

Parashat Korach

Why Can I not Be Free and Let My Hair Loose?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

When I was reading your commentary on the parsha I came across the story about On's wife. The commentary was in English, and for me, the crux seems to hang on the precise translation of ONE word. In the English translation of *Tractate Sanhedrin* it says that On's wife "untied" her hair- not uncovered! To me, this implies that her hair was braided or otherwise bound, and she unbraided it or let it down. Perhaps, that was a sign that she was getting ready to be intimate with her husband? Do you know what the exact Hebrew word is in *Talmud Sanhedrin*? Moreover, the fact that she saved her husband's life by untying her hair seems to indicate, that releasing the hair is a positive thing. It equals saving lives, and therefore it must be good to untie or reveal the hair! I don't see any of these sources being clear enough to justify the obligation to cover one's hair. I also still can't accept this whole notion that just because they covered their hair then, therefore, we must cover it now. Also, how come the Lubavitcher Rebbe's wife showed hair from under her hats? Thanks for your time and patience.

Tammy Locks (name changed)

Dear Tammy,

As always, I'm happy to answer your questions. You are correct. In *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 110a, the wife of On ben Pelet is described as disarranging her hair. The original Aramaic in the Talmud is למזיה ו/סתריתה *v'sitrata l'mezeiah*. She 'let her hair loose' to discourage the congregation of Korach from entering their house, in order to collect her husband to join his rebellion against Moshe and Aharon. Seeing her flowing hair, they retreated. In this way, On's wife indeed saved her husband's life, by preventing him from joining Korach's congregation and sharing their fate of being buried alive or burned by heavenly fire. when the earth opened to swallow them up. Since, the mitzvah to save lives overrides all other mitzvot, the act of On's wife was, therefore, as you write, extremely good and a mitzvah, just as it is a mitzvah to drive a car on Shabbat in order to bring a woman in labor to the birthing clinic. The commentaries explain that On's wife acted this way because the hair of a [married] woman is considered to be the same as her private parts (שער באשה ערוה) (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 24a, *Yad Rama, Sanhedrin* 109b). On's wife knew how holy all of Israel is. Even the opponents of Moshe and Aharon would not enter a house where the hair of a married woman is loose. If the hair of a married woman was normally uncovered, why would just untying her hair make Jewish men turn away? Rather it makes sense that the men turned away since they were not used to seeing a a married woman's lose and uncovered hair.

Additional Holiness Requires More Coverings

I get numerous questions regarding hair covering; a topic that I already addressed in *Parashat Naso*, so I will be brief. I understand that it is a burning issue and that it is very difficult for many women to cover their hair, especially when living in a secular society. I imagine that you want to be free and let it all loose, rather than experience the restrictive feeling of being all covered up. I know the feeling, for I used to have long loose hair. I have exchanged my graceful dangling locks with long flowing colorful hair scarves, which became kind of my trademark! The makeover was never difficult. In Jerusalem, 1979, when I became newly religious and part of the Yeshiva world, hair covering was considered a crown of honor. Single women could hardly wait until they got married and adorn

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themselves by wrapping their hair with a beautiful flowing scarf. Our hair covering attested that we had finally entered the higher echelon of married women. There is a principle in the Torah that the holier something is, the more covering it needs. This is why the *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll) is carefully covered, as well as all the vessels in the Mishkan (tabernacle). When a woman marries, she rises to a state of greater holiness, as she is now ready to become a mother in Israel, and a partner with Hashem in bringing holy souls into the world. For this reason, she needs more coverings than a single woman does (Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, *Ish u'beito*).

Did All Famous Rebbetzins Cover All of Their Hair?

In regards to your question concerning the wife of the seventh Lubavicher Rabbi, showing part of her hair under her hats, my Chabad friends believe that she was wearing a wig under her hat, although it certainly doesn't look like that in the photos. In any case, the photos that show the most hair were taken in the privacy of her dining room. Most of the public photos show less than a *tefach* of hair (the width of two fingers at the forehead and down to the ears), which is permitted according to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer, 1 Siman 58*). It seems to me that there is too much preoccupation with what this and that Rebbetzin wears or doesn't wear. The late Rebbetzin, Chaya Mussia may also have struggled with hair covering, like many Chassidic young women, who came from Russia in the early 20th century, influenced by the enlightenment movement and the decline in observance under the Communist regime. Perhaps this is what spurred her husband, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory, to engage in a systematic campaign to promote and restore the mitzvah of hair covering for observant, married women. The Rebbe asserted that Jewish law demands that all – and not just part – of a married woman's hair be covered (*Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 75:2, Tzemach Tzedek, Responsa Even Haezer 139*). He wanted to supplant the widespread aversion to appearing different and "too Jewish" with a strong sense of identity and pride. Still, he was sensitive to a woman's concern with her appearance. For this reason, he advocated the wearing of wigs as opposed to scarves, which he recognized as an unattractive, even untenable option for most Jewish young women in America. The Rebbe worried that most women, even the more pious, would not wear scarves consistently and in a manner that covered all of their hair (http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/840202/jewish/The-Lubavitcher-Rebbe-on-Hair-Covering.htm).

Hair Covering Preserves a Woman's Energy

Today, exciting headscarves have received a great renaissance. "[Wrapunzel](#)," celebrating the art of head wrapping is only one example of the revival of women's hair-coverings. You can be creative with your wrappings, using several scarves in different colors, tying them in new and artistic ways. Some women may prefer a fancy hat or even a wig. The choice is theirs, as long as they find a way of covering their hair that feels good to them. Here is a reason for women's hair covering that I found really convincing: hair contains the lowest energy/matter ratio. That is why one can completely sever the hair all the way to the scalp while experiencing minimal pain. When the spiritual energy is reduced to a minimum, the potential for negativity and unholiness grows vastly. Spiritual forces of darkness, the *kelipah*, seek to feed off that type of weakened/darkened energy. By covering her hair, the woman prevents spiritual energy from flowing to the wrong places, while maintaining it for herself and her immediate family (Rabbi Tzvi Shapiro).

Kabbalistic Blessings

The *Zohar* explains that by covering her hair, a woman brings tremendous blessings to herself and her family. A wife must be covered, even in the inside corners of her home. If she keeps this, it is written, "Your children are like olive plants" (*Tehillim* 128:3). What does it mean, "Like olive plants"? Just as an olive tree does not lose its leaves in winter or summer and is more valuable than other trees, so, too, will her sons be elevated above others. Her husband will also be blessed in everything, with the blessings above and with the blessings below, with wealth, children and grandchildren. This is what is meant by, "Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears Hashem" (*Ibid.* 4), and "Hashem shall bless you out of Tzion: and you shall see the good of *Yerushalayim* all the days of your life, and you shall see your children's children, and peace upon Yisrael" (*Tehillim* 128:5-6); (*Zohar* Part 3, 126a).