



Hair today, gone tomorrow

Since Samson, Jewish people have had a thing about their hair.

Around this time last year I started getting a lot of traffic on my weblog for google Internet searches on ‘uptown girl snood factory’.

For a few crazy days last summer, I was breathlessly following and blogging the frum world’s biggest story: Rav Elyashiv, the ultra-Orthodox world’s leading authority on Halacha, decreed that Indian hair *sheitels* were *ossur* because it was *avodah zoroh* (in contemporary parlance: an aging rabbi, who may or may not have lost his marbles, said it was forbidden to use Indian hair in wigs, because the hair may have been sourced in pagan hair-tonsuring ceremonies. I kid you not).

The story hit *The New York Times* and all over the haredi world women were burning their wigs rather than fail to follow the letter of the (new) law. Overnight, the bottom dropped out of the Indian hair market. You can’t help wondering where all the wigs went.

Covering your hair in the frum world is not simply a statement of modesty; it is also an outward sign of the power struggle in haredi circles. Some commentators claimed that the crisis precipitated by Rav Elyashiv’s ruling was a reaction to the weakening of social control once practised by the rabbis in the haredi world. It seems that the *sheitl* subtly signifies the oppressive power of halachists combined with a powerful statement of ethnic identity.

Because just as wearing a *sheitl* or a snood defines an Orthodox woman’s identity (though there’s surely a paradox in Orthodox feminists who both cover their heads, signifying that visible hair is not OK, and wear trousers – legs, however, are not a problem), my hair defines me as a Jew. While I don’t – wouldn’t – wear a wig, I’m supremely conscious that my curly/frizzy Jewfro is distinctive.

While I don’t believe there is such a thing as ‘looking Jewish’, I know I have ethnic hair. When I meet other people with hair-like-me we bond, instantly, like long-lost relatives cooing over shared good news. We have an immediate connection that goes beyond wash-rinse-spin-dry to understanding the fractured identity created by having a visible outsidership permanently attached to our very being. It’s like *my hair* is saying ‘Hello, I’m Jewish.’

When I took a job in a quintessentially English firm, I suddenly realized I was the only curly-haired person amongst three hundred employees. I was surrounded by corporate Diana-alikes: trim women with neat blond bobs and *milchig* musical tastes, the Disney heroines of their own lives. I didn’t fit in. It wasn’t just my moderately feisty nature. It was the unruliness of my hair.

The pressure to conform in the frum community is – on the surface – expressed in edicts that dictate that women must cover up. Of course, it’s a nuanced and complex issue, integrating power struggles, a desire for beauty and modesty and a commitment to collective discipline. For Jewish women in the secular world, the pressure is not to conform but to make your hair conform: expensive hair care products, the burning touch of the straightening irons. When a Jewish woman buys a hair straightener she’s listening to a voice that’s whispering: *you don’t fit in*.

For women like me, hair is as much about *minhag* and Halacha as going to the *sheitl macher* is for the women of Stamford Hill. In much the same way that frum people leave a small part of their houses unfinished as a reminder of the destruction of the temple – *zecher lemikdash* (I often think it looks more like they employed sub-standard contractors) – I feel like my hair is a contemporary, upbeat version of the same concept: *zecher le-identity*. My curls are a constant reminder of the struggle of Jewish women to be who they want to be.

What happened to the wig-burning story? As fast as it was all over the mainstream papers it was gone. Even the Internet couldn’t help me. My friends in Boro Park tell me confidently, ‘You can’t oppress modern Jewish women. They’ll find a solution.’ Apparently *sheitls* have *hechsherim* now. And the *rabbonim* moved on to their next *mishegas*: tiny insects might make water *treif*. Brings a whole new meaning to over-regulation. ●