

Hair which completely replenishes itself is a powerful symbol. It can signify age, conformity, mourning, rebellion, punishment, servitude, sex appeal. It is styled to show beauty, removed to cause humiliation, interpreted as a sign of strength or weakness."

Connie Koppelman

(curator of the exhibit *Hair: the Long and Short of It.*)

Hair

AN INTRO

In the beginning, God created heaven, earth and hair. We might think hair a trivial third choice, but it shows that God really got it—hair is the body's most versatile raw material. Hair is both body and costume; it's natural, yet it demands attention. Long uncombed hair, like that of ancient Nazirites, was even during biblical times a nostalgic throwback to good old days, when humans, uncontaminated by culture (read: combs), strolled as one with the beasts of the field.

We *love* our hair—uncut hair, particular colors or styles, can symbolize for us entire eras of our lives. Wreathing our shoulders, cradling our faces, our hair is our shelter and womb. And we *hate* our hair—plucking it, shaving it, perming or dying it—our misery fuels the economy: we are perfect consumers, always unsatisfied. When we remove our hair we enter the realm of religious ideals: our hairless (and/or emaciated) body is the martyr's. Jewish women in their *shaytls*, men with their *payess*, nuns shaved and capped, testify that they belong to a people consecrated to God. These are ancient identifications: hair meaning separate, holy.

Hair, powerlessness, self-transformation. "At 27," muses writer Lynne Taetzsch, (in the book *Minding the Body* edited by Patricia Foster), "I arrived at Newark airport with one suitcase and my 9-month-old baby in my arms. Everyone felt sorry for me, of course—a young mother (failed marriage) all alone in the world with her baby. One of my brothers handed me \$20 to ease the pain. I immediately went out and bought a box of Clairol silver blond. Perhaps if I could look in the mirror and see someone else, this life wouldn't really be happening to me."

A harried young mother and lawyer explains. "When my life is out of control, or I'm scared about embarking on something new, about performing, I turn to my friend: my hair. It understands. Cutting it, coloring it, braiding it, I tell it: 'You're the only thing in my life I can control.' It's a never-failing intimacy: me and my hair. It helps me to take back my power."

Hair is about will. As Julia Epstein (co-editor of *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*) puts it: "There's a direct line from Delilah to the Nazi camps. Hair is sex; sex is



FRIDA KAHLO (1907-1954), half-Jewish, half-Catholic Mexican painter, was renowned for painting, more than anything else, her own face—specifically her trademark mustache and single winged eyebrow. She bragged: "I love to draw each little hair of my mustache." Here, in *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), she immortalizes one of many tempestuous arguments with her husband Diego Rivera. Defiantly shearing off her extraordinary long dark hair that Diego loved, she paints herself in challenging male clothing beneath trashy pop-lyrics: "Look, if I used to love you, it was because of your hair. Now that you're pelona (bald), I don't love you anymore."

WIFE!

DUCTION

By Susan Schnur

power.” The question is: Whose will? Whose sex? Whose power? Who is the cutter, who the cuttee? Women who have been raped, report cutting off their hair soon afterwards.

In M. Gary Neuman’s story (on the following pages) about the Jewish custom of *upsherin* (cutting a boy’s hair for the first time when he turns three and begins his Jewish study), a feminist’s acute ear discerns little Yehuda’s first Jewish syllogism: “Haircuts masculinize me; masculinized, I am ready for serious study; therefore . . . hmmm, what does this teach me about my sisters?”

Jewish Blondes. Several years ago I attended a conference for Jewish children (now grown) who had been hidden during the Holocaust. Entering a room of 1000 or so (mostly female) Jews, I was blinded by b*1*o*n*d*n*e*s*s. Certainly some were True Blondes—that fact was generally significant to their survival. It’s easy to free-associate around blond Jewish Nazi-era children: baby-chick-colored hair, sun-kissed, spun gold, apricot gold, damsels in distress, angels, Madonnas, little Aryans. A blond female, writes beauty expert Mary Tannen, “is the done-to rather than the doer (and the doer is always a guy).”

And then there were survivor Bottle Blondes, those who had learned, as traumatized elementary-school Jews, that protective coloration is a scorching lesson in life or death. Silence may = Death, but even more iconographically, Blonde = Life. These women were no shallow copycats or impersonator blondes. They were Female Heads: powerful totems against the Evil Eye. Blond versions of Samson: feminine virility encoded in hair.

Which brings us to Hollywood. One of its definite seven wonders was the invention of that pantheon of celebrated blondes by none other than dark-haired male Jewish film-moguls escaping New York’s garment district. Writes Susan Brownmiller (in *Femininity*): “The visions of blond loveliness these men projected onto the screen bore no resemblance to their mothers and sisters, or to the women they might have been expected to marry.” We can thank Jewish men for: Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, Veronica Lake, for the associations of blondness with breathless vulnerability, with tragedy, for the cult of blondness that leaves many of us female non-Nordics plucking, waxing, insecure.



Even as a child, Kahlo wanted to be different. She ridiculed convention, flouted rules. Here she turns her signature eyebrow into a bird, a swallow in flight. “I don’t care,” she once wrote to a lover, “I like myself the way I am.” She enjoyed mocking herself, and would say as she left a social gathering, “I have to go shave now.” Picasso, a fan of hers, gave her the earrings she wears here: enormous hands. The last entry in her diary is a sketch of a black angel with the words: “I hope the exit is joyful, and I hope never to come back.”

Feeling tortured, powerless, ridiculed, rejected. (My own informal research, in putting together these pages of hair stories, suggests that most Jewish women feel they have, in the words of one informant, “too much dark ethnic hair in too many awful places.”)

Blond Advantage, continues Brownmiller, includes, “that one’s body hair isn’t frightening, unkempt, mannish. It’s unchallenging, bubbly, froth.” (Writes Karen Minns about her Catholic parochial school days: “We wondered why a blond nun had ever become a nun at all.”) There is some male rage these days against brainy, dark-haired dynamo women who have taken to lightening their hair in order to appear less threatening (vide: Gloria Steinem, Barbara Walters, Hillary Clinton). Power Blondes. *Aren’t there any standards anymore?* A man used to be able to depend on a blonde to at least *play* dumb.

And then there is Randy Milden’s “Real Jewish Hair” (on the following pages)—a case wherein blond hair, on an adopted girl, is a provocation for her to work seriously overtime to “be Jewish.”

Bighorn sheep. Like them, our species exhibits minimal sexual dimorphism—male and female humans look largely similar. This causes us much anxiety; we crave absolute binariness of male and female: One must be either/or. And so we recruit dualistic social constructions to substitute for biology’s spectrum approach. Historically, for example, hair has always told instant stories to illiterates: Are you male or female? Slave or ruler? Virgin, married, widowed?

Says writer Zane Kotker (in *Rapunzel, Rapunzel*): “Polarity is important. Men achieve dominance by hair: the more hair, the fiercer. Quite simply, you appear to occupy more space if you’ve got dark fuzz all over you. He is the warrior who will fuss with his hair before going into battle; I will be inventing agriculture back outside the cave.” (That last semicolon is critical. It establishes balance, sets up the Hegelian dialectic.)

Transgressive hair—that is, hair on a female that grows on male-staked territory (mustaches, underarm hair, hairy legs)—unsettles our two categories. It’s not called “transgressive” for nothing—it treads on enemy soil, makes the enemy take out its shotguns. A hairy female leg, for example, provokes from most of America bizarrely disproportionate sociobiological fear and loathing. Says one college-age female: “The room was warm at my parents’ Passover seder. I pulled my sweater over my head and thus revealed hairball underarms. The room reeled; all of patriarchy rustled in its grave.”

Hair is power; hair is the opposite of power. “A highly qualified woman with extremely pronounced facial hair,”

comments Jennifer Miller (on the following pages), “has virtually no employment options. This is really sad; she’s just so scary.”

A century ago, American suffragist Charlotte Perkins Gilman recognized that hair would remain always the last frontier (as it surely has): “It wasn’t the Lord who gave men short hair—it was the scissors,” she told a female audience. They were shocked, shocked. To alleviate their anxiety, she added: “Don’t worry. I’m not asking you to go home and cut your hair. You wouldn’t do it anyway.” Still, Gilman persisted: “*If a woman cuts her hair off, people say, ‘Oh, shame: she wants to be a man!’ But what do they say when the case is reversed? Whiskers are a man’s natural prerogative, but now when he shaves off his whiskers and goes with a smooth face, why don’t they say to him, ‘You want to look like a woman!’*”

Zane Kotker plays dumb when she asks: “Why is leg hair considered more male than female if both of us have it?” As does Brownmiller: “Given a sample lock of hair for analysis, an expert would not be able to say if it came from the head of a man or a woman.”

“I look at someone like Jane Fonda,” muses Brownmiller as we talk by phone one afternoon, “who has historically been a strong feminist, and I see where progress absolutely stalls—she has no courage in the underarm area.” In our own “transgressive” hair, we see how we have internalized rules of binary opposition and dominance: the slightest look askance by someone and we (almost to a woman) run to shave.

It was said about the 19th century social reformer John Ruskin (says Julia Epstein) that he was thoroughly horrified, on his wedding night, to discover that women—not only their polar opposites, men—have pubic hair. His marriage was annulled for non-consummation.



They Don't Wear Wigs Here. It is already 1900, but Rose Cohen's Orthodox mother will not un-

cover her hair—for God's sake, Mother, this is America! The mother's dowdy kerchief-covered head bleats out the entire family's greenhorn status, humiliating Rose no end. Finally, one day, after much argument, Rose wrestles her mother's kerchief from her head and starts styling her hair according to the latest religion: fashion. Writes Cohen (in *Out of the Shadows*): “My mother had never before in her married life had her hair uncovered before anyone. She glanced at herself, admitted frankly that she looked well, and began hastily to put on her kerchief.”

Later that night, however, just before Rose's father returns from work, the mother again modestly uncovers her hair.

“‘What!’ Rose’s father exclaimed. ‘Already you are becoming an American lady!’ Mother looked abashed for a moment; in the next, to my surprise and delight, I heard her brazen it out in her quiet way. ‘As you see,’ she said, ‘I am not staying far behind.’”

For our immigrant foremothers, the equivalent of losing one’s American virginity was throwing the *shaytl* off the ship’s prow in view of the Statue of Liberty. Learning English might take years, but transforming one’s head took but a moment, and had great symbolic power: instant *Yenkee*. But oh, to throw or not to throw—it could be a wrenching, agonizing question. To move with the secular, or stay grounded in the sacred? To be loyal to the Old Country, or be influenced by one’s children’s (and, often, husband’s) vote for assimilation? An immigrant woman’s first experiment in self-definition in this country: HAIR. Her choice (much more than her husband’s) was seen as transcending her personally, advertising the sometimes contradictory values of her extended family. Some women solved the dilemma sequentially—bare head at home; kerchief in the marketplace; *shaytl* at shul. Or, bare head during the week; kerchief on *Shabbos*; *shaytl* on the High Holidays. Plumage—its varied pressures fell (and continue to fall) mostly upon females.

Divorce rates among immigrant Jews, says Barbara Schreier (in *Becoming American Women*) were startlingly high: “The man comes to this country first. Five years later, he sends for his wife, and finds her not five years behind, but two centuries.” Bewigged wife from Russia, reminder of Jewish shame, of the cultural chasm. Many women who did “Americanize” overnight never ceased mourning their cast-off devotions, finding fashion to be spiritually cold.

In Russia, in the mid-19th century, the government tried to ban *shaytls*, believing that they inhibited assimilation. One Czarist decree, reports Schreier, promised special travel privileges to whomever acquiesced. Another threatened that “Jewish women will be inspected to discover whether or not they are shaving their heads.”

And then there is Irene Glassgold’s story (on the following pages): A woman howling, a husband insisting on the *shaytl* nonetheless. Writes Ruth Whitman in a poem called “Cutting the Jewish Bride’s Hair:” “This little amputation will shift the balance of the universe.”

The Gendered Grammar of Hair. Recently visiting Israel, Molly Myerowitz Levine passes a peculiar window display at a wig store in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood. All of the bewigged styrofoam heads, she notices, are wearing sunglasses. Levine, a classicist and hair aficionada, is curious to get the “story.”

Hair as Metonymy

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It turns out, she writes, that the self-styled “Modesty Brigade” of the town of B’nai Brak has experienced the luscious heads to be unbearably erotic—and has demanded that the owner cover every wisp with kerchiefs (in “The Gendered Grammar of Ancient Mediterranean Hair” in *Off With Her Head: The Denial of Women’s Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture*, edited by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz).

“When the shopkeeper protested that she was in the business of selling wigs and not scarves,” Levine continues, “a rare compromise was reached.” Sunglasses. Put out the styrofoam eyes, the rabbis perhaps figured, and the sirenic wigs cause only half an erection. (For opinions on why wigs are permitted to be other

than grotesquely ugly anyway, see the following article, “Hair, O Israel,” which examines Talmudic *shaytl* laws.)

How, asks Levine, does hair—upon both men’s heads and women’s—alleviate patriarchal anxieties? Ancient Mediterranean (male) warriors’ hair, for example, was long (intended to primordially terrorize enemies), and Apollo, God of unshorn hair, was the testosterone ideal: *forever* young, potent and lawless. Ancient Mediterranean brides’ hair, on the other hand, was traditionally completely shorn, articulating the opposite: that every trace of female wildness could be extirpated;

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From *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880-1920*.



THE SHAYTL & SUSAN B. ANTHONY

BY IRENE GLASSGOLD

Mrs. Michaelson was shouting about her wig. It was a hot Baltimore summer afternoon. The temperature was 90, and the humidity was hovering close to 95. The *shaytl*, she claimed, was heavy and hot and was the cause of her extremely high blood pressure. Susan B. Anthony had freed American women from bondage, but she had not been able to lift the burden from Mrs. Michaelson's head. The Sanhedrin was too crafty even for Susan B. Anthony. Though she had been able to get the Constitution amended, Susan B. Anthony was unable to stop the Sanhedrin from continuing its subjugation of Jewish women.

Rabbi Michaelson again began his "too late" sermon. "We came to America too late, *rebetsn*. If we had come when we were younger, I would have shaved my beard. You could have grown your hair. I would have given up my Prince Albert and velvet hat. But now they've seen us like this. How can we change? How would I make a living? What would people say?"

In truth, Rabbi Michaelson knew this argument no longer worked with his wife. It used to work before she started Americanization class, and Susan B. Anthony had become her idol. Mrs. Michaelson had changed since she went to school to prepare for the citizenship exam. From a shy retiring woman, she had turned into an confident angry one. She had liked going to class and being away from her housewifely routines. Now, she thought that there was something to life besides husband, children and the shul sisterhood. Besides this, she had scored five points higher on the exam than her husband, and he had had private lessons. How could she score

higher? His wife—a woman, who couldn't even be counted for a minyan.

"I'm burning up," Mrs. Michaelson continued angrily. "Look how I'm perspiring. And there's no sense to it. It's

pubic hair that has to be covered up. Only the Sanhedrin would get confused and include *all* hair—they know it's not all hair! They use this for suppression, to make women look unattractive, older, unstylish. At least if I could go to New York to Madame Marie's. Her wigs are lighter, more becoming. Kohlerman's wigs are the heaviest and make you old before your time."

"New York? Where would we get the money? Do you understand how much I earn?" Rabbi Michaelson shot back. "Be thankful there is food on the table!"

"There will always be food on the table," Mrs. Michaelson replied acidly, "because you like to eat. There is always money for what you want. But your wages can never buy what I want."

The truth, however, was more complicated. Actually, Mrs. Michaelson

did accept her husband's "too late" argument. She also believed that they had arrived in America too late in their lives for things to change drastically for her. But she also felt her husband was overly concerned with "what people would say." She was sure that the congregation was not preoccupied with the subject of whether their *rebetsn* showed her own hair or that of the local wigmaker's. Mrs. Michaelson had had such gorgeous auburn hair, with natural curls. Like the Greenstein girl. Last night at the Greenstein girl's wedding, Frances walked down the aisle—such a beautiful young girl. After the wedding, in her going-away

"WHAT RIGHTS
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CRIED HER
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suit, she had on that frightful *shaytl*. She looked like a defeated tired old woman, and the look on her face—the eternal ageless suffering of Jewish women was on Frances' face.

The same thing had happened to her. A lovely young girl had been changed into a matronly woman. But going to Americanization class had filled her with hope. Perhaps something could be retrieved. After all, it had not been easy for Susan B. Anthony either. She had even been arrested.

Mrs. Michaelson went into the kitchen to prepare the four-course dinner that they ate each evening. Even on such a hot day as this, there was an appetizer, soup, main course with side dishes and a dessert. Otherwise her husband would complain.

Rabbi Michaelson came in to supervise. He did like to eat, and he wanted to make sure that there was nothing on the menu that he disliked. He sat down at the kitchen table. The dinner, when Mrs. Michaelson completed the preparations, would suit him admirably. It was dairy: vegetarian chopped liver made out of spinach and eggs, potato soup, baked fish with cucumber salad, and baked apple.

"I used to have such beautiful auburn hair, such wonderful curls—a lot of good they did me," Mrs. Michaelson sighed.

"Why are we talking about curls?"

"We are talking about curls because that is what attracted you to me, and now that you got me I have to keep them covered especially on days like these, when it's 90 degrees outside, but it must be 150 in this kitchen."

"This is history, *rebetsn*. We had too late a start in America. How can you now take off the wig when there are just ordinary pious Jews whose wives wear wigs? What will these people say if the wife of the rabbi, the head of the whole *Vad Ha'Rabanim*, who is the example for the entire community, would take off her wig?"

"That's the point! I'll set the example like Susan B. Anthony. I'll carry her message. Men their rights and nothing more: women their rights and nothing less."

"What rights don't you have that everyone else has?" Rabbi Michaelson snorted. "Susan B. Anthony got women the vote. You can vote in your *shaytl*."

"I can vote, but I'm enslaved!"

"What do you mean 'enslaved'?"

"Look at me!" Mrs. Michaelson shouted suddenly, her anger again flaring. "I look like my grandmother in this wig. Only 37 years old and what am I doing? I'm sweating under a *shaytl*, cooking this ridiculous hot dinner when everyone knows that today is the day for a cold salad. How come we don't know about cold salads?"

"Salads are side dishes."

"Oy, *Got in himl*, why don't you free me from this servitude? This kitchen is hot as *Gehenna*, only I'm sure it's not as hot *there*."

"Out of the way! I'll cook the dinner," said Rabbi Michaelson, pushing Mrs. Michaelson from the stove.

"No, you'll make a mess, and then I'll have to stay and swelter even longer, cleaning as well as cooking."

"You just want to argue! You say you're enslaved in this kitchen, but when I offer to free you, you come up with objections!"

"That's because you respond to details rather than the general picture! You just don't understand what it's like for me—to come to America, the land of opportunity, and to end up controlled by some ancient group of men who have no relevance to this day and age. I am in the New World. Ha! A lot of good it's doing me!" She was screaming.

"I'm sick of this!" Rabbi Michaelson banged on the stove top. "If this is a campaign to go around with your head uncovered, you're wasting your time, *rebetsn*. The answer is NO! ABSOLUTELY NO! DEFINITELY NO!"

"Sad was the day when I laid eyes on you! Who were you? A starving yeshiva boy? It was I who married beneath me. I who had a family tree of *robonim* since the 1500s! Who are you to tell me what to do, to be my supervisor, to tell me what is right from wrong?"

"I was a brilliant yeshiva boy who came to the home of a revered rabbi to court his daughter who we all believed wanted a *talmid khokhem*, who would hold her husband in high esteem and observe all the Jewish laws and customs..."

"That's the point. Exactly the point," interjected Mrs. Michaelson. "I do observe the laws and customs. I do respect your learning. But where does it say about a *shaytl*? Are men so oversexed that the sight of a married woman's hair would get them excited? Why punish poor women for that?" and she too

banged on the stove top.

"All the women in your family wore *shaytles*, and you should be grateful to me. I rescued you from Hungary, from Oppihide, that tiny town, from the rural life, brought you to a new land, a big city."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. What good is it to be here if everything is the same?"

"Everything is better! We have a big house, two bathrooms; we live across from a park. The air is fresh like the country, and we live in the city!"

"BUT I CAN'T BREATHE!"

Mrs. Michaelson hadn't meant that she actually couldn't breathe physically, but when Rabbi Michaelson looked at his wife, her face was scarlet, and she was gasping. "Get out of this kitchen," he screamed. "Go sit out on the porch! I'll call Dr. Kampleman."

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Mrs. Michaelson in her *shaytl*, c. 1937. Says Irene Glassgold: "This *shaytl* was the style back then—slightly wavy and pulled severely into a low knot at the back of the head, like a school-teacher's bun. Sometimes Mrs. Michaelson wore a same-color hair net (made of hair) over the whole thing, to keep everything in place. Even today I can spot a *shaytl* a million miles away—no matter how stylish, they have a look about them."

THE SHAYTL & SUSAN B. ANTHONY

(continued from p. 13)

Rabbi Michaelson rushed to the telephone terribly upset. When his wife's pressure began to climb, it was dangerous.

Fortunately, Dr. Kampleman was in his office, which was a few doors from the Michaelson house. He came right over. He took Mrs. Michaelson's blood pressure. It was 220.

"She'll need complete bed rest," Dr. Kampleman said. "She'll have to stay in bed until her pressure goes down." Rabbi Michaelson helped Mrs. Michaelson upstairs. He had trouble looking at her—he felt guilty. Maybe there was some truth to her complaints about the *shaytl*. Maybe it was too heavy; maybe it had something to do with blood pressure. Her blood pressure did rise to these dangerous heights, and Dr. Kampleman had warned that high pressure could cause a stroke.

Mrs. Michaelson just lay there. The bedroom was hot, too, but removing her *shaytl* had helped, and getting out of that kitchen had helped too. She knew she would be in bed for a few days. Her blood pressure went up quickly, but it was hard to bring down.

Rabbi Michaelson came up with some iced tea. Mrs. Michaelson said she felt better. Her head felt much lighter without the wig. "If only I could go to New York—to Madame Marie's. If I had had a light wig, this wouldn't have happened."

Rabbi Michaelson was nervous about his wife's condition, and he knew he mustn't upset her. Nevertheless, he lost control.

"I give up!" He started shouting once again. "You want a *shaytl* from Madame Marie, have one! God knows where I'll find the money, but go! Go! Call Rifkeh. Stay with them. Go! Go to New York and buy yourself a new wig. Take the train—Go! Here's the money," and he opened the dresser drawer where he kept various wallets filled with cash. "Two hundred dollars—Go! And maybe there will be some *sholem bayis* here! A meal without Susan B. Anthony. That's all I needed, her and her suffragettes!" Rabbi Michaelson stormed from the room.

Mrs. Michaelson was shocked that her husband had handed over the money. She didn't wait to discuss it for fear that he would change his mind. She called her sister-in-law, Rivkeh, to say she was coming. She would take the early morning train a week from next Monday. Rivkeh would meet her, and they would go directly to Madame Marie. They would then travel to Brooklyn. She would spend the night, and return to Baltimore the next day.

Mrs. Michaelson recovered in a few days. On the train to New York, she wondered why her husband had given in this time when he had refused so many other times. He must have been moved by her illness. "Maybe I could have gone further; maybe

I could have given up the wig altogether," she thought.

When the train arrived in New York, Rivkeh was waiting. "She's 38, but she looks 70," thought Mrs. Michaelson as she waved from the train window. "Madame Marie's wares aren't doing her much good."

The experience at Madame Marie's was not what Mrs. Michaelson had envisioned. There was a very fancy waiting lounge and display cases, but a wig was a wig—and there was a look about the wigs of the Orthodox women that, no matter what, was always the same. More disappointing, Madame Marie was unable to match Mrs. Michaelson's natural hair as well as she would have liked. She wanted something more auburn. But they either had flaming red, which she didn't like at all, or a reddish brown, which couldn't compare to the natural color of her hair. It just was not like wearing your own hair. There was always that gap, alas, between the wig line and the back of the neck—the gap which revealed that you were wearing a *shaytl*.

After a number of trials, Mrs. Michaelson chose something. Rivkeh said it was marvelous. Mrs. Michaelson saw that it was an improvement over what she was wearing, but it still made her look just the same as every Orthodox woman in a wig. Hopefully when the wig was made to her head size, it would look better. It had to be made to order, and would be sent to Baltimore in a month.

It was just 3 o'clock, but Mrs. Michaelson decided she was too depressed to face her brother in Brooklyn—he was even more doctrinaire than her husband. She would eat something at Farm Food, and then return home. Though Rivkeh tried to persuade Mrs. Michaelson to stay over, she would not change her mind.

She was not feeling the way she had thought she would. There was no surge of elation. She was soon to be an Orthodox woman of fashion! She would have a custom-made *shaytl* from New York, from Madame Marie—what she had always said she wanted. But now, it was not what she wanted.

Rabbi Michaelson was delighted to see the taxi that brought Mrs. Michaelson home from the train station a day early. He did not like Mrs. Michaelson to spend the night away from him. He was, however, concerned about Mrs. Michaelson's quiet sad mood. She explained that she was tired, that it had been a long day, and went to bed.

The next day Mrs. Michaelson served her husband his usual breakfast when he returned from the morning prayers at the synagogue. She cleared and washed the dishes and started to cook the dinner. She cleaned the house, then told her husband that she had some errands downtown. She took the trolley car to Howard and Lexington, crossed the street, and entered Hutzler's department store.

Going directly to the scarf department, she asked for scarves that could be tied into turbans. She bought six in colors that would match her dresses, dark ones, as her dresses were very conservative. She brought them home and practiced tying turbans,

"IT'S PUBIC HAIR THAT HAS TO BE COVERED UP," SAID THE *REBETSN*. "ONLY THE SANHEDRIN WOULD GET CONFUSED AND INCLUDE ALL HAIR."

arranging them so a few waves of her hair would show out. She thought this looked much better than a *shaytl*.

Mrs. Michaelson meant this to be a lighter, more attractive substitute for her old *shaytl* until the Madame Marie article arrived. In the weeks before her new wig was delivered, Mrs. Michaelson learned that no one paid attention to what she had on her head. Everyone thought that she was wearing a wig under the turban. Her hair grew longer, and little by little she exposed a few more waves. Mrs. Michaelson was feeling better. She had no more headaches, and she was certain that her blood pressure was down.

When the package from Madame Marie's arrived, Mrs. Michaelson buried it deep in her lingerie drawer. She never took it out. She just kept wearing her turbans. She felt that a tremendous encumbrance had been lifted from her. And this feeling was renewed every time she reached into her drawer for a corset and felt the soft wig there.

Rabbi Michaelson knew that Mrs. Michaelson wasn't wearing her *shaytl*. She was keeping her hair covered in public and no one had noticed that her own hair was underneath, so he decided not to mention the subject. She did look much better and was much happier and healthier. He was worried about one thing, though, but hopefully this wouldn't come up for years, and by then maybe he could persuade his wife to wear her wig again. The cemetery that Rabbi Michaelson was expecting to be buried in when he died was a very Orthodox one where all the most pious Jewish were buried. All the women who were buried there had worn wigs when they were alive. Would Mrs. Michaelson be allowed to be buried beside him if she hadn't worn a wig in her lifetime? It would be terrible if Mrs. Michaelson couldn't be beside him.

Rabbi Michaelson knew that he should discuss this with Mrs. Michaelson immediately and try to persuade her to wear her *shaytl*, but he was so attracted by Mrs. Michaelson's new look, and he didn't want to start another fight. Besides, they were still young. He would postpone this worry about cemeteries and eternity. He would wait a while yet before broaching the subject of eternity with Mrs. Michaelson. □

Postscript: This is how Mrs. Michaelson's story would have ended had she lived in the 60s, 70s or 80s. However, this all occurred in the 30s and 40s, just a few decades too early.

What really happened was that Mrs. Michaelson did travel to New York for a *shaytl* at Madame Marie's. She bought the turbans, but wore them only at home. Mrs. Michaelson wore her new wig when she went out. She despised it as much as she had the old one and argued furiously with her husband for the rest of her life about its suppressive effects.

She transmitted her feelings about wigs to her three Orthodox daughters. They were "liberated"—none of them ever wore a *shaytl*. Mrs. Michaelson died in 1955, at age 62, of a stroke caused by extremely high blood pressure. She was my mother. — I.G.

Irene Glassgold is a learning specialist in private practice living in Riverdale, NY. She began writing at age 55.

Black~Jewish Daughter

(continued from page 21)

elected to take), the toll of slavery, and the costs of remaining. It's all in the hair.

Which is how I happened upon Charlene's, a place where women can go 24 hours a day to get their hair done. The idea titillates me to no end: a place where you can go just about any time of day or night if your hair "turns back," which means, in case you didn't know, returns to its natural state.

And so I went to Charlene's. Night manager Jerome Shavers regales me with tales of "his nights at Charlene's" which he pronounces in an exaggerated lisp, as if recalling some infamous cabaret or brothel. He always asks new faces what brings them to the salon so late at night. One woman said she just couldn't sleep. Another swore her husband wouldn't let her back in the house unless she got rid of the "Afro beads" on her neck.

Charlene's is empty at 2 a.m. Hours have gone by listening to Jerome. He's talking now about being "called" to do hair and why: to save his Mama and her girlfriend, Miss Orphelia, from being bald-headed. (The two burned each other's scalps regularly with head-over-the-sink perms.) This is where I belong forever, in Charlene's 24 hour hair joint, listening to Jerome's war stories. Bury me under a hair dryer, Jerome can deliver the eulogy: "Here she rests—fried, dyed, and laid to the side."

hair again. Hair issues are among us. We must tease them out, hold them up to the light, and coax them into art.

And thanks once again to modern technology, which brought us no-lye relaxers and such, chemically altering your tresses is now a process somewhat removed from antiquated notions like self-mutilation and disfigurement, and is just as innocent as a five-dollar nail job. Jewish women iron, Asian women perm, WASPs highlight. So what if black women burn and fry? After all, isn't it impossible to tell where society's force-feeding leaves off and we begin? □



Lisa Jones

GENDER-BENDING AND AN ANCIENT JEWISH CUSTOM

BY M. GARY NEUMAN

If you called my son a “she” or a “cute little girl,” I wouldn’t correct you. He’s mistaken for a girl with such regularity that I’ve long since exchanged my explanations for a smile and silence. Let me explain: There’s a custom among observant Jews to let a male child’s hair grow uncut until age three.

On his third birthday, a huge celebration and “haircutting ceremony” called an “*upsherin*” takes place. At our son’s *upsherin*, close to 200 friends and family attended. Tables of homemade cakes and brownies encircled a large sheet cake on which was written all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Outside, we had a petting zoo; inside, pizza. My wife and I had spent hours preparing.

We poured champagne for a *l’chaim* toast, and the big moment arrived. I said a few words of blessing to Yehuda (expressing his family’s hopes that he grow to bring *nachas* to himself and his people), and I thanked the community for the roles we each play in bringing up one another’s children. Yehuda was presented with his first *kippah* and *tzitzis*, the four-cornered undergarment he would now be encouraged to wear daily. Yehuda’s community—which would continue to support and nurture him through childhood—understood this moment as the beginning of its formal responsibility to educate him in the performance of *mitzvos* [positive commandments], which Yehuda would take his place in assuming.

While we all sang, the head of the Rabbinic Academy cut the first lock of hair, followed by grandparents, cousins and friends. Back home after the party (and a stop at a professional barber), Yehuda marveled at his “big boy” image and watched the video of his party again and



again. I had a sense, for the first time, of how my parents had felt at my *upsherin*.

Upsherin (which means “first cutting”) dates back to ancient times, though the

**“HIS LONG
HAIR
OFTEN
HELPS ME
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A MORE
GENTLE
PARENTING
STYLE.”**

etiology of the custom remains obscure. It seems to be connected to the Jewish law which prohibits the harvesting of a fruit tree before the tree reaches a maturity of three years. By analogy, “pruning” the child’s hair (“hair” and “foliage” are the same word in Greek and Latin) at age three represents the placing of limits on nature—culture is

introduced. The child’s mind is, as it were, first “harvested;” formal education begins. That’s why there’s a Hebrew alphabet on Yehuda’s cake. Jewish mysticism also likens toddlers’ innocence and inherent holiness to that of biblical Nazirites who do not cut their hair or drink wine, and who dedicate themselves to holiness.

I found myself thinking about Nazirites

Editors’ note: As far as LILITH knows, upsherin ceremonies do not exist for three-year-old girls. If you know differently, we would love to hear from you.

one night while I watched my son running down the sandy Miami beach at dusk, his dirty blond hair halfway down his back flying in the wind. That small figure framed against the waves and sunset really did look mystical, angelic, free of all societal restraints. Like a Nazirite—he seemed almost untouched by civilization.

I thought about the implications of Yehuda's long lustrous hair, and about the role that his long hair has played in his short life. Though my wife and I try to be aware of gender bias in our child rearing, I would be lying if I didn't admit that I do, unconsciously, treat my son differently from my daughter.

I expect more from my son. Because he is male, I believe that society generally gives Yehuda the message that he should be more adult, that he can absorb a little more criticism than a female of the same age. I get irritated at his small tantrums or pouts, while the same behavior from my daughter makes me smile and shake my head.

I feel an urgent need to teach Yehuda his Hebrew letters, to have him attempt the Passover questions. I expect him to shake my father's hand in shul and to speak respectfully. In short, I find it more difficult to allow my son to act his age; easier to allow my daughter to act her age.

Too often, if I'm in a cranky mood, I won't allow Yehuda the small defiances and normal outbursts that children display. I'll be

too prepared to criticize and correct. But then it hits me: that hair. The long golden strands covering his neck, back and often his eyes jostle my memory—he's not even three. Just a baby who deserves the right to act like one. He needs my love and acceptance now and forever. I think his long hair often helps me attain a gentler parenting style; hopefully a style that will stick with me in the future.

I do feel that a special bond between my son and myself formed specifically during the year when he was two, and I wonder if this would have been a little different without his long hair and girlish look. It's no coincidence, I am sure, that the "terrible twos" coincide with a boy's hair at its longest.

At Yehuda's *upsherin*, my throat tightened and I felt wistful. For me, a great part of my son's innocence (and maybe mine) is connected to his long, untouched hair. I saved the golden locks, of course, and will show them to anyone who laughs at old family customs. □

M. Gary Neuman is a psychotherapist in private practice in Miami Beach, and the author of several articles and books. His most recent therapeutic program for children of divorce, called Sandcastles, was featured on CBS and NBC Nightly News.

"AS AN ADOPTED CHILD, ALL I WANTED WAS REAL JEWISH HAIR."

Dr. Randy Milden, currently Dean of the College at Haverford College, was adopted as an infant in 1951. During those years in Massachusetts, adoptive parents were required by law to be of the same faith as the child's birth mother. Growing up as a Jew in the working-class mill town of Haverhill, Massachusetts, Milden's blond hair became the stage upon which she rehearsed and acknowledged her torment about her "real" identity.

I always knew intellectually that I was adopted, and that my biological mother was Jewish, but then there was this HAIR—"dirty blond," it was called then, baby-fine, thin, wispy hair. To myself I called it "shiksa hair." I didn't know who my biological father was.

The Jewish community in Haverhill, Massachusetts, was a major factor in my life. It was tightly knit, 300 families. From early on, I longed to "look Jewish," which to me meant getting rid of "the hair," meant having real, dark curly Jewish hair.

One of my earliest memories is being shlepped to Helen's Beauty Parlor for "body permanents"—it was either 5 perms before the age of 4, or 4 before the age of 5. I would sit there, this tiny girl with terrible hair, all the ladies and smells and rollers, capes, such scenes. And then I would leave Helen's with these Shirley Temple curls—but by the time we got home, my hair would be all straight and horrible again. It was sad. It was tragic. My mother really wanted a little girl with curls—so this was her tragedy as well as mine. I was an only child.

By the time I hit adolescence—with bar mitzvah parties constantly—I would go to synagogue each week with dirty hair (but with a hat on), and then walk down to Helen's Beauty Parlor and get my hair washed and set. It felt like a lonely journey from shul to Helen's.

By the time my mother picked me up, it seemed like hours. I would cry and scream about how my hair was "wrong"—and it was somehow my mother's fault. Red-eyed, I'd get picked up to go to the bar mitzvah party.

I never thought of any larger "blond American ideal," but just Haverhill with its Irish Catholics (also dark-haired) and Jews. All I wanted was to "look Jewish," to belong. All my cousins had much better hair. I knocked myself out trying to be Jewish—I even won the Rabbi Abraham Isaac Jacobson Leadership award in confirmation class.

I had friends who ironed their curly thick frizzy hair so that they'd look like WASP icons—that was so perplexing.

I first met my biological mother when I was in my mid-20s. I walked in the door and asked to use her bathroom, and there were all these products for baby-fine, thin hair, terrible hair. What an irony—the "shiksa hair" was Jewish! I came out of the bathroom and announced to her: "Everything else is negotiable, but I'll never forgive you for the hair."

She laughed.

All those times that people had said to me, "Gee, you don't look Jewish." If only once someone had said the opposite—that would have been the best day of my life.

—Susan Schmur



PIA SWEDEN, Girlfriend #1

BLOND BRAIDS AT AUSCHWITZ

BY LIVIA E. BITTON JACKSON



PHOTO: ARTHUR MAGUIN
Note: A model was used for this photo.

The following memoir is excerpted from *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* by Carol Rittner and John Roth [Paragon House, 1993]. Livia E. Bitton Jackson, the author of the account below, was deported to Auschwitz with her Orthodox Hungarian family in May, 1944. She had just gotten a bright yellow Schwinn bicycle with shiny chrome handlebars for her 13th birthday. Life changed overnight.

Before the Soviet Army liberated the camp in January, 1945, the Germans emptied out nearly everything from Auschwitz's storehouses. Still, seven tons of shorn human hair—only a small part of the total collected at Auschwitz—was found. The rest had been sold to German companies that transformed hair into mattresses and felt.

Sometime during the fourth night, the train comes to a halt. We are suddenly awakened by the noise of sliding doors thrown open and cold night air rushing into the wagon. A huge sign catches my eye: AUSCHWITZ. . . An officer in gray SS uniform stands facing the lines of women and children. Dogs straining on short leashes held by SS soldiers flank him on both sides. He stops each line and regroups them. Some to his right and some to his left. Then he orders each group to march on. I tremble as I stand before him. But he looks at me with a soft look in friendly eyes.

"Goldene Haar!" he exclaims as he takes one of my long braids into his hand. I am not certain I heard it right. Did he say "golden hair" about my braids?

"Bist du Judin?" Are you Jewish?

The question startles me. "Yes, I am Jewish."

"Wie alt bist du?" How old are you?

"I am thirteen."

"You are tall for your age. Is this your mother?" He touches Mommy lightly on the shoulder: "You go with your mother." With his riding stick he parts my Aunt Szeren from my mother's embrace and gently shoves Mommy and me to the group moving to the right.

"Go, and remember, from now on you are sixteen."

Our silent, rapid march ends. By fives we file through the entrance of a long, flat gray building.

"Sich auskleiden! Alles herunter!" Get undressed, everybody! Take off everything! "Los!"

The room is swarming with SS men. Get undressed, here? In front of the men? No one moved.

"Didn't you hear? Take off your clothes. All your clothes!"

I feel the slap of a whip on my shoulders and meet a young SS

soldier's glaring eyes.

"Hurry! Strip fast. You will be shot. Those having any clothes on in five minutes will be shot!"

I look at Mommy. She nods. Let's get undressed. I stare directly ahead as I take off my clothes. I am afraid. By not looking at anyone I hope no one will see me. I have never seen my mother in the nude. How awful it must be for her. I hesitate before removing my bra. My breasts are two growing buds, taut and sensitive. I can't have anyone see them. I decide to leave my bra on.

Just then a shot rings out. The charge is ear-shattering. Some women begin to scream. Others weep. I quickly take my bra off.

It is chilly and frightening. Clothes lie in mounds on the cement floor. We are herded, over a thousand, shivering, humiliated nude bodies, into the next hall, even chillier. More foreboding. It is darker here. Barer.

"Los! Schneller, blode Lumpen!" Faster. Move faster, idiotic whores.

We are lined up and several husky girls in gray cloaks begin shaving our hair—on our heads, under the arms, and on the pubic area. My long, thick braids remain braided and while the shaving machine shears my scalp, the hair remains hanging, tugging at the roots. The pain of the heavy braid tugging mercilessly at the yet unshaven roots brings tears to my eyes. I pray for the shaving to be done quickly. As my blonde tresses lie in a large heap on the ground, the indifferent hair butcher remarks: "A heap of gold." In a shudder I remember the scene at the selection—the SS officer's admiration of my "golden hair," the separation from Aunt Szeren. Where is she now? Is her hair shorn off and is she stripped of her clothes, too? Is she very frightened? Poor, darling, Szeren neni. If my hair were shorn before the selection, we would be together with her now. We would not have been separated. It's because of my blonde hair that Mommy and I were sent to the other side. Poor

darling. If only we could have stayed together!

The haircut has a startling effect on every woman's appearance. Individuals become a mass of bodies. Height, stoutness, or slimness: There is no distinguishing factor—it is the absence of hair which transformed individual women into like bodies. Age and other personal differences melt away. Facial expressions disappear. Instead, a blank, senseless stare emerges on a thousand faces of one naked, unappealing body. In a matter of minutes even the physical aspect of our numbers seems reduced—there is less of a substance to our dimensions. We become a monolithic mass. Inconsequential.

The shaving had a curious effect. A burden was lifted. The burden of individuality. Of associations. Of identity. Of the recent past. Girls who have continually wept at separation from parents, sisters and brothers now began to giggle at the strange appearance of their friends. Some shriek with laughter. Others begin calling out names of friends to see if they can recognize them shorn and

stripped. When response to names comes forth from completely transformed bodies, recognition is loud, hysterical. Wild, noisy embraces. Shrieking, screaming disbelief. Some girls bury their faces in their palms and howl, rolling on the ground.

"Was ist los?" What's the matter? A few swings of the SS whip restores order.

I look for Mommy. I find her easily. The haircut has not changed her. I have been used to seeing her in Orthodox kerchiefs, every bit of hair carefully tucked away. Avoiding a glance at her body, I marvel at the beauty of her face. With all accessories gone her

perfect features are even more striking. Her high forehead, large blue eyes, classic nose, shapely lips and elegant cheekbones are more evident than ever.

She does not recognize me as I stand before her. Then a sudden smile of recognition: "Elli! It's you. You look just like Bubbie. Strange, I have never seen the resemblance before. What a boyish face! They cut off your beautiful braids" □

THE HAIR SHAVING HAS A CURIOUS EFFECT. THE BURDEN OF IDENTITY IS LIFTED.

HAIR APPARENT: CONSIDERING ULTRA-ORTHODOXY AT 17

Susan Josephs, 23, is a staff writer at New York's Jewish Week. Formerly she was an editorial intern at Ms. magazine, and before that editor-in-chief of U.C.L.A.'s Jewish monthly, Ha'Am. When Josephs was 17—six short years ago—"two roads diverged in a yellow wood" and she—she took the road to the left, and that's been hairy.

When I was a child, my mother always made me cut my hair short. I have very thick, curly, dark, quintessentially "Jewish" hair. I love my Jewish hair, and I've always wanted it long. It was a constant, huge struggle between my mother and me. At 14, I began to grow my hair long, and my mother didn't interfere.

My hair became an extension of myself—how I was going to establish autonomy in my life. Sometimes when I'm frustrated, when I'm thinking and have a creative idea, I touch my hair—it's an external thing that's much more than a physical characteristic to me. Hair means independent thought; it means freedom.

When I graduated from high school in San Diego, I was in the depths of a spiritual quandary. I grew up in an Orthodox family, but went to public high school. I was also very involved in the Orthodox youth organization, N.C.S.Y.

In other words, I was fragmented: In public school I was doing theater, I had friends who knew nothing about my life in Judaism. In N.C.S.Y. there was a correct "brand" of Judaism—the ultimate thing to do was to observe everything halakhically, and to go study for a year in Israel when you finished high school to "find yourself."

I compromised by going to Brovender's yeshiva in Jerusalem for a summer. They have the reputation as the yeshiva with the most rigorous study program for women—at that time, they were the only yeshiva teaching Gemorrah to women.

I wanted to figure out who I was. I was very seriously trying to picture myself taking on all the trappings of a Strictly Orthodox Person. There was a lot of social pressure to wear skirts every day, and that was already oppressive to me. But in conversations with other students, it was—"Of course we'll cover our hair; when you get married you HAVE to cover your hair," and that's what really terrified me.

The skirts I was doing. Grappling with the Laws of Purity I was doing. But what really struck terror into my heart, what really made me angry, was the thought that I would have to take my hair THAT I LOVE and conceal it. That would mean

suffocating. It would mean stripping me of me.

That was my critical watershed point because it was the only thing I knew without question: I would not be covering my hair. From that certainty, I looked at other facets of Orthodoxy.

Since beginning to grow my hair out at 14, my hair has been long. People describe me: "She has this kind of—Hair." "You can't miss her, she's the woman with the HAIR." "She has this HAIR." I wouldn't say it's beautiful, but I unquestionably love my long, dark, curly, thick, quintessentially Jewish hair. People tease me, "How come you never want to do anything new to your hair?"

I love it long—the longer it gets, the freer I am.

—Susan Schmur

Braids

Friday morning
I braid my hair
in front of the mirror
cannot see behind my head
think of braids
I might have made
on a Friday morning
kneading dough
separating it into strands
& braiding them
into a crown
round as a rose
as only our villiage did
for Sabbath bread
the whole world would know
here is a challah from Tels
taste it

— *Layle Silbert*

Hair &



Hair

Ardently down the backs of cousins
in Poland until it brushed their ribs
the silkworm cousins grew the hair
Sarah Fishoff Silverman peddled
in Missouri.
In Sedalia meager enterprising waves
swelled over coils and switches
off Polish Jews, hair grown
to drape on Sarah's forearm.
She walked the town selling hair
of those who stayed behind,
sticking her other palm out with coins,
trusting strangers to make change
for the hair that caught the fancy
of stylish Midwestern ladies,
the curls and braids that pleased the Nazis
who trimmed their lampshades with Jewish hair,
fashioned bellcords to summon butlers
from my cousins' hair that grew no more.

— *Maxine Silverman*

Ballad of the Washed Hair

The stones on the mountain are always
awake and white.

In the dark town, angels on duty
are changing shifts.

A girl who has washed her hair
asks the hard world, as if it were Samson,
where is it weak, what is its secret.

A girl who has washed her hair
puts new clouds on her head.

The scent of her drying hair is
prophesying in the streets and among stars.

The nervous air between the night trees
starts to relax.

The thick telephone book of world history
closes.

— *Yehuda Amichai*

Desire

Brushing Out My Daughter's Hair

Brushing out my daughter's dark
silken hair before the mirror
I see the gray gleaming on my head,
the silver-haired servant behind her. Why is it
just as we begin to go
they being to arrive, the fold in my neck
clarifying as the fine bones of her
hips sharpen? As my skin shows
its dry pitting, she opens like a small
pale flower on the tip of a cactus;
as my last chances to bear a child
are falling through my body, the duds among them,
her full purse of eggs, round and
firm as hard-boiled yolks, is about
to snap its clasp. I brush her tangled
fragrant hair at bedtime. It's an old
story—the oldest we have on our planet—
the story of replacement.

—Sharon Olds



Dead Women

return
to brush
their hair.

They use our combs,
careful not to break
the teeth.

They borrow our brushes,
leaving a trace of hair
in the bristles.

They enter our beds
to feel the warmth of a man
they have almost forgotten,

but not forgotten.
They try on our gloves and soft
scarves.

They try on our nightgowns
and turn slowly
in front of the mirror.

In the morning we wake,
smooth out the gowns and scarves
in the drawer, sit in front

of the mirror.

We raise the brush or comb to our heads,
stop, notice the hair,

continue.

—Siv Cedering Fox

I'm Letting It Grow

Mother, I'm letting it grow,
enjoying letting it grow—
the thick brown hairs
on my thighs
you made me shave
for beaches and parades.

I'm letting it grow, Ma,
dark and curling as creeping ivy
to see if there's a man alive
who'll have the guts
to walk with me in shorts
down streets, in public places.

And if there's not—
I'll dye it black
and grow it thick and wilder;
naked hair will trail
like banners through the crowds—
all eyes glued to these gorilla legs
as they plod forth like Kong,
hairy and alone
but in their own direction.

—Nancy Blotter



Ballad of the Washed Hair is from *Selected Poetry of Yehudah Amichai*, translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, HarperPerennial, 1986. *Hair* is from *Voices within the Ark*, Avon, 1980. *Braids* is from *Sarah's Daughters Sing*, edited by Henny Wenkart, Jewish Women's Resource Center, National Council of Jewish Women, NYC, 1990. *Mother I'm Letting it Grow* and *Dead Women* is from *Rapunzel, Rapunzel*, edited by Kathryn Maachan Aal, Mcbooks Press, Ithaca, NY, 1980. *Brushing Out My Daughter's Hair* is from *The Dead and The Living* by Sharon Olds, Knopf, 1984.

HAIR, ISRAEL:

JEWISH WIG LAWS

BY SUSAN SCHNUR

What does *halakha* [Jewish law] say about women being required to cover their hair? According to Haviva Krasner-Davidson (a woman with special expertise in this matter) the answer begins with the Bible, which gives us but two relevant hair passages:

First, Deuteronomy (21:10-14) tells us that when a woman is taken captive during war, it is mandatory that her captor cut off her hair. One month later, "after she has mourned her mother and father," to quote the Bible, her captor can marry her. The hair principle extracted from this, explains Krasner-Davidson, "is that hair is sexually alluring, which is why the captor must cut his captive's hair—so that he won't be attracted to her during the month that she is not yet his wife." [Most male *halakhic* scholars have a special gene that allows them to stay focused during discussions like this, and not get waylaid by random umbrage.]

Second, Numbers (5:11-31) discusses the infamous *sotah*, she who is accused of adultery, and is brought before the high priest who "*parah*"s her hair. Krasner-Davidson explains that the meaning of *parah* is murky—is it "loosen" or "uncover?" In either case, she says, later generations (of hairsplitters) use this reference as the source which conveys that "having one's hair exposed was shameful during biblical times."

Next the Mishna (*Ketuvot 7*) comes up with a surprisingly severe Q and A: Is there any instance in which a woman, divorced by her husband, does not receive compensatory financial support [*ketubah* dues]? Answer: Yes—the woman who goes out in public with her hair uncovered does not receive support.

However, adds Krasner-Davidson, despite this harsh Mishnaic view of the hairy woman, the rabbis here understand hair covering to be more a matter of custom than law.

The Gemarrah, though (*Ketuvot 72A-B*), disagrees. Hair covering, it maintains, is law, not custom. Moreover, it's a "practice of biblical origin, which makes transgressing it even more serious," explains Krasner-Davidson. This quarrel—is it law or custom that prescribes hair covering—is important, because it is the pivot upon which centuries of rotating religious hair injunctions are mounted. (If you're Mishna-prone, you interpret hair-covering more leniently; if you're Gemarrah-prone, more stringently.)

During the Middle Ages, married Jewish women in Europe

covered their hair with scarves [*tikhlach*—but then again so did non-Jewish women. *Halakhic* headhunters, then, find it hairy teasing out whether medieval scarf-wearing had more to do with Jewish injunctions or with conformity to larger, non-Jewish standards of "female modesty." This becomes significant to later hair arbiters whose rulings distinguish between general custom vs. Jewish law.

By the 16th century, wigs were on the scene. They were fashionable in [Christian] France, and Jewish women throughout Europe (presumably those who were more well-to-do) jumped on the bandwagon. *Shaytlach* [wigs] were considered more toothsome than *tikhlach* [head scarves], so Jewish women's embrace of them represented a kind of feminist revolt. Indeed, says Krasner-Davidson, "Most rabbinic authorities denounced *shaytl*-wearing as tantamount to going with one's head uncovered, since a *shaytl* looked just as sexually alluring (if not more so) than a woman's own hair."

"Rabbi Moshe Isserles ruled in the 16th century, however," continues Krasner-Davidson, "that a wig is admissible, and it's his opinion that was accepted by the Ashkenazi community." (A recent exhibit at the Jewish Museum included European *shaytlach* that looked like cottony Raggedy Ann mops—it's hard to imagine them as a step up from *anything*.)

In one of those paradoxical reversals that define tonsorial social history, ultra-Orthodox communities today consider wigs—not scarves—to be the more stringent practice. Even though a wig can cost well over \$1000 and look positively sirenic, a woman who ties up all her hair and covers it with a hat or scarf will receive, says Krasner-Davidson, "disapproving looks." She adds: "Recently, in some ultra-Orthodox communities, rabbis have issued proclamations telling women that they must wear hats on top of their *shaytlach*." [Author's comment: Oy.]

Finally we have the question of whether hair is *ervah* [a part of

THERE ARE LOTS OF RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS —SOME CONFLICTING WITH OTHERS— OF THE INJUNCTION FOR JEWISH WOMEN TO COVER THEIR HAIR.



the body that, in Orthodox practice, must always be covered in public—like breasts, thighs, shoulders], or is it something that, when covered, simply serves to state that a woman is married and thus not available to other men. Some hold that hair is not *ervah* (since a man is permitted to see his wife's hair even when she's sexually off-limits to him); others see hair as "straight *ervah*, so that a woman who does not cover her hair is seen as promiscuous (as if you had your breasts showing), not just immodest," says Krasner-Davidson.

Must women *halahkically* keep their hair covered even in their own homes? Some say yes, explains Krasner-Davidson. "They base this on the story in the Talmud [*Yoma* 47A] about a woman named Kimhit who had seven sons all of whom became high priests. When the rabbis asked her how she merited this, she answered that in her whole life, even the walls of her house never saw a strand of her hair." (Krasner-Davidson adds: "This story is also the source of the custom in some ultra-Orthodox communities for married women to keep their heads shaved.")

The most common at-home custom for very religious women, continues Krasner-Davidson, "is to keep their hair covered in public, but not when they are alone with their families." This practice is based on the most widely accepted current interpretation of hair: that showing it does not constitute *ervah*; just "female immodesty."

On one of the many other hands, however, some women will show their hair in their homes even in front of male non-relatives. This is because "some consider this *mitzvah* as connected to place

and not to the woman herself," explains Krasner-Davidson. "Therefore, if she is in her home, she does not need to wear her covering. The Talmudic source for this practice is striking: 'If the fact that women must cover their hair even in their own courtyard is true, then no daughter would have married even Abraham our Forefather.' The implication is that this is *too much* to ask of any woman."

In our century, "covering hair has fallen out of practice in many observant communities," concludes Krasner-Davidson. "Some wives of well-respected rabbis—even those considered 'giants' of their generations—did not or do not cover their hair. Those who say that hair-covering is more a matter of custom (rather than law) point to the social mores of our times, arguing that since it is not considered immodest for women in general society to keep their heads uncovered, then head-covering no longer applies."

Though this author's head was giving off steam through a good part of this *halakhic* discussion, Krasner-Davidson's head stayed cool. "I agree with hats on top of *shaytls*," she says. "Gorgeous wigs defeat the whole purpose of 'modesty,' meeting the letter of the law, but not its spirit. I get upset when *halakhic* loopholes become the highest standard. With wigs, you've defeated the idea of conveying whether you're married, since they often look so perfect you don't know they are wigs. I like to dress modestly, and to convey that I'm married. It makes men take me and my mind more seriously; they don't look at me as an object. And that let's me have an easier time talking with men." □

Black~Jewish Daughter

Lisa Jones, Village Voice staffer, is the daughter of two pretty famous people: black nationalist Amiri Baraka, and white Jew Hettie Jones. The following is excerpted from her new book, bulletproof diva: tales of race, sex, and hair [Doubleday, 1994].

how i invented multiculturalism. It was easier than you think. First I arrived, fatter than an A&P chicken, just another black child in New York City born to a Jewish woman and a Negro man. At the wee age of three I followed my sister to the Church of All Nations school on the Lower East Side. For many years I thought the entire world was a band of Latin, black, and Chinese children dancing around the maypole and singing "Que Bonita Bandera" and the few Ukrainians who served us lunch.

Endured my first Toni home permanent at age six to have an Afro like Angela Davis. This continued for four years, then thanks to chemical overload or natural progression, my hair napped up enough to make a 'fro on its own.

Ate potato kugel and boiled chicken with Aunt Fannie, the only Jewish relative who didn't disown my mother for marrying a black man. Eighty-year-old Aunt Fannie stayed in

Flatbush through the Caribbean migration and was known to have made only one comment about her niece's interracial marriage: "How do you wash that hair?" she said, leaning over her grandnieces, still in grade school, and their enormous globes of nappiness.

hair always and forever. We ate lunch, the tape recorder was rolling, and now the legendary jazz singer would tell me her life story. This was her preface: "When I was a little girl, about 13 or so, they told me that a woman's pride and glory was her hair. Then they told me mine wasn't any good. I guess I went to war to absolve myself of this grief."

Not, "Back when I used to gig at the Five Spot . . ." or "Coleman Hawkins sure could blow . . ." but, everything I've done with my hair explains everything I've done with my life and my art. This wasn't an epiphany for me as much as a confirmation of something I've believed for a while. Hair is the be-all and end-all. Everything I know about American history I learned from looking at black people's hair. It's the perfect metaphor for the African experiment here: the price of the ticket (for a journey no one

(continued on page 35)

"Jewish women
iron, Asian
women perm,
WASPs
highlight, what
do Black
women do?"

Trans- gressive Hair!

THE LAST FRONTIER

Day 1: Here I am at Yiddish music camp (KlezKamp)—five days with 450 other people, extraordinary programs, so much Jewish talent, brains, attitude. Despite this atmosphere of abundance, however, everyone's fixated on this one thing: this gender-ambiguous person. Is it a male or female? This person is on and off stage all evening (as a microphone techie), so you can really stare.

Day 2: I'm told her name is Jennifer. Now it seems obvious—she's a woman with a full beard. It's amazing how dominating her quiet presence is. Everybody's whispering about her: Why doesn't she shave? What's her story?

Day 3: By today she's got people fascinated by their fascination: How is it that a little bit of hair is so damn interesting? Here we have the hottest Klezmer bands around, witty instructors, great food, and everyone's walking around: "Help me out with this HAIR thing."

Day 4: Lunch today at a table that ends up all female. This young woman says: "There are lots of women here who would look exactly like her if they didn't remove their facial hair. Like me." (No! I would never have guessed. Now looking close I see: she must shave. Golly.) Then she challenges all 12 of us at the table: "If you've never bleached or removed hair from your face, raise your hand." No one's hand goes up. "See?" she says. I realize so many dark-haired women must walk around with some low-level shame; little leaching secrets. Who is this Jennifer person? None of us at this table, we decide, would ever have her courage.

Day 5: The last day of camp. A woman mentions how attractive Jennifer is. I agree. She looks like Jesus—mournful doe eyes, gentle body carriage. Courage is so attractive. We actually don't see Jennifer's beard anymore: just this beautiful face that presents itself unapologetically, just the way it is, to the world. It's amazing what an education this face—wordlessly—has given many of us this week.

The lessons Jennifer Miller taught me—just by being in my world for a few days, walking around like any other person—were profound. She refused to apologize for herself. I realized, in experiencing her presence, how rare that quality is in women. It was liberating to just be around her. She's what you might call a Jew's Jew, in the sense that she's the kind of outsider (like Moses, say) who is capable of "seeing," of applying pressure upon a whole social structure, of pushing the envelope towards the checks-and-balances of diversity. To be a woman who likes her body the way God made it—this is treason; wanton, male, too independent.

Jennifer Miller told me her story, in several conversations:

I grew up in Hartford, Connecticut where both of my parents were college professors. I was a tomboy, very athletic, interested in juggling, clowning, gymnastics, dancing, acting—pretty much in that order. By the time I started to get a little beard hair, around age 17, I had a strong core, particularly from my mother and grandmother, that people should be who they are: true to themselves.

My mother and grandmother were both educators, tough dynamic women who stressed the individuality of each learner in a classroom. My grandmother, famous in her field, specialized in developing diagnostic materials for children with perceptual reading disabilities. Her classrooms (she had her own center for educational therapy) were all individualized instruction. My mother, inheriting her mother's educational philosophy, fought the public school system in Hartford and eventually got every teacher re-trained to teach in open classrooms. So the message I got was fundamentally non-conformist: it's appropriate, important, beautiful to be who you are; everyone is special and right; let's encourage different ways of being. Their perspectives had a lot to do with strengthening my character. What I understood was: read at your own speed, do math according to your ability, and by extension, I guess, love your own face.

It took 10 years for my facial hair to grow in. My mother, with whom I was very close, died when I was 21 (she was 48; cancer), so she and I didn't really work out my hair thing. For years I didn't even talk to my closest friends about my beard—it was sort of taboo. I harbored fear and insecurity; I did not blossom overnight into proud beard ownership. At first it was just a few hairs, then a few more, then more: it was not at the beginning clear that this was going to be a beard.

Through these same years, though—I'm now 34—I was coming out as a lesbian, getting involved in issues of the 1970s: equal rights, "the matriarchy overthrowing the patriarchy," this whole new aesthetic of reclaiming nature and naturalness. My beard grew really slowly, so I had a long time to think and change alongside of it. By the time I created my own theater [CIRCUS AMOK, a 12-person one-ring traveling feminist circus complete with musicians, jugglers, acrobats], I had developed a lesbian feminist ideology, and a circus image to go with it. I was growing up artistically in the East Village of New York, learning how to get away from the tyranny of gendered roles in performance. Women could dress like sword-throwing males, etc.

One day when I was 20, my grandmother made an appointment for me for electrolysis. I held this rubber rod to ground the jolts of electricity; this needle prodded my face. It felt like mutilation, a losing battle. I felt defeated. I felt like a traitor to myself, to the cause—as I was beginning to understand it. If the electrolysis was a one-time permanent removal, I would have gotten rid of the beard

BY SUSAN SCHNUR

(it's not; you have to go back many times). Anyway, I was beginning to see my beard as a process, not a medical condition. The questions that arose for me were about my relationship to the outside world; not my relationship to my body. About electrolysis I thought: I don't think I should have to make this change. This is a feminist issue; women's power in relation to their bodies. When I'm asked hormone questions I get angry. It's tedious, patronizing. It's prosthetic advice: You're definitely not all right the way you are; here's how you can change your defect, become normal. Yes, there have been times that I've shaved—to get employment, to travel with Ben and Jerry's circus, but it never really worked for me. There's a beard line that makes me feel embarrassed and nervous. People are thinking, "That's a woman who wants to hid her imperfection but she can't."

I walk around with a tremendous amount of anxiety, but I can't easily separate out "beard anxiety" from general "starving artist anxiety" that so many people I know walk around with. There have been painful and depressed times in relation to the beard. For example, I have a fear of going to the bathroom in a public place. I always bring someone with me so people can hear my female voice and they won't look at the beard and say, "What are YOU doing in here!" I have to steel myself to walk in and be seen. There are times I literally don't pee. When I'm traveling outside of New York I pee in a jar in the car.

Recently in an airport, I used the men's bathroom for the first time. I just went in—it seemed less scary than the women's room. When I came out of the stall, a man was at the sink. We looked at each other in the mirror and he didn't gasp, so I felt somewhat comfortable in there. Many public places are hard—lines in movies, stores—people have the opportunity to stare. I have to be so alert all the time. It's hard.

My biggest difficulty is financial—there are so many jobs I can't get with a beard. I have a desire to teach like my mom and grandmother, but how can I invest in an education for myself when I could never get a teaching job with a beard? I did, many years ago, teach in an after school program, but then I stopped for a while, my beard grew fuller. I couldn't return to it. It's too hard to approach administrators, to have so many points against me. So this has definitely affected my choice of work and community. It's also very hard to go to new places, to leave New York. I've often wished things were different. In my 20s, I pretty much intellectually withdrew from the straight world, decided not to go to college, not to climb a career ladder. It was much easier to have my alternative look within an alternative community. It's different for me now: I feel able and eager to participate in all kinds of communities.



"The message from my mother and grandmother was non conformist—be who you are".

-Jennifer Miller

A few years ago I worked at a Coney Island sideshow as "Zenobia, the Bearded Lady." It was heavy; something I thought I'd never do. But I got to talk about the world being full of women who have beards or at least the potential to have a beard if only they would reach out and live up to this potential. I talk about saving money and energy on waxing, plucking, electrolysis. I let it be known that I choose to let my beard grow; it's not a curse; it's a choice. I educate. I say, "I'm not the Other—I'm You, I'm just bearded."

Interestingly, coming on-stage as the bearded lady wasn't different from people staring at me anyway. But, like gay drag behavior on stage, calling yourself the bearded lady is an empowered response to being looked at. It justifies my being looked at; makes me feel safer, in control of the staring. I can express things with my own timing. I can act instead of react.

There's also the issue of becoming what one looks like. I am so often assumed to be a male on the street, and I respond to that. For that moment I am in fact a male. This widens my construction of my own gender. A woman with a beard is a bigger gender than a woman without a beard. So my character is affected, my interaction with society creates my gender, and I feel consequently that I'm something that's a little different from just a woman.

Being bearded gives me lots of power. Power from feeling I have no secrets, the striving for womanly perfection is over. The power that comes from being liberated from going for anything mainstream. As much as I sometimes WISH pluckers and shavers were at this place with me, I don't think they should do what I do unless they're ready. It's hard to do what I do unless you start when you're young, because it takes many years to grow a full beard, and you have all that time to grow and develop strategies along the way.

Having a beard has given me cause to become radical, of course, to have courage. As I get older, I get more and more committed to the beard. Its fibers are woven in deeply with who I am. The cost of giving it up now is a cost of selfhood. I'm wearing this beard as a political act, because I have some hopes for a changed cultural future. I wear the beard because I intend to effect change with it. Therefore, on some level, I'm teaching, doing political work. I couldn't maintain this very difficult thing if I wasn't coming at it from many angles: a subversive act, a teaching tool, a lifelong conceptual art piece, it's who I am. □

A 30-minute film about Jennifer Miller, *Juggling Gender* by Tami Gold, can be rented (\$60) through Women Make Movies (212-925-0606; FAX: 212-925-2052). Jennifer also, for a fee, shows the film herself and talks to audiences afterwards. To book her, call: 718-486-7432, CIRCUS AMOK. Jennifer's traveling one-ring circus, can be booked at the same number.



LILITH readers: You've let us know that you particularly treasure, and find empowering, articles about Jewish foremothers—from biblical matriarchs through 20th century heroines. From time to time, therefore, we'll be highlighting such material under the banner "Foremothers." Do save these articles—eventually you'll have your own Jewish "motherline" reader.

TWO MONOLOGUES: BY ZEISE WILD WOLF



I AM LEAH, ADONAY, and my eyes are weak. All my life I have been not right—weak of eyes instead of beautiful of form, weak of eyes instead of beautiful to see; an eldest girl instead of an eldest boy, an eldest girl instead of a youngest girl. Even Rakhel [Rachel], Adonay, my baby sister, who loved me in our earliest years, felt bitterness toward me in the end. Even Ya'akov [Jacob], husband by my own father's design, believed I had helped to trick him, Adonay, and despised me to the end.

Only my children saw me, Adonay, and only they and my handmaid Zilpah loved and cared for me. In many ways, Adonay, I am a weak woman, but I am strong in love, and I love until death—a dangerous combination, Adonay, perhaps most dangerous in a woman. For I loved my sister Rakhel and I loved Ya'akov, but me they did not love. My eyes are weak but I see much, Adonay, and though I tried to make a place for myself, Adonay, I never belonged in my own home.

From the beginning you saw my pain and did what you could to help me. You opened my womb and gave me seven children, Adonay, and you made my Rakhel barren for many years. But even this could not help me,

Adonay, and the names of my children tell my story. By their names I say prayers, Adonay. Through their names I tell my people the story of my heart:

R'euven, meaning "may my husband please love me." Shim'on, "God has heard that I am hated." Levi, "now my husband will join me." But three sons to no avail. Thus I left off hoping and "I praised you," Adonay, in Y'hudah—for you stayed by me when I was otherwise alone.

And when much later I birthed again, Adonay, I "cleared my debt" with Y'ssachar, for Zilpah my maid had already birthed Gad and Asher on my behalf. I prayed one last time with Z'vulun, "let my husband love me, dwell with me," but with Dinah, my final child, I accepted your "judgment." I have given to Ya'akov as much as Zilpah and Rakhel and Rakhel's maid Bilhah all together—six sons, Adonay—but I have not received my husband's love. May my story be heard.

I learned to draw sustenance from what I received, Adonay. Above everything, I gained satisfaction in my handmaid Zilpah and the love of my children, especially, Adonay, in the love of my firstborn, R'euven. R'euven, R'euven. My first hope, my last hope. Who but R'euven would bring mandrakes for me to make Ya'akov

For the biblical antecedents of this story, see Genesis 29-35.

love me . . . who but R'euven would see with clear eyes that my husband did not love me? R'euven hurt for me, Adonay. In his heart there was pain for the loneliness of his mother, and he brought comfort to me, Adonay, like no one else. If only that he saw me was enough.

Many of the nights that I was alone, Adonay, I tried to understand why Rakhel and Ya'akov hated me as they did. Perhaps their hatred was closer to guilt. Inside, did Rakhel perhaps feel badly for me, Adonay, so lonely without love—in a tent only calling distance from her own? When we were little children, Adonay, we had a story between us that we told over and over, of the man who would come and love us both, because we would not stand to be parted. Maybe she was sad, Adonay, if she remembered our story. Maybe she cried, Adonay, because we had our one man and he separated us more than two men from different tribes could ever have done.

Did she weep, Adonay, that we came to say nothing together but bitter words? Or perhaps her hatred was really anger, Adonay, that I bore six sons and a daughter, and she only two sons, and only at the very end, Adonay, after more than twenty barren years. But it is also possible, Adonay, that she saw nothing at all, how else could she have taken those mandrakes from me, granting me in exchange but a single night—only one—with my own husband?

Now, since Rakhel has died, Adonay, Ya'akov speaks with me, but my nights are no less lonely. One night, however, Adonay, Ya'akov called to me from the tent door in a hesitant voice, and I let him in with gentleness. He told me his story of Esav, his brother, of whom I know only a little, only that which poured then from my husband's mouth.

Now on lonely nights, Adonay, I think of how Ya'akov bought his brother's birthright, with a bowl of lentils and some bread. Ya'akov cried to tell it, Adonay, and I comforted him, but only with my arms. For that night, in my heart, Adonay, I finally understood. They are of one way—Ya'akov and Rakhel. Esav and I are of another. Esav traded his life for a single bowl of food; I traded my mandrakes—my chance for love—for a single night with my husband. And I cry, Adonay, for the cycles that turn. And I pray in my heart, Adonay, that the circles you spin are for the good.

I AM RAKHEL, ADONAY.

I went to the well one morning and saw with my own eyes the man who would be my husband, many years hence. I knew I wanted him, and I received what I wanted. But I did not receive what I wanted in the way that I wanted it.

When I was very young my mother died. I cried and cried but my mother did not live again, and Leah my sister loved me and raised me and comforted me, so that after a time I loved Leah in my mother's place.

Leah and I had a story we used to tell again and again, that one day a man would arrive at our house and he would marry us both and we would live with him, all of us together, all of us happy. But when I saw Ya'akov, I knew this story to be impossible. I loved Ya'akov. When he kissed me I knew he loved me too, and Leah would need to find someone else. How could I have known that my father Laban would make this impossible? Father, Father. A more stupid man never was. All of Leah's pain is from Father, though she thinks it is I, and perhaps Ya'akov, who are to blame.

But we loved each other, Ya'akov and I. Loved and understood each other. We thought the same, planned the same, were, so it sometimes felt, of one flesh. What could we do? Not love each other? That would have been as impossible as asking the wind to stop blowing. And it would have been absurd. Then no one would have been happy, and at least the way we loved, Ya'akov and I had our moments. But even those were few, as Father had guaranteed.

Many children were not my due, though I longed with all my soul to bear fruit like Leah, to fill the tent with little men, their sweet voices and faces everywhere I looked. But no, instead to Leah and Ya'akov seven, and six of them boys! But to me not even one for many many years, and then precious, dear to my heart Yosef. And years later, so many years later, another—and he on my deathbed.

Ya'akov loved me, he didn't care how many children I had for him. But I cared. The only time Ya'akov became angry with me was when I cried out to him—Give me children! Then he knew I hadn't yet taken his Adonay to be my God. To make me "pay," he took Bilhah and she conceived and birthed. Then I knew you, Adonay, but still Ya'akov took Bilhah once again, and again she conceived and birthed. After that a little time passed, and then we were once again happy. .

I didn't want to hurt Leah, but why did she have to make everything so hard? She knew that Ya'akov loved me—why did she try and try to make him love her?

AS CHILDREN,
WE HAD A STORY
BETWEEN US
THAT WE TOLD
OVER AND OVER,
OF A MAN WHO
WOULD COME
SOME DAY AND
LOVE US BOTH,
BECAUSE WE
COULD NOT STAND
TO BE PARTED.

Foolish woman, she thought herbs could bring her Ya'akov's love, but mandrakes bring babies, not love—everyone knows that. I needed them more than she. And then how she used to say that Ya'akov was *her* husband! He was my husband, and hers only from deceit. Didn't she know that?

One evening, though, I passed by her tent and I heard her crying. Listening, I thought it was my own heart that had broken. I suddenly remembered a time when we were very young. Father had punished me and I cried so hard that my head throbbed. Leah heard me and came to my bed and rocked me, singing her sweet, soft songs. Remembering this, I wanted so to enter her tent and comfort her as she had so often comforted me in childhood. But then I thought—for what? I am the cause of all her pain! What could I do for her? And so instead I returned to my tent and cried myself to sleep, also uncomforted.

It was from that evening and because I knew I was on my deathbed even as I breathed life into this world—that I named my second son Ben-Oni, son of my unhappiness. Of course Ya'akov changed the name. What did he know, really? I tried to leave in my last child's name a reminder, a marker, a warning perhaps: son of my unhappiness. But Ya'akov wanted, in our last child's name, to tell his own story.

I died after a sad life, Adonay, still full with desires, of a god who stayed always a little strange to me, married to a man for whom I waited fourteen years and then shared with three others. I paid for childbirth with death, Adonay, and died so far from the heart of my sister. I died in the desert, Adonay, and was buried along the way. □

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FOUR MATRIARCHS? MAKE THAT SIX

“Now the sons of Jacob were Twelve in number. The sons of Leah—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun. The sons of Rachel—Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah—Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah—Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob.”

[Genesis 35: 22-26]

It's been only a scant 3500 years or so since the deaths of our biblical Matriarchs (ז״ל), so it might come as a surprise to find equality-creep already affecting a few of our more liberal synagogues. In the Hebrew *Amidah* prayer [a core set of blessings], after the usual address to the “God of our Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” a *davener* might now find a newly inserted phrase addressed to that more bashful deity. He [sic] of our “Matriarchs—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.” Some of us come face-to-face with this ontogeny routinely, so it no longer knocks our *tefillin* off.

A funny thing happens, though, on the way to the

Forum. As we begin gender-fixing the liturgy, we suddenly notice—as is the case with the application of *any* political Band-Aid—a whole new body of boobos that somehow just weren't *there* before. The Four Matriarchs are a case in point, because there aren't four of them, **there are six.** (See *Numbers Rabbah* 12:17, for example, where the rabbis refer matter-of-factly to our “Six Matriarchs.”) How did two get so emphatically forgotten?

The Six are: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah. The latter are Leah's and Rachel's “female attendants,” but they were included as Matriarchs not because of that—rather, because of their ova. Bilhah and Zilpah follow Jacob into his tent (presumably to see his sand etchings),

and emerge with four tribal blastocysts: Bilhah births Dan and Naphtali; and Zilpah, Gad and Asher. These four sand-eating toddlers represent one-third of the Twelve Tribes.

Six Matriarchs makes theological sense if we but step back and remember for a moment what makes the Twelve Tribes important anyway. Historical confederations aside, the Jewish tradition has continually used the iconology of Twelve Tribes to drum into our heads a core concept: our people's invention of democracy. All biological Jews are descended from these original half-brothers, our tradition wants us to know. We all count, we all count equally. The Twelve Tribes are intended to sear into our hearts a Jewish ethical ideal of inclusivity.

A midrash (*Exodus Rabbah* 1:6) makes this point directly: When the Twelve Tribes are mentioned, why aren't they always enumerated in the same order, the midrash asks rhetorically. And it answers: to teach the lesson of democracy—that we're all equal, wife and handmaid (and by extension, born-Jew and convert), child of Leah, or child of Zilpah, of Rachel or of Bilhah.

We understand that leaving out the two matriarchs who are “female attendants” doesn't sit well with feminist *or* Jewish values. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are all from privileged, well-to-do stock (some argue that they are even royalty)—they're not the nannies. Excising Bilhah and Zilpah institutionalizes as ‘kosher’ a kind of Upstairs/Downstairs.

When we rewrite the *Amidah* to include Bilhah and Zilpah (as we now must surely do), we introduce into our prayers a different ethic of decency. Carol Gilligan has said that, “Justice is the highest value in masculine morality, but women's morality places a higher value on an ethic of care, whose premise is that no one should be hurt.” How does the inclusion of two handmaids speak to that?

—*Rabbi Susan Schnur*