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By Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy

Women's Headcoverings: A Messianic Viewpoint

(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

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Introduction

In Biblical times, women covered their heads with veils or scarf as a sign of chastity and modesty. The unveiling of a woman's hair was considered a humiliation and punishment (Numbers 5:18, Isaiah 3:17, II Maccabees 4:6, Sus. 32). In the orient, the head was covered as a gesture of respect, in the presence of a notable, an elder or scholar. From this followed the practice of covering the head in the presence of God at worship, the practice becoming a sign of piety.

The headgear was an ornament. Shulamites long flowing locks were admired (Song of Songs 4:1, 6:5, 7:5 compare with Ezekiel 16:7). Much art was bestowed in the braiding (Isaiah 3:24, II Samuel 14:2;6, Judges 13). A woman suspected of adultery was disheveled and her covering was removed by the priest (Numbers 5:18-compared with Leviticus 21:10). The shearing of hair was the insult of a captive woman (Jeremiah 7:29, I Corinthians 11:15).

In Talmudic times, women always covered their hair (Ned. 30b; Num. R-9:1, 6). Some aggadic sources interpret this custom as a sign of a woman's shame and feeling of guilt for Eve's sin. Should a woman walk bareheaded in the street, her husband could divorce her without repayment of her dowry. (In Ket. 7:6, the term "dat Yehudit" means that a woman should not spin or have her hair uncovered in the street.) By the sixteenth century, praying with the head uncovered was considered to be a heathen custom.

Girls did not have to cover their hair until the wedding ceremony (Ket. 2:1). In some contemporary Sephardic communities, however, it is the custom for unmarried girls to cover their heads.

Some rabbis compared the exposure of a married woman's hair to the exposure of her private parts since they felt that a woman's hair could be used for erotic excitement (Ber 24a). They forbid the recital of any blessing in the presence of a

bare headed woman. Pious women even took care to not uncover their hair in their house. This was particularly true of Kimhit, the mother of several high priests (Yoma 47A, Lev. R 20:11).

The general custom was to appear in public and in the presence of strange men with covered hair. It gradually became accepted to be the general traditional custom for all Jewish women to cover their hair (Sh. Ar. EH 21.2).

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, some circles of women began to wear a wig, called in Yiddish, a shaytl, which was made of artificial or real hair and worn, according to an old Jewish practice by pious women as a sign of modesty. "Pious married women never share their hair in public and have it covered frequently by a wig." This innovation was opposed by certain authorities such as Moses Sofer.

Rabbinic literature teaches that it is sinful for a Jewish woman to be seen by any man other than her husband, or to listen to the recital of prayers without her head covered. Some very pious Jewish women used to cut their hair off on their wedding day and keep their head covered with a kerchief, a custom still observed in some Jewish communities though it has been discarded for the most part.

In modern times, only the strictly orthodox insist on women covering their hair all the time. It remains however the practice in some Reform synagogues for women to cover their hair. The majority of Jews cover their heads at prayer, Torah study, or religious observances. This practice isn't based on any law in the Bible or Talmud, but a first time injunction in the Medieval Jewish Codes. There are places in the United States where one of the chief divisive distinctions between Reform and Orthodox Jews is the willingness or the unwillingness of the congregations to worship with uncovered heads.

II. Eastern Europe

The first intervention of the authorities in this practice occurred in the thirteenth century when a council held in Breslav during the year 1266 ordered Jews in Western Poland to wear a yellow hat. The Piotrkow Diet of 1538 reproved Jews for adopting Christian attire and compelled them to wear this as well.

The Lithuanian Statue of 1566 as well as the Southern Polish Statues of 1595 laid down minute specification restricting the sumptuousness of female dress and jewelry. The Lithuanian Statute ordered yellow hats for men and kerchiefs for women.

Although the woman's dress was more colorful, her finery was not meant to be displayed outdoors based on Psalm 45:14. The dress of Jewish women was generally in the fashion of the period but more subdued.

In Western Poland, during the 18th century, it was customary to wear a bonnet on the Sabbath made of brocade trimmed with lace and silver stitching. In the east, including Lithuania and parts of Russia, the earliest form of head covering consisted of lace trimmed with colored ribbons, glass baubles and beads. In time, pearls and diamonds gradually replaced popular ornaments.

In Central Poland, Galicia and Hungary, the head covering was made up of three parts: the harband which covered the hair above the forehead; the grint which served as the background and the kupke for the Sabbath which was a sort of tiara. The wig or shaytl was never considered proper for the very Orthodox.

III. Married Women

The custom of covering the bride's face with a veil so that she would not be seen even by her husband until after the wedding ceremony was felt to date back to Genesis 24:65 as well as to Rebecca and Leah (Genesis 29:23-25). The Mishnah Keith 2:1 states that Jews throughout the Middle Ages have retained this custom. The wedding began with the veiling of the bride in the home and was considered a symbol of her obligation of chastity.

As mentioned earlier, among the causes for divorcing a wife was walking in the street with her head uncovered. It is listed among these causes: adultery, relations with her husband while menstruating, exposure of her forearms and frivolous conduct with other men.

The main function of women was that of presiding genius and guardian of the home. This was considered her temple: the education of her children, her divine service; her family, her congregation. It was her duty to supervise all domestic matters including: the maintenance of Kashrut, home celebration of Sabbath and festivals, the early education of her sons as well as a good measure of the education of her daughters. The wife encouraged the husband to study Torah (Midrash Genesis 17:12).

The Talmud did not consider it dignified for women to be exposed to the roughness of everyday life outside the home (Psalm 45:14, Yeb 77a). By nature, the woman's main function was to act as a helpmate to her husband, "A beautiful wife, beautiful without cosmetics, doubles the days of her husband and increases his mental comfort." (Yeb 63b, Ber 57b)

It was the duty of her husband to try, at all costs, to avoid her from shedding tears, "for God counts the tears of women." Talmud also opposed the husband's reliance on his wife's income. He was forbidden to recite prayers in front of any woman who was not fully dressed and this included his wife's head covering.

In the latter part of the Middle Ages, according to an old Jewish custom, married women, for the sake of modesty, covered their hair in the presence of strange

men because of the erotic effect of the hair. The Talmud cautions women against going out with their head uncovered, even praises the covering of a woman's hair in the house. Midrash Numbers 9:16 states that only heathen women went about with their heads uncovered. It was forbidden to pray in the presence of an unmarried woman with uncovered hair (Ber 25A). The Zohar called the covered hair of the head of the wife, "The chastity of the house."

In Mishnaic times it was a universal practice for women to cover their hair, it's violation was deemed grounds for divorce without paying the ketuba. Later custom became more lenient toward unmarried women. It was an inviolable Jewish custom that women should not be seen in the streets with their hair uncovered (Ket. 7:6).

In the Septuagint, the Mosaic Law regarding Numbers 5:18 is taken by the rabbis to mean, "The priest shall uncover the woman's head." As stated in Midrash Rabbah on Numbers 5:18:

In the place where he set her to begin with there he sets her afterward (In other words, she moved about from place to place.) before the "LORD": Is it not already written above that he must set her before the "LORD"?

Yes, but the repetition is to indicate that he must set her before whom she stands, before the "LORD". And let the hair of the woman's head go loose. This may be compared to a priest who entered a cemetery while his servant remained waiting outside to avoid being defiled. As though it was not sufficient for the latter to be like his master! In the same way so that the priest might not go out of misplaced pride object: "Am I to uncover a woman's head? It says, before the "LORD", and let the hair...go loose. And let the hair go loose (ibid); why? Because it is usual for the daughters of Israel to have their head covered. Consequently, when he uncovers the hair of her head, he says to her: "You have departed from the way of the daughters of Israel, whose habit it is to have their heads covered, and you have walked in the ways of the idolatrous women, who walk with their heads uncovered.

Rabbi Ishmael derives from this, the law forbidding women to walk with uncovered hair (Ket. 72a; Sifre Num.11).

Traditional custom as interpreted by the rabbis comes from Numbers R. 28:20, "The distinction of Kamlhit, who saw seven of her sons made high priests and two officiate on one and the same day, one of them being Simon ben Kamlhit, mentioned by Josephus (Antiquities 28. 2,2) as "Simon son of Camithous", is ascribed by the Rabbis to the fact that even the ceiling of her house had not seen the hair of her head." Yer. Meg. 1.72a).

Talmudic understanding saw an uncovered head as a sign of nakedness and incentive to improper glances. It is unlawful to recite the Shema in the presence of a woman with a bare head.

Originally, the custom was for married and single women (Ned. 30b). Also, law (B.K. 90a) were set which fined 400 drachmas for tearing off a woman's head covering in the street. Paul, in I Corinthians 11:12-13, also supported this.

Pirke R. El. XIV said that as a result of Eve's curse, a woman must go about covered as mourners. Later in Talmud and occidental countries, there is mention of unmarried women with uncovered heads.

V. Modern Commentaries

Gablein states that a woman praying and prophesying is to have her head covered or a covering on the head. A covering on the head is an outward sign of being in the place of subjection. Another reason is given why praying women should wear outwardly, as sign of subjection, because of the angels. Angels are watchers and attendants of heirs of salvation. They know the church and (Ephesians 3:10) so they observe Christian worship. Angels themselves are in subjection and yields obedience.

I Corinthians 11:10 states, "Therefore, the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels." Strong indicates that the Greek for woman refers to, "A woman, specifically a wife; a woman; be married." (#1135 gune, sdginomai). Angels has a question mark and is unclear (# 2465 or 2432; issagelos similar to angel/angel-like). The Greek for veil is "katakalupetai" which suggests a veil that hung down.

Wycliffe Bible Commentary states, "The word for angels in the expression 'because of the angels' does not refer to elders. Nor does it refer to evil angels (Genesis 6:1-4). It refers to good angels who are present in worship meeting s since they live in the presence of God (I Corinthians a4: 9; Luke 14:7,10| Ephesians 3:10; I Timothy 5:21; Psalms 138:1). The insubordination of women in refusing to acknowledge the authority of their husbands would offend angels who, under God, guard the created universe (Colossians 1:16, Ephesians 1:21) and know no insubordination." (Pg. 1247-1248)

For the counsel concerning veiling of women in public worship there were three reasons: 1. Theological reason, 2. Biblical reason, 3. Physical reason. "In the final analysis, the hat or veil is not the important thing, but the subordination for which it stands. The presence of both is ideal."

Matthew Henry says this is a positive sign. Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Whole Bible states that it was a sign of humility and very womanish.

The passage is addressed to "every man" and "every woman" indicating the widest application and conveying the ideal of a universal principle, without reference to marriage, eliminating the concept that this is binding only on the married.

Paul W. Marsh writes concerning the long-standing tradition of veiled women in Asia:

A study of life among veiled women in Asia reveals that both aspects of the word (exousia-authority) are true. A sign of being under own authority and that in experience no contradiction exists. The concept fundamental to all cultures utilizing the veil is the subjection of woman to man. Yet within the realm of subjection, the woman has a place of authority, dignity, respect and security. This is provided by the veil itself, which preserves her dignity in contrast to the unveiled woman, whose bare face is the evidence of loose morals, or the general shamelessness of Western habits. Many Moslem women confess to a feeling of utter nakedness and shame on being seen without a veil; the veil is their greatest right and security. Paul argues from a somewhat similar background. For a Corinthian woman to throw off her veil in church was not only to deny her subjection but also to abandon her dignity.

According to Detweiler, the commandment had a four-fold purpose:

1. It is a witness of obedience and dedication to God and Messiah, for it reveals a desire to fill the sphere of life designated by God's order.
2. It is a witness to man challenging him fill his place.
3. It is a witness in the Christian brotherhood, for the spirit and attitude of voluntary submission it represents enables woman to fulfill her place in the church.
4. It is a witness to the world, to a society that disregards Scriptural truth and practices, and that does not recognize God's order.

It is interesting that the second part of the passage is dealing with communion is universally practiced but the first half of chapter eleven is widely ignored. Paul was writing not only to the Corinthians, but also "to all the churches of God". I Corinthians 14:39 states all Paul's teachings here are commandments.

VI. Conclusions

For those who may regard the veiling as a quaint little religious symbol used only by a few culturally bound sects, it must be remembered that all cultures abound

in symbols, including our contemporary culture. There are, for example, numerous emblems of both religious and secular organizations.

It is not a matter of the validity of a particular symbol with which one needs to be concerned, but rather, whether it is of divine or human origin.

God is concerned about the attitude of our heart and one of the ways it has been evident is the mention of head coverings. It has obviously connected itself with many aspects of womanhood and has symbolized modesty and submission to one's husband, "that you should remember the "LORD", your God."

Dr. Enos Martin on the present tension in male-female relationships states:

The anxiety in male-female relationships today is the fear of "being taken". Mothers warn daughters, "Be careful, men are out to take advantage of you." Men warn each other, "Be careful when you get close to that woman or she will manipulate you."

The church is one place in the world where we ought to be free of the fear of being taken; one place where our hopes and fears are known and respected. The covering on a Christian woman is a symbol that she is in a relationship with her brothers where she is protected and respected, a relationship where she doesn't need to fear being taken or used, a relationship where she need not manipulate her brothers for survival, but where her Christian brothers delight to enhance her life.

The covering signifies that the Christian woman is in a relationship where her brothers care for her as Messiah cared for the church. The covering then should be an attractive symbol of a beautiful relationship existing between Christian brothers and sisters.

Let us be careful for God looks on the intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). We are not to be as some of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who flaunted outward religion without reason or conviction of heart. Was this a sign of divine origin from the beginning of time? It was mentioned in all Scripture from the earliest time, and was threaded throughout the history of every culture. How much should we be influenced by our culture styles and fashion? Our responsibility is keeping, in proportion, our obedience and ourselves to the Word of God to Him.

If we do accept head covering for ourselves, is it not a sign of freedom and a sign of our betrothal to Messiah and man? Let every man be convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5).

We need to realize that we are free when we do not have to submit to an unholy inner drive to prove our equality to men, but rather realize, "How gentle God's commands; How kind his precepts." (Psalm 119).

Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman yeshua613@hotmail.com