

Parashat Naso

Where does the Torah Mention the Obligation of Hair-Covering for Married Women?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

I'm having serious issues with head coverings. I am trying to understand the modesty aspect and I haven't been able to find any place in the Torah that states that married women have to cover their hair. How do we know that women in the Bible actually covered their hair? Perhaps the whole hair-covering business is something the Rabbis, who were men, made up? Even if women in the Torah did cover their hair, why would that imply that we must cover it now? If it is THAT important, why isn't it implicit in the Torah? Perhaps, if I learned the deeper meaning behind women's hair-covering, perhaps if I could connect with some underlying Kabbalistic reasons for married women's hair-covering, then it might be easier. Otherwise, I really can't pull this off in the long run. Whenever I am around women who let their hair down, I don't feel comfortable sticking out, so I can't help letting my hair-covering slip. If you could please shed some light on this topic, it would mean a lot to me.

Ahuva Freeman (name changed)

Dear Ahuva,

As always, your questions show your deep desire to keep the mitzvot from a place of true connection. Certain mitzvot are not easy to keep when we live in a secular environment. From the time of the enlightenment period, when the Jews began to blend into the general society, the *kipah* was exchanged with a cap and women's hair covering with an occasional doily. The *ba'al teshuva* movement, beginning in the late sixties, wove new strands into the fabric of the mitzvah of women's hair covering. When I got married, 36 years ago in Jerusalem, I had no qualms about covering my hair. On the contrary, I was excited to mark my entry into the realm of the married crowd, with the crown of Jewish womanhood – the long flowing headscarf. However, when I look around today, I notice that not every woman in the orthodox camp shares my enthusiasm about hair covering. Lately, the newest style in certain circles, has reduced the mitzvah of women's hair covering to merely symbolic. Some signify matrimony with a headband, rather than a proper hair covering. In our time, at the verge of the final redemption, our secular environment greatly challenges the Torah world. This challenge prompts us to delve deeper into the inner Torah (kabbalah) in order to truly connect with the mitzvot.

How do We Know that Married Women in the Bible Covered their Hair?

Before giving you a drop of Kabbalistic insights, I'd like to answer your question about how we know that women in the Bible indeed covered their hair. The Talmud (*Ketubot* 72a) learns the fact that married women would keep their hair covered from a passage describing the *Sota* – the woman who went astray. This woman, suspected of adultery, is brought before the Kohen.

ספר במדבר פרק ה פסוק יח והעמיד הכהן את האשה לפני השם ופרע את ראש האשה...

“Then the Kohen makes the woman stand before Hashem and makes the woman's head wild...”
(*Bamidbar* 5:18).

Note that it does not state, “Make the woman’s **hair** wild,” but rather, “make the woman’s **head** wild.” How would it be possible to disarrange the **head** of the woman any other way than by uncovering it? The root word, פָּרַע/*para*, used to describe what the Kohen does to the woman’s head is mentioned numerous times in the Bible. It usually means unrestrained, or uncovered. Thus Rashi expounds on the verse, “Now Moshe saw that the people were uncovered (פָּרַע/*fara*), for Aaron had made them uncovered...” (*Shemot* 32:25), that the shame and disgrace of the people were revealed. Regarding the suspected adulteress, Rashi explains, AND HE SHALL PUT IN DISORDER [THE WOMAN’S HEAD] – i.e. he pulls apart her hair plaits in order to make her look despicable. We may learn from this that regarding [married] Jewish women, an uncovered head is a disgrace to them (*Siphre*). (*Rashi, Bamidbar* 5:18). Since the whole procedure describing the *Sota* aims at a scornful treatment of the woman who has by her own conduct subjected herself to suspicion, it follows that it was regarded as immodest for Jewish women to allow their hair to remain uncovered.

Why is Married Women’s Hair-covering not Mentioned Directly in the Torah?

If it is so important that married women cover their hair, why is it not written with an explicit command in the Torah? Why does it not state anywhere in the Torah, something like, ‘Every married woman must cover her hair’? Why must we learn about this mitzvah indirectly from the story of the *Sota* (suspected adulteress)? To answer this question, we need to understand that many important Torah laws are not written directly in the Torah. Rather, they are learned out through Talmudic exposition, based on the principles of the Torah. For example, most of the laws of Shabbat are not specified in the Torah. The Talmud learns the 39 forbidden creative works from the description of building the Tabernacle. The Torah itself states only, “Don’t do any work.” The kinds of prohibited works are not written directly in the Torah. Likewise, in regards to the laws of modesty, the written Torah states only the general law that “your camp shall be holy” and “you shall be holy.” It never states explicitly the laws of modest dress for women. Only in the Oral Law does it specify that the thighs, upper arms, and chest of a woman, and in the case of a married woman, also her hair, are considered her private parts. These other parts of our body that all women are commanded to cover, are not even hinted at in the Torah. Only the hair-covering of a married woman is considered a law from the Torah, based on our Torah verse regarding the *sota* (*Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot* 72a; The Bach, Even Haezer 21).

Did the Rabbis Invent the Mitzvah of Hair-Covering?

The fact that many mitzvot are learned out through the Oral Law does not decrease their importance. Many mitzvot, which most observant Jews regard as the core of Judaism, are ‘only’ rabbinic- such as lighting the Shabbat and Chanukah candles, hearing the *Megillah* on Purim and reciting blessings before eating various foods. The Torah explicitly commands us to listen to the Torah leadership (the Rabbis) (*Devarim* 17:11). The Oral Torah is handed down in direct transmission from Sinai to Moshe. Therefore, the entire Torah legal system is based on having faith in Rabbinical authority. Even if the rationale of certain mitzvot are not always revealed to us, it is important to develop *emunat chachamim* (faith in our sages), and humbly realize the limitations of our own understanding. The rabbis didn’t just invent the mitzvah of hair-covering in order to disparage married women and make their lives miserable. There are deeper reasons for the importance of hair-covering for married women which is emphasized in halacha, midrash and in the Zohar.

Protecting the Gates of her Head

“From the hair of a person you can know who he is...” (*Zohar, Naso, Idra Rabbah* 129a).

Long or short, hair is very deep. It’s like the body and soul’s antennas transmitting energy from a higher realm, while also exuding the deepest, most inner parts of one’s being. The hair acts as conduits for our light and energy. I have seen numerous young women changing as they learn Torah in our program. The first thing to be affected when a person undergoes transformation is the hair. Hair is even affected by our moods. It could change from frizzy to wavy, stand out or lie flat. Rabbi Yehuda said, the hair of the head of the [married] woman that is revealed causes another hair to be revealed {that is the power of the *sitra achra* that clings to the hair}... (*Zohar Chelek* 3, *Daf* 125b-126a). Rabbi Chaim Kramer, in *Anatomy of the Soul*, explains that the Hebrew word for hair שער/*sa’ar* has the same letters as the Hebrew word for שער/*sha’ar* – gate. The hair of the head corresponds to the gates, for they are outside the head, protecting all that is inside, as a gate protects a building from outsiders. Before a woman is married, her ‘gates’ are open to allow the man of her life to enter. A married woman, however, needs to close her ‘gates’ in order to guard the holy union with her husband from every outside intruder. Even a woman who is no longer married needs extra guarding of her ‘gates.’ Once her ‘gates’ have been entered, and her private parts opened, she becomes vulnerable to extraneous forces. Only the man who holds the key to her ‘gates’ must be allowed in.

The Attraction of a Woman’s Hair – Reserved for Her Husband

Our hair is very much an expression of our inner soul. It is very alive and can be very attractive and sexy. Even if it is not attractive, it still reveals something very deep from within our soul, which for a married woman, is reserved for her husband alone. You can be creative with the coverings, using several scarves in different colors, tying them in new and creative ways. Of course, some women prefer a fancy hat or even a wig. Hashem gave women the ability to attract a man with our hair. Once we have attained our man, the attraction of our hair needs to be hidden from men other than the one and only man in our life. It is something special about us, which is just for our husband to enjoy.