**

How much of the head and hair does a woman need to cover? Where do the variations in custom come from?

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# How to Cover

Now that we have discussed the “[why](https://www.deracheha.org/head-covering-1-halachic-basis)” and “[who](https://www.deracheha.org/head-covering-3-who)” of head-covering, we can address the question of *how* the head should be covered. We have seen two major rationales for the importance of a woman's head covering in general: as a mark of her dignity, and as an act of modesty. Though these are related concepts, they have different emphases that lead to practical halachic differences.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If we focus on the obligation of head-covering as rooted in the concept of dignity or proper dress, then a woman's head-covering is a form of dress for the **head**. Some **hair** showing outside the head-covering would not necessarily compromise the **head** being well-attired.

If we focus on the modesty elements of head-covering, then a woman is not so much dressing her head as covering it, and having **hair** show becomes more of a halachic concern.

Let's explore the range of opinion on these issues, noting when the emphasis is on dignified head-covering and when it is on modest hair-covering.

**Dignified Head-Covering and Torah Law**

Rav Moshe Feinstein clarifies what kind of coverage is obligatory by Torah law, noting that the Torah-level obligation is learned from the uncovering of the *sota*'s **head**, not her **hair**.

Responsa *Iggerot Moshe* EH I:58

The fundamental prohibition was said in *Ketubot* 72b, as was taught in the *beit midrash* of Rabbi Yishmael from the verse "and he uncovered the head of the woman" –"an admonition to the daughters of Israel that they not go out with **head** uncovered [emphasis added]" and it is not said, "an admonition that they not go out with **hair** uncovered " This implies that [the prohibition of going uncovered] depends on what is considered uncovering the **head** overall….It is also clear that one should only derive from the verse a prohibition [of uncovering] what the *kohen* needed to uncover of the head of the *sota*…for one could also say that [uncovering] less than that would not be a disgrace [to the *sota*] at all…Even if we say that we don't need all of it [the head uncovered as part of the *sota* ordeal, and covered beforehand], in any case at least a large part of the head needed to be uncovered [during the ordeal, and covered beforehand]…This is the majority of the head or, at the very least, close to a majority of the head.

The Torah specifically commands uncovering the sota's head. That means that the *sota* must have arrived at the ordeal with the majority of her head covered. Therefore, to fulfill the Torah-level requirement of head-covering, a woman's head must be mostly covered.

Exposing a significant portion of the *sota*’s head is required in order to disgrace her. Conversely, a substantial head-covering over most of the head is necessary to maintain a married woman's dignity, as a matter of Torah law.

**Head, Hair, and *Dat Yehudit***

The Talmud notes that a woman can fulfill the Torah-level obligation of head covering by placing a *kalata*, a basket or simple cap, on her head. But *dat Yehudit*, which usually encompasses behavior in line with customs of modesty, demands better coverage:

*Ketubot* 72a-b

On a Torah level, a *kalata* [basket or simple cap] suffices; for *dat Yehudit*, even [covering with] a *kalata* remains prohibited [as inadequately covered]

The Talmud does not explain what makes the *kalata* insufficient. One approach to this question emphasizes dignity, and the other modesty. Both are possible rationales for *dat Yehudit*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**I. Insufficiently Dignified** Meiri writes that a *kalata* is a sort of nightcap, not worn in public:

Meiri, *Beit Ha-bechira*, *Ketubot* 72a

Even though in most places its [*kalata*'s] meaning is a small basket in which she places her spindle, here it seems to mean a sort of cap of rough fabric that she dons at night.

On this view, perhaps the *kalata* is insufficient to satisfy *dat Yehudit* because it is not dignified enough. A dignified person does not go about in public wearing pajamas, or a nightcap or other informal covering for a headdress. *Dat Yehudit*, like the Torah-level obligation, is primarily concerned with the **head**.

**II. Insufficiently Modest** Rashi explains that a *kalata* was in fact a woven basket:

Rashi *Ketubot* 72b s.v. *Kalata*

A basket that has an indentation on its underside to fit on one’s head and a receptacle above in which to put a spindle and flax

A version of Rashi brought in *Shita Mekubetzet*, a medieval anthology of commentaries, explains that a *kalata* may provide an inadequate amount of head covering:

Rashi, Old Version, *Shita Mekubetzet*, *Ketubot* 72a

Even a *kalata* also is not [sufficient] because of modesty, for it is impossible that her hair not be seen between the strips [of the basket].

According to this comment, a *kalata* cannot serve as a proper covering because it leaves too much hair showing, which is insufficiently modest.[[3]](#footnote-3)

While the obligation learned from the *sota* mentions covering the head, this version of Rashi argues that *dat Yehudit* is also concerned with concealing **hair**.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Modesty concerns about covering **hair**, then, may derive from the obligation of *dat Yehudit*. They also arise in the related discussion of whether **hair** is considered *erva*, which can provide additional reason for a woman to cover her **hair**.

# Full Hair-Covering

The Talmudic account of a woman named Kimchit takes the idea of covering hair out of modesty to an extreme. Kimchit states that the beams of her house never saw the braids of her hair, which implies that she kept her hair fully covered at all times, even at home.

*Yoma* 47a

Our rabbis taught: Kimchit had seven sons, and all of them served as *Kohen Gadol* [each would substitute for his brothers at times when ritual impurity disqualified them from Temple service (*Tosefta Yoma* 3:20)]. The sages said to her, 'What did you do that you merited thus?' She said to them, 'In all my days, the beams of my house never saw the braids of my hair.' They said to her, 'Many have done so, and did not achieve an effect.’

Kimchit is clearly a meritorious woman who believes her merit stems from the care she takes always to cover her head. The sages, however, question her conclusion.[[5]](#footnote-5) That "many have done so, and did not achieve an effect" raises the possibility that Kimchit is mistaken as to the source of her merit.

Additionally, this passage implies that Kimchit's act was unusual, and not to be expected. She sees her conduct as uniquely meritorious, and the sages say "many others" have done it. Not all women shared this practice, or were obligated to, which suggests a woman could meet standards of modesty without full coverage.

**Mystical Approach**

The Zohar draws on the Kimchit dialogue to present covering every strand of hair, even within the house, as essential for all married women:

Zohar III *Naso* 125b-126a

A woman for whom hair of her head emerges from its covering causes sorrow to her home and causes her children not to be counted in the city and causes evil forces to dwell in the home. Who causes this? That hair of her head that is seen outside. ..For this reason, it is required of a woman that even the walls of her home not see a single hair of the head, how much more so outside [the home].

According to the Zohar, misfortune befalls a home as a consequence of a woman's hair being at all uncovered within it. The mystical implications of keeping each hair uncovered go beyond ordinary considerations of modesty. The Zohar's position connects to broader kabbalistic ideas according to which hair is associated with judgment, and thus uniquely vulnerable to evil. This passage indicates that keeping all hair covered at all times and in all settings is praiseworthy.

Even among rationalists, the Zohar can have halachic influence. Although he does not say it is fully obligatory, Magen Avraham follows the Zohar to urge women to cover every strand of hair. Mishna Berura quotes him.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Magen Avraham* 75:4

But in the Zohar Naso p. 239 he was very stringent that not a single hair of a woman should be seen and thus is it fitting to practice.

This practice is followed in many communities, especially in Chassidic circles.

**Double Covering**

Closer to our day, Chatam Sofer rules that a woman outside her home should wear two coverings, one atop the other, to ensure that not a single hair be seen, following the Zohar:

Responsa *Chatam Sofer* I:36

Indeed in our lands, where the other nations go out with heads uncovered and our mothers did not go out [that way] and were very careful and were concerned for the words of the Zohar…The rule that emerges is that any single hair in any place on the head and the forehead of a married woman, even in her room, is *erva* if she does not have a scarf on her head, and in the marketplace and public courtyard also a hat.

Chatam Sofer's approach is an important source for the practice in some communities of wearing a hat atop a wig. A similar line of thought informs those communities in which women shave their heads, lest a single hair emerge from covering.[[7]](#footnote-7) Chatam Sofer's reference to *erva* indicates that his foremost concern is modesty, though he notes that custom has played a role in defining what is modest here.

# Partial Hair-Covering

As opposed to the Zohar, some early rabbinic authorities do allow for a woman to let some hair emerge from her head-covering, without seeing this as immodest or *erva*.

In his discussion of *erva* and recitation of *Shema*, Rashba (citing a Ra'avad we do not have) mentions hair that emerges from a woman's head covering:

Rashba *Berachot* 24a

Her face and hands and feet… and her hair outside of her hair-binding, which isn't covered—we aren't concerned about them [during the recitation of *Shema*]

Rashba seems to indicate that there is no problem whatsoever with a woman leaving some hair exposed. Assuming that Rashba has in mind even a married woman outside of her home setting, this would mean that not every hair need be covered.

Rashba may mean to suggest that a woman may deliberately leave some hair uncovered, as she does her face and her hands (Rav Moshe Feinstein).[[8]](#footnote-8) Alternatively, he may mean only that fly-away hairs that escape the covering are acceptable (Chatam Sofer). [[9]](#footnote-9)

Rema rules like Rashba:

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 75:2 Rema

This [permissibility of reciting *Shema*] applies [when a man can see] women’s hair that typically emerges from their hair-binding

According to Rema, a man may recite *Shema* in the presence of a woman's hair that emerges from her head covering. He makes no negative statement about the hair being shown, implying that a woman may freely leave such hair uncovered without concern for immodesty or *erva*.

Maharam Alashkar makes this point explicitly. He describes the hair between ear and forehead, such as that around the temples, as being regularly exposed and not a form of *erva*:

Responsa Maharam Alashkar 35

This statement that "the hair of a woman is erva" only deals with hair that a woman's practice is to cover…In the [Talmud] chapter *Chezkat Ha-batim*, we say, "a woman does all her adornments and leaves out a little bit." What is it [that she leaves out]? Rav says *'bat tzida'*" …This is the very custom of women today, that the woman binds all her hair and leaves out hair at the temples going down beside her face and this is called in the language of our sages *'bat tzida*,*'* as was explained…Our sages were lenient in many matters, so that a woman would not become unappealing to her husband.

For Maharam Alashkar, it is not necessary or even desirable to cover every strand of hair. Leaving some hair exposed at the temples or perhaps even a fringe (i.e., bangs), is a longstanding custom in conformity with standards of modesty.

Maharam Alashkar argues that modest practice should not come at the expense of a woman's attractiveness to her husband, which is part of the bond between husband and wife. A woman today might add that letting some hair show at the temples or in front, so that she doesn’t look bald, helps her maintain her own sense of attractiveness as well.

Basing himself on Maharam Alashkar's ruling and on common custom, Rav Ovadia Yosef justifies the practice of revealing up to two *etzba'ot*, finger-widths (4-4.8cm total), of hair:

Letter, Rav Ovadya Yosef, *Otzar Dinim* 37:15, note 15

That which some say, that even one hair from the hair of her head that is visible entails a Torah level prohibition, is incorrect, for the custom of Sefardi women is to show a fingerbreadth or two from the hair of the head in the front, and Maharam Alashkar, who was a world-class scholar in the time of Beit Yosef, ruled to permit it.

According to his approach, a small amount of hair showing at the front of the head does not change the overall modest effect of a woman's head-covering.

# Rav Moshe's Ruling

As we have learned, Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that the Torah-level obligation is to cover at least most of the **head**. That leaves the amount of **hair** that can be left uncovered undefined.

In order to define how much hair can be left uncovered, Rav Moshe turns to the Talmud's discussion of hair as *erva*! This is surprising, because Rav Moshe usually takes care to distinguish between the matter of *erva* and the obligation to cover one's head, and does not consider women's hair nowadays to be *erva*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

How does the argument work? According to Rav Moshe, a married woman's head is considered typically-covered because of her obligation to cover most of it. Married women's hair can be considered *erva* both because of its attractiveness and because it is typically-covered along with the head. Now, the Talmud teaches that a certain amount of hair can be exposed without being considered *erva*. Rav Moshe infers that a woman is allowed to leave that same amount of hair uncovered, without violating the obligation of head-covering.

Responsa *Iggerot Moshe* EH I:58

Since the entire head is [defined as] a typically-covered area [which can give it *erva* status], one should prohibit [a man's seeing it during *Shema* etc.] due to *erva* like [other] typically-covered body parts…Therefore, since in the law of typically-covered areas there is a distinction between a *tefach* and less…this distinction also applies to hair…Therefore one should not prohibit if she wants to reveal [hair]…but only two [*etzba'ot*] fingerbreadths in height, since the face is about two *tefachim* wide so that altogether it will be less than a [square] *tefach*. More than that is prohibited.

Since a man may recite *Shema* in the presence of up to a *tefach*, a handbreadth (8-9.6 cm), of exposed *erva*, Rav Moshe argues that up to a *tefach* of exposed hair is a reasonable maximal measure for a woman to leave uncovered.

This innovative ruling provides a halachic basis for women to leave up to a square *tefach* of hair uncovered, an area roughly 64-92 cm2.[[11]](#footnote-11) Rav Moshe assumes most women who leave hair uncovered will do so across the front or back of the head, and that this will mean an area of uncovered hair 4-4.8 cm in depth (in this case, like Rav Ovadya's measure). He does not, however, limit his ruling to a specific configuration, which leaves room for a woman to leave some hair exposed in the middle of her head.

Rav Moshe's ruling has been widely accepted in some circles. Others emphasize that Rav Moshe presents covering more hair as praiseworthy, and question how freely he intended women to rely upon his ruling. A look at his words indicates that full covering is commendable, but relying on his lenient ruling fully acceptable.

Responsa *Iggerot Moshe* EH I:58

Therefore according to halacha, even though it is proper for women to be stringent and cover [fully]…It is clear that those who wish to be lenient… should not be considered in violation of *dat Yehudit* God forbid, and even a *talmid chacham* and fearer of Heaven should not refrain from marrying such a woman if she fears Heaven and is careful about *mitzvot* and is of good character.

# Head-Covering

Rav Nahum Rabinovitch follows the approach that a married woman’s chief obligation is to cover her **head**, and that *erva* is not the source of obligation. He therefore maintains that there is no reason to apply the *tefach* measure to a woman's head-covering, since the *tefach* applies specifically to the law of *erva*.

Responsa *Si’ach Nachum* 105

But also when a covering is required, if a small amount of the hair emerges outside the covering, that’s also fine, …and in Beit Yosef there he cites the Rashba in the name of Ra'avad: " Her face and hands and feet… and her hair outside of her hair-binding, which isn't covered—we aren't concerned about them” ….In summary, according to basic halacha one must cover most of the hair of the head, but it is permissible to leave out a bit of hair, and not specifically a certain amount of hair, but as is customary in the community of those who keep Torah and *mitzvot* to which she belongs.

Although Rav Rabinovitch does not provide a specific measurement, he does refer to the hair left out "*ketzat*" ("a small amount" or "a bit"), which would suggest that more than a *tefach* out would be acceptable as long as it is **not** the majority of the hair on a woman's head.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein reportedly took a similar overall approach. He rejected the *tefach* measurement and instead formulated the requirement as conveying the overall impression, from every angle, that one’s hair is covered.[[12]](#footnote-12)

It is possible that Rav Rabinovitch's statement that “one must cover most of the hair of the head” has led to the increasingly common practice of women covering just the top of the head while leaving a good amount of hair flowing beyond the covering, something that Rav Lichtenstein did not support.

As Rav Yehuda H. Henkin has pointed out,[[13]](#footnote-13) the mishna’s description of a bride going to her wedding with her head uncovered presents a difficulty for women leaving this much hair out. Rashi's commentary there describes hair loose to the shoulders, regardless of what's on top, as what is uncovered specifically by a virgin bride:

Rashi *Ketubot* 15b

And her head uncovered—old French *esjevalede*—her hair on her shoulders

If an uncovered head is **defined** by having loose hair to the shoulders, then a covered head could not include hair loose to the shoulders. There are limits to how much hair could be left out of a head-covering without eroding its status as dignified or modest head-covering.

● What about covering just with a headband, or a strip of scarf framing the front and back of the head?

*Especially in Israel, the practice of wearing only a very narrow headband or thin strip of scarf encircling the head has become popular. A woman with this type of covering is relying on the minority opinion that covering is not obligatory beyond common custom, and is interpreting custom* very *leniently. This type of justification for this practice is sometimes attributed to Rav Rabinovitch, who has made oral remarks that this might become permissible if it were to become common practice.*

*However, as we have seen, the prevalent view among halachic authorities is that there is a Torah-level obligation in head-covering, as well as a* dat Yehudit *obligation. A lenient view of fulfilling just the Torah-level obligation is that at least the majority of the* head *should be covered. Anything less risks violating Torah law.*

*How, then, has the practice to cover less taken off? A woman may be unaware of the halachic significance of covering the majority of the head. She may have the misconception that there is nothing more to the obligation of head-covering than signifying that she is married, or may view head-covering through more of a social than religious lens, as a way to identify with the halachically observant community.*

*Indeed, although wearing only a headband does not satisfy the obligation of head-covering as widely understood, it is preferable to leaving the head fully uncovered, because it does accomplish those social goals. For many women, especially those new to observance, this type of gesture toward head-covering is itself a significant effort.*

# Wigs

Many women observe the mitzva of head-covering by wearing wigs. From the perspective of modesty, a wig's effect is mixed. On the one hand, the wig provides full hair coverage, and in that way may be preferable to other options. On the other hand, a wig can look so natural and attractive that it is unclear how it satisfies the dictates of modesty.

Precedent for wearing wigs can be found in the Mishna's discussion of carrying on Shabbat. Articles seen as adornments unlikely to be removed and carried may be worn on Shabbat, even in the absence of an *eiruv*. The Mishna teaches:

Mishna *Shabbat* 6:5

A woman [is permitted to] go out [on Shabbat]... with foreign hair to the courtyard

Rashi explains that this "*pe'a nochrit*", foreign hair, is a type of hair extension.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Talmudic discussion of this mishna applies it to married women attempting to be attractive for their husbands.[[15]](#footnote-15) If the mishna explicitly permits a married woman to go out on Shabbat wearing hair extensions, then it stands to reason that wearing a wig is a permissible form of head-covering, since it looks even less like a woman's own hair.[[16]](#footnote-16) Shiltei Gibborim makes this inference:

*Shiltei Gibborim* to the Rif, *Shabbat* 29a in Rif pagination

It seems one can bring proof and support from this for women who go out with their own hair covered when they are married, but instead of the braid of their hair they wear the hair of other women…It clearly implies that the daughters of Israel are permitted to adorn themselves with these. For the statement 'a woman’s hair is *erva*' refers only to the hair that is really attached to her scalp, when her scalp is visible with the hair. But with hair that covers her hair, there is no problem of 'a woman’s hair is *erva*' here and also no [concern] of an uncovered head…even though it is an adornment for her in order to look like [she has a lot of] hair, there is no [halachic objection] to it…

According to Shiltei Gibborim, this mishna, coupled with common custom of his day, provides justification for wigs as a form of head covering. He adds that hair growing from the scalp appears significantly different from hair that is not naturally attached. This last argument may have been more applicable to wigs of his day than to some of the more upscale wigs of today, which are attached to a false scalp and thus do appear to grow from the scalp.

It is also possible to explain *pe'a nochrit* differently, as hair used to fill out head coverings from the inside, much like today's ”boubou” or “shaper,” worn by some women under a headscarf.[[17]](#footnote-17) In that case, the mentions of *pe'a nochrit* in rabbinic literature would not support wearing a wig without a hat on top.

Rema rules like Shiltei Gibborim, permitting men to recite *Shema* in view of a wig:

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 75:2 Rema

This [permissibility of reciting *Shema*] applies [when a man can see] women’s hair that typically emerges from their hair-binding, and how much more so foreign hair [a wig]

Common Ashkenazi practice is to permit wigs as a form of head-covering. This raises questions about dignity. In Talmudic times, it seems that dignified dress in public required a significant, visible head-covering. From that standpoint, it would seem that a wig should not qualify as a head-covering.

Nowadays, in some religious communities, wigs are considered more dignified than other head-coverings, in the sense that women would not wear anything other than a wig to a formal event. What constitutes a standard for modesty in wigs also varies from community to community.

What about *mar'it ayin*, conveying a false impression that one is violating Halacha? Can’t a good wig be mistaken for a woman’s real hair? Some authorities mandate that a wig be worn only in places in which wig covering is common (or if it is obviously a wig).[[18]](#footnote-18) Others, including Rav Moshe Feinstein, are less troubled by this concern, since there is general awareness that halachically observant women sometimes cover their hair with wigs.[[19]](#footnote-19)

By placing a hat atop a wig, a woman both ensures all her hair is covered for modesty purposes, and has a hat to add dignity.

It is important to note that the rulings of Sefardi halachic authorities on wigs as head-coverings are mixed. Some Sefardi authorities, such as Kaf Ha-chayyim, freely permit them:

Kaf Ha-chayyim OC 75:19

Thus is the consensus of the later halachic authorities to permit [wigs] like the words of the Rem"a.

Others, such as Rav Ovadia Yosef, do not generally permit wigs as head covering:

Responsa *Yabi'a Omer* EH 5:5

For in past generations, the wigs were very visibly recognizable, and there was no concern of *mar'it ayin* [appearing to violate a prohibition], since they resemble natural hair. But the new wigs today, not only do they resemble natural hair, but they even exceed it in beauty and form and appearance, until even immodest women use them for adornment and beautification. And since there is no recognizable difference between these wigs and natural hair, certainly there is a concern of *mar'it ayin* …And the basic halacha is like the words of most if not all the later halachic authorities cited above to prohibit this, and it is a great mitzva to publicize the prohibition in public, especially for Sefardi women who have always been accustomed to prohibit…

Rav Yosef opposes wigs because they raise questions about modesty, and because they could give the false impression that a woman's head is uncovered. Additionally, he does not think wearing wigs is supported by Sefardi custom. Even Rav Yosef, however, permits wigs in special cases, such as following divorce.

## ● Why is it accepted for a woman to wear a wig that is nicer than her hair?

*Modesty should be a consideration in choosing a head covering. That being said, different women and communities have different conceptions of modesty. When it comes to satisfying the technical obligation to cover the head, wigs are often very effective. In some communities, wigs have become the gold standard of head-covering for precisely this reason. How well wigs reflect a woman's sense of modesty is a more subjective question. Rav Ovadya Yosef prohibits wigs due to concern in this area, while others do not find the average wig to be lacking in modesty.*

*Often when choosing a head-covering, and not only with wigs, a woman may experience tension between feeling positive about how she looks and the quality of coverage she thinks Halacha demands. The mitzva of head- covering, with its effects on self-image and self-expression, can be challenging. It is important to find ways to make it accessible to as many women as possible, and to respect the more lenient voices in different directions that enable a woman to keep Halacha while also feeling satisfied with how she presents herself. For many women, wigs present a halachically- acceptable opportunity to maintain modesty and dignity in a way that feels positive.*

*In general, the option to use a wig for head-covering is important in situations where an obvious head-covering could be problematic, as in certain professional settings. Today, with the rise of multiculturalism, many people proudly wear distinctive religious garb. In a society where our Muslim sisters do not hesitate to wear a* hijab*, perhaps Jewish women should feel more comfortable wearing an obvious hair-covering. On the other hand, there has also been a backlash against multiculturalism, even extending to physical attacks against clearly identifiable Jews and other minorities. In societies where this is a concern, using a wig might be advisable.*

In many communities in which wigs are traditional, they are viewed as, at best, equal to other full coverings. In contrast, Chabad insists women wear only wigs, as preferable to other coverings.[[20]](#footnote-20) As Rav Schneerson wrote:[[21]](#footnote-21)

Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot* 13, p 189

A woman who wears a scarf on her head will tend to take it off in certain cases because of discomfort. As opposed to a woman who dons a wig, even if President Eisenhower himself walks in, she will not remove it.

Since a woman is unlikely to remove her wig or feel otherwise self-conscious when wearing it, the Rebbe considered wigs preferable to other forms of head-covering.

In recent decades, it has become increasingly prevalent for rabbis of some communities to endorse wigs as preferred head-covering, because they provide fuller coverage than many scarves.

In general, styles of head-covering tend to vary from community to community, influenced both by Halacha and social and cultural trends.

In our next and last installment of this series, we discuss in what settings the obligation of head-covering applies.

## ● How should a woman cover her head— and hair?

*While some authorities consider it obligatory for a woman to cover all of her hair, and others consider it praiseworthy, there are still others who permit leaving some hair uncovered, even deliberately. Their opinions range from a few fly-away hairs, to hair at the temples or a fringe, to two* etzba'ot*, to a* tefach*. Other opinions permit uncovering even more.*

*Deciding how to cover one's hair and how much to cover involves halachic, personal, and communal elements. A woman should seek to make a decision that both has halachic support and allows her to perform the mitzva in a way that is comfortable for her (or at least does not cause her resentment). The challenge is to find a way to fulfill the obligation in head-covering that is consistent with one's overall approach to halachic decision-making, and at the same time feels right on the head.*

*Even after learning through the range of opinions in the sources and taking personal feelings into account, it is critical also to consider communal factors. Because each individual woman’s head-covering is part of her public presentation, it often becomes a statement of personal and religious commitments and communal affiliation. For better or worse, all head-covering choices come with associations in the observant community, and those affect personal decisions and halachic discussion.*

*Many women take pride in head-covering as an opportunity to make a statement about religious commitments and to demonstrate belonging to a given community. For precisely the same reason, though, many other women can find this mitzva especially difficult, especially when personal preference does not align with community norms.*

*Psychologist Khaya Eisenberg explains how challenging it can be for her to choose between a snood, which she prefers, and a wig, which is her community's norm:*

Khaya Eisenberg, "Halachah, Society, and the Snood,” in *Hide & Seek*, ed. Lynne Schreiber (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), pp. 102-3

A snood may be less socially acceptable, but it is no less modest…. I am fulfilling the law….I find a *shaitel* bothersome to put on and wear, but it's always a safe bet for fitting in in any situation…Perhaps pretenses and social conformity are valuable motivating forces for adhering to *Halachah*.

*In making these decisions, it can be helpful to talk out concerns with a mentor. The decision-making process is itself of great importance. Over a lifetime, a woman may find that she revisits her decision, more than once.*

*A woman's head-covering should make a statement that she feels honors Halacha, her community, and herself.*

**Further Reading**

* Ellinson, Rabbi Elyakim Getsel. *Woman and the Mitzvot: Guide to the Rabbinic Sources Vol. 2, The Modest Way*, trans. Raphael Blumberg. Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, 1992.
* Henkin, Rav Yehuda. Understanding Tzniut. Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2008.
* Haber, Rav Shemuel. Et Tzenu’im Chochma, Vol. 1. Karnei Shomron, 2007.
1. We plan to discuss the concept of modesty in a future piece on Deracheha. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This analysis is adapted from Rav Yehuda H. Henkin's in *Understanding Tzniut: Modern Controversies in the Jewish Community* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2008), 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. :.See also Rabbeinu Yehonatan on the Rif *Ketubot* 32b

*Dat Yehudit*, even a *kalata* is not [sufficient], because of *tzeni'ut*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In his ruling on *dat Yehudit*, Rambam does not clarify whether his chief concern is style or quantity, dignity or modesty. (See *Yabi'a Omer* IV EH 3, who entertains both possibilities.)

Rambam writes that a scarf would not suffice for *dat Yehudit*, and that a woman should wear a *redid*, a broader cloak or wrap. It is possible that Rambam prefers the *redid* because it is a more dignified garment. Given that he lists it as *dat Yehudit*, which he identifies with modest practice, it is also possible that the *redid* is there to address modesty concerns and provide more coverage of the hair. Rambam may even be advocating a double covering, a *redid* on top of a scarf, which could theoretically serve either purpose. *Mishneh Torah Ishut* 24:12

These are the things that if she does one of them she transgresses *dat Yehudit*: She goes out to the marketplace or to an open alleyway with her head uncovered and not wearing a *redid* [cloak] like all the women, even though her hair is covered with a scarf.

Rambam's position seems to apply only where "all the women" go out with a *redid* (as in the Middle East of his era), in which case it would be essential to a woman's dignified and modest appearance. That limits the applicability of the *redid* to our day.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In contrast, the Yerushalmi praises Kimchit unambiguously.

Yerushalmi *Yoma* 1:1

The sages sent and said to her: What good deeds are in your hand? She said to them: May it come upon me if the beams of my house saw the hair of my head or the hem of my robe in all my days. They said …the flour [*kimcha*] of Kimchit is the finest flour, and applied the verse to her: All the glory of a king’s daughter is within (*Tehillim* 45:14)…. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mishna Berura* 75:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Rav Yitzchak Tzvi Leibowitz, in *Shulchan Ha-ezer*:

*Shulchan Ha-ezer* II:9:10:1

See Zohar Naso, that a woman needs to cut her hair when she comes to have relations…The custom of Ashkenaz is that they shave their hair altogether. The reason for this custom is several concerns of modest women: One, lest a hair remain floating above the water at the time of her immersion…They were further concerned for it is impossible to be careful that a few hairs don’t emerge from the covering, which is *erva*, and it is prohibited to recite sacred matters or blessings in front of it…They were further concerned by what is written in Zohar Naso [about the dangers of letting a single hair show]

Available here: <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=8556&st=&pgnum=166> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Iggerot Moshe* EH I:58

Behold one should explain that they [the hairs] emerge from the binding up to a *tefach* and even more. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Chatam Sofer* I OC 36

In any case those few [hairs] that it is impossible to gather, Rashba wrote [regarding them] that hairs that emerge from the bindings are not *erva*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Responsa Iggerot Moshe OC I:42, quoted [here](https://www.deracheha.org/head-covering-1-halachic-basis). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rav Yehuda Henkin has argued that one could define a *tefach* leniently for these purposes, as an area where *both* length and width are at least a *tefach*. On this logic, a woman could expose a strip of hair across her head up to 8-9.6 cm deep. *Understanding Tzniut*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In oral communication with his daughter, Rabbanit Esti Rosenberg. Our understanding is that, while Rav Lichtenstein viewed the obligation as primarily one of **head**-covering, he was also concerned with **hair** based on his understanding of *dat Yehudit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rav Henkin makes this point in *Understanding Tzniut,* 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rashi *Shabbat* 64a

*Pe'a nochrit*: a braid of detached hair that she joins to her hair with her braid so that she will appear to have [a lot of] hair.

Rashi *Arachin* 7b

With a *pe'a nochrit*: This does not refer to her real hair, rather a lock of another woman's hair fastened to her hair. For women with little hair were accustomed to fasten other women's hair to their hair and this is a *pe'a nochrit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Shabbat* 64a

Ulla said: In order that she not become unattractive to her husband. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The courtyard is likely specified as part of the discussion of where something can be worn that may come to be carried. A counter-argument to this reading would be that a wig is only permissible in a woman's *chatzer*, and not in public. See, for example, Ya'avetz:

*She'eilat Ya'avetz* I:9

She is prohibited in it [a wig] in the public domain. The mishna does not have to teach us that she not go out in one on Shabbat [to the public domain], but in the end of the mishna [it does need to make a new point] that in the courtyard it [the wig] is permissible. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Responsa *Be’er Sheva* 18

I found written in the manuscripts of the great Rabbi, Rav Yehuda Katzenellenbogen z”l, who wrote about this, that this is not the way and not the city that our ancestors, the sages of the Mishna and Gemara and the commentators and halachic decisors, bequeathed to us. For this is even more obvious than eating eggs with dairy, for the leniency to adorn oneself and go out with a *pe’a nochrit* in the gemara applies specifically to a *pe’a nochrit* that is covered under her cap, with a shawl over her head, like the hair that is really attached to her scalp. For only women who had little hair were accustomed to wear a *pe’a nochrit*, in order that their husbands would not sense how little hair they had, for it is demeaning to women – they would fasten a *pe’a nochrit* to their hair in order to appear to have a lot of hair. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mishna Berura 75

In the book *Magen Gibborim* he was stringent in this matter, see there. He wrote further there that if the custom of the place is not that women should wear wigs, the law is certainly in accordance with those who are stringent in this matter because of *marit ayin*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Iggerot Moshe* EH II:12

…The rationale is simple – since we do not find in the Talmud that they prohibited it, one should not infer from other cases where they did prohibit due to *mar'it ayin*, for one should not derive one [case] from another. Further, because it is usually recognizable that the hair is a wig, and even if it is not recognizable to men who don’t look so much at women until they would recognize it, in any case it is certainly recognizable to women in the vast majority of cases, and perhaps even all of them are recognizable. Therefore because of that which might happen rarely that it wouldn’t be recognizable, they did not prohibit…Since she is presumed to be a Torah-observant woman, and we know that from up close one can certainly recognize that it is not her hair … [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Iggerot Kodesh* Translated, p. 146

http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=15897&st=%D7%A4%D7%90%D7%94&pgnum=167 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=15826&st=&pgnum=195> http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article\_cdo/aid/840202/jewish/The-Lubavitcher-Rebbe-on-Hair-Covering.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-21)