Sociological Papers

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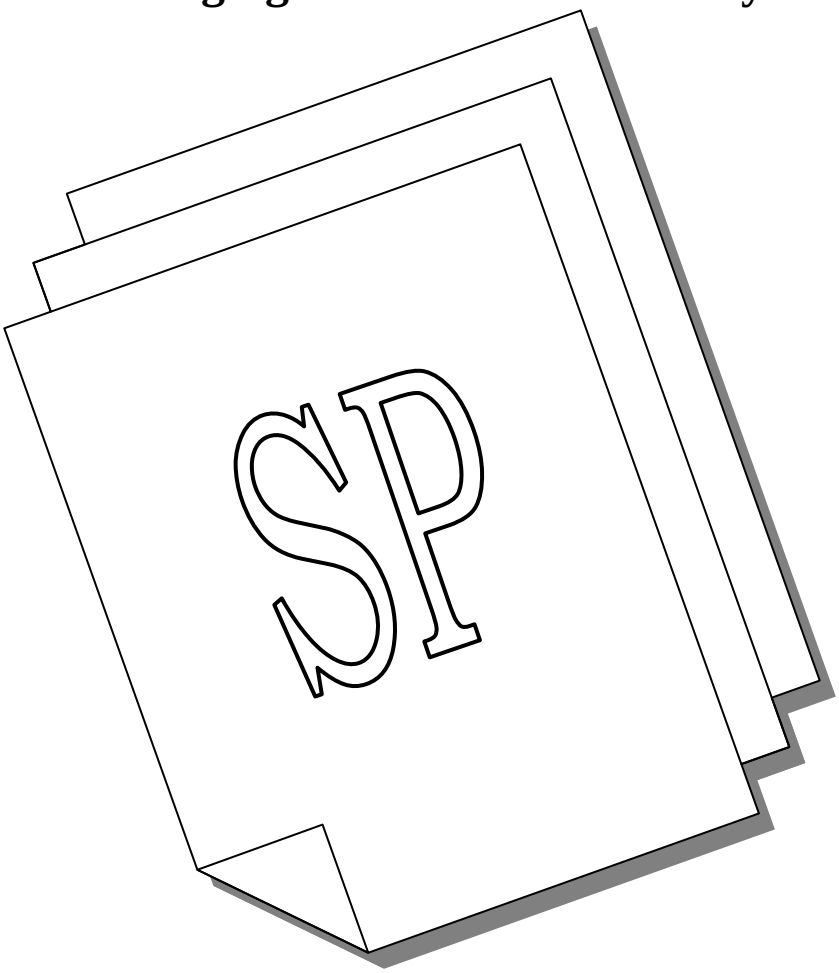

Volume 14, 2009

Sponsored by the Leon Tamman Foundation for Research into Jewish Communities

SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY STUDIES
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

"Grace is Deceitful and Beauty is Vain": How Hassidic Women Cope with the Custom of Head Shaving and Wearing a Black Kerchief[1]

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Abstract

Religious women's modesty norms are often perceived as patriarchal oppression aimed at governing women's bodies. Current study challenges this perspective, offering a deeper, multi-dimensional picture of Haredi women's lived experiences and body practices. Focusing on the notion of modesty among the women from the extreme ultra-Orthodox group Toldot Aharon, the article explores how they experience the harsh custom – shaving off their hair upon marriage and covering their heads with black kerchiefs. The findings exemplify a variety of women's voices, ranging from viewing these practices as desirable and empowering to the opposite view that they damage one's attractiveness and are quite painful.

Introduction

Many studies have discussed the issue of modesty norms in extreme religious groups that ensure that women's bodies are covered and deny women's rights to their own bodies (Arthur, 1999; Daly, 1999; Elior, 2001). Most of these studies see modesty restrictions as a form of patriarchal oppression. McCarthy-Brown (1994) claims that these restrictions are salient characteristics of fundamentalist religious views in the modern world. According to her, fundamentalists strive to control the hidden forces of the human body and physical desires, especially sexual desire, which they consider a major threat. This is the reason that the men need to control the women. Women are seen as bearing the major portion of human physicality and sensuality due to their primary connection to nature, while men are seen as more strongly connected to culture (Ortner, 1974). In addition, most societies assign women the role of the "other", the category that is marked out and defined by men (Beauvoir, 1974). In consequence, women have become the object onto which whatever is undesirable or threatening to human existence can be projected: sexuality, emotions, ritual impurity, sin and death (Douglas, 1966). According to the fundamentalists, men's control over women ensures that the pure forces of reason can function properly and lead to a more orderly and certain world. It is for this reason that the fundamentalist agenda is focused on restricting women's behavior and supervising their sexuality by imposing severe modesty norms on them (Eilberg Schwatz, 1995; McCarthy-Brown, 1994).

[1] An earlier version of this article was published in: *Gender Issues*, September 2007 Issue (24:3).

Some ideological streams in Jewish society are also preoccupied with the issue of modesty in women's attire, albeit there are great differences in the modesty norms prevalent in the various groups. A number of researchers (Berger Sofer, 1979; Hartman and Marmon, 2004; Heilman, 1992) believe, like McCarthy-Brown, that the requirement of modesty in women's external appearance in Judaism stems from the idea that all women are a threat to men's spiritual world by their very nature. Therefore, strict injunctions about how to dress are imposed on women in order to distance men from their tempting, seductive ways, thus helping them to behave morally. The various researchers, however, have scarcely investigated the significance of these injunctions to the Jewish women themselves. Therefore, the author chose to discuss these aspects of the modesty requirements among the women of one of the most extreme Hassidic groups *Toldot Aharon*. In particular, to study was focused on the meaning these women assign to an extremely demanding custom practiced by this group – shaving off their hair upon marriage and covering their heads with black kerchiefs – and the way they cope with this requirement.

Since *Toldot Aharon* is one of the most extreme ultra-Orthodox groups with particularly rigid modesty requirements, this discussion can be seen as a case study of women's perceptions and coping mechanisms applicable to other religious groups as well. The major contribution of this article is its insight into the womens' own perceptions of this highly sensitive and typically silenced matter.

Toldot Aharon Hassidism

The Hassidic group of *Toldot Aharon* began in the 1920s with Reb Aharon Roth (Ratteh) (1894-1947), in Satmar, Hungary. Reb Aharon and his group settled in *The Mea Shearim* district of Jerusalem in 1940 (Halahmi 1997), where they have lived ever since in an "ultra-Orthodox ghetto".

The extremist nature of *Toldot Aharon* is reflected in the segregation of its members from the outside world and their rejection of any compromise with a modern lifestyle or with Zionism (Rozman, 1991). The language spoken in the group is Yiddish, although most of the adults (both men and women) speak Hebrew as well, because they are unable to avoid hearing Hebrew spoken on the street and because they study religious texts in Hebrew.

Toldot Aharon bears the characteristics of a traditional patriarchal community: almost absolute separation between the sexes and a clearly defined division of roles between men and women. As in the rest of the ultra-Orthodox society, the declared central role of the woman in *Toldot Aharon* is bearing and raising children (El-Or, 1993, 1995; Goshen-Gottstein, 1966, 1984). In most other ultra-Orthodox sects in Israel, the woman plays another important role: the economic support of the family becomes her responsibility so that her husband can devote all his time to the Torah study. In *Toldot Aharon*, however, the women are not ideologically obligated to provide for their families financially. Unlike the women in the ultra-Orthodox mainstream, many of whom become chief breadwinners, the women of *Toldot Aharon* do not consider such work to be their vocation. Their declared role is to be housewives and mothers, as is the role of women in traditional patriarchal societies.

Most of the women in the group hardly ever leave their own neighborhood. Like the men in the group, they are forbidden to own and use television sets, radios, computers or any secular reading material. In addition, their education system provides the women with far less knowledge than other ultra-Orthodox women. As a result the

women's world is extremely narrow, even in comparison to other ultra-Orthodox women. As in the general ultra-Orthodox community, marriages in *Toldot Aharon* are arranged and take place in a very early age (girls at 18 and boys at 18-19). Unlike most of the ultra-Orthodox groups, however, where the boy and the girl are allowed to meet each other before the parents finalize the engagement, the *Toldot Aharon* members take a more stringent view and only allow the boy and the girl to formally meet for a few minutes at the time of the engagement, after both sets of parents have finalized the financial arrangements concerning the couple's economic future.

Group members have a unique style of clothing. The men wear a striped caftan over black trousers tucked into long black socks. They wear a broad-brimmed black hat on weekdays and a *shtreimel* (fur hat) on the Sabbath. The women, for reasons of modesty, are required to wear simple dresses that do not display their femininity, and black stockings. When they are married, they are required to shave their heads completely and wear black kerchiefs. Young unmarried girls must wear their hair long in one or two braids.

The girls of *Toldot Aharon*, like those of other ultra-Orthodox groups, are instilled with the importance of the biblical verse "Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain" (Proverbs 31:30) from a very early age. Most of them are nevertheless concerned about their external appearance and consider it important to look respectable and attractive. In *Toldot Aharon*, as in the general ultra-Orthodox community, the external appearance of a young woman is an important asset in finding a husband. The women are also expected to maintain an aesthetic appearance after marriage, in order to continue to be attractive for their husbands and prevent them from looking at other women, and also because, according to Jewish tradition, Jewish women are like daughters of a king and should dress accordingly. Thus, the women make great efforts to look respectable (Zalcberg, 2005). Nevertheless, the married women of *Toldot Aharon* are required to shave their heads and wear black kerchiefs. This requirement leads to tension between the wish to look attractive and the obligation to adhere to the group's uncompromising demands for extreme modesty. In light of this, the present article attempts to explain what these women experience as they try to cope with these conflicting requirements.

Shaving one's head and wearing a black kerchief in *Toldot Aharon*

The requirement of shaving women's head appears in Reb Aharon's set of formal written regulations, which involve various areas of life. These regulations reflect the severe norms accepted by the group. Rule 3 states: "They must cut off all their hair completely…every woman must be extremely careful not to have any hair, God forbid, not even a single one…I therefore request that no woman make the slightest extenuation of this rule, or wear a wig or even a hairpiece" (Ratteh, 1994).

A necessary condition for being a member of the group is carefully following Reb Aharon's regulations. If anyone does not abide by the regulations, he and his entire family are excluded from the community (Ratteh, 1994).

In accordance with these regulations, on the morning after her wedding night the newly married woman has her head shaven and then immediately covered with a tightly fitted black kerchief. From that day on she is responsible for shaving her own head. There are various customs but no unequivocal views about when and how often this should be done. Most of the women shave once a month, a significant number doing so before visiting the mikveh (the ritual bath). These women regard the hair on

their heads as interfering with the purification process, so they shave before immersing themselves. There are, however, some women who do not accept this stricture, believing that it is sufficient to shave their head before their hair grows long enough to make it difficult to cover properly.

The custom of wearing a black kerchief upon marriage was a local custom among ultra-Orthodox Jewish women in Hungary, adopted by Reb Aharon and preserved when he moved with his followers to Jerusalem. It is now unique to *Toldot Aharon* except for a few other Orthodox Jerusalemite women who maintain their mothers' customs. The reason for this demand is that in Jewish traditional teachings black is considered the most modest color the least likely to draw attention, and, according to the group's tradition, black is a reminder of the destruction of the Temple and a sign of mourning for it. Since one of the reasons for wearing a black kerchief is modesty, the women are not required to wear one in their own home and instead may wear a floral kerchief. Although the black color of the kerchiefs is not specified among Reb Aharon's regulations, most women believe it to be the rule for the whole community to obey.

The head shaving custom

The hair on a woman's head is considered a symbol of sexuality, feminine sensuality and instinctual drive (Eilberg Schwartz, 1995; Lang, 1995). Since women's sexuality is perceived in some cultures as a threat to men, patriarchal marriages try to prevent a woman's sexuality from being apparent to any man other than her husband. To avert this threat, many patriarchal societies prescribe concealment of hair as an external symbol of female sexuality. Some of them do so by requiring a head cover and the most radical ones by head-shaving. Shaving a woman's head thus symbolizes the restraint of her sexuality upon her marriage, since she is permitted to have sexual relations only with her husband (Myerowitz Levine, 1995).

Symbolically, marriage joins the woman, who is perceived as connected to nature, with the man, who is perceived as closer to the spiritual, standing higher in the cultural order (Ortner, 1974). Thus the woman is symbolically transferred upon marriage into a "more cultured" world, in which her hair, which symbolizes the state of wild nature, has no place and must therefore be removed (Myerowitz Levine, 1995).

The psychological and anthropological literature suggests that the hair on one's head is a symbolic medium for expressing one's identity and changes within it, since it is both clearly visible and easy to manipulate (Aran, 2003; Weitz, 2004). Making changes in a woman's hairstyle as a symbol of the changes she experiences upon marriage has been done throughout history. In traditional societies such changes were the norm, and this symbolism was clear to the women involved (Myerowitz Levine, 1995).

Little is found in the literature about the custom of shaving women’s heads after the wedding ceremony. Shiloh (2001), who studied women in the Jewish community of pre-State Palestine, indicates that shaving one's head after marriage gives a girl her “Jewish form” and symbolizes the change in her personal status. She states that, although there is a halachic (Jewish law) basis for the requirement that married women cover their hair, shaving one's head is an additional stricture aimed at completely preventing the sight of hair on the woman's head.

The stricture of shaving one's head was prevalent in some Jewish communities in parts of Eastern Europe during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Shiloh, 2001). By the second half of the nineteenth century the custom was maintained mainly in Hungary by Hassidic communities and Hungarian Orthodoxy (Schreiber 2003). After World War II the custom died out among most of these groups, and in fact *Toldot Aharon* is one of the few groups that continue to abide by it. The strict observance of this rule is not subject to compromise, so no man in the group can marry a woman who refuses to shave her head.

How the women cope with the practice of head shaving

A woman's hair plays a major role in her external appearance and affects her degree of attractiveness. As such, it also affects her self and social image and her perception of her own femininity (Diener, Wolsic and Fujita, 1995; Harter 2000). Indeed, the socialization of girls teaches them from an early age that their hair is one of the defining elements of their femininity and beauty (Weitz, 2004).

For some women, losing their hair, for example as a result of chemotherapy, is equivalent to losing their self (Weitz, 2004). Head-shaving thus means stripping away one's personal identity and can reflect one's submission to a new collective, as in the cases of soldiers, prisoners, or skinheads (Seigelshifer, 2006). Shaving a woman's head as a form of stripping away her personal identity, as well as a form of degradation and punishment, appears at the end of World War II in occupied Europe, when partisans and resistance fighters shaved the heads of women who had engaged in sexual relations with Nazis and/or collaborated with them (Foxlee, 2001).

In light of this, shaving the head of a bride the day after her wedding is generally regarded in Western society as a violent, brutal act, and a traumatic, degrading experience for any woman. Hirschfeld (2000: 53) states: "Shaving a woman's head goes far beyond the issue of modesty; it is an instrument for completely silencing the woman's voice as a spiritual human power in the culture." Shiloh (2001) claims that, although there is very little historical documentation about the feelings of the shorn young bride, the little there is reveals that the Jewish brides were so fearful of the procedure that some of them even threatened to leave Judaism entirely when faced with it. It is therefore most likely that shaving the bride's head has the potential to damage her self-image and perception of her femininity, leaving her with permanent mental scars. The traumatic potential stems from an extreme transformation, a sudden transition from having long hair that has never been cut to having a completely shaven head covered by a black kerchief, together with the clear knowledge that she will never be able to grow her hair long again.

Nevertheless, the women of *Toldot Aharon* reported that they all accept the requirement to shave their heads upon marrying. They consider it similar to the laws of family purity – almost like a commandment that must be fulfilled at all costs. Moreover, only a minority of women reported that it was hard and that there was an inner voice inside them expressing doubts, uncertainties and resistance. The women's reports demonstrate that most of them – both as individuals and collectively – have developed various mechanisms to assist them in coping with the community's strict rules. A considerable number of the women use these mechanisms to redefine the 'brutal', 'threatening', traumatic' practice of shaving into a one they consider positive, desirable, pleasant, and even enhancing their appearance.

Methodology

The findings presented here are based on a broader ethnographic study of the world of the *Toldot Aharon* women that was conducted during the years 1999-2004. The women were studied through participatory observation (Fetterman, 1989), in which the group members, especially the women, were accompanied in their daily lives as well as at special events. Since this is a closed group, it is particularly difficult for strangers to enter it. Therefore making contact with the subjects was a long, slow process of establishing informal relationships and developing trust on the basis of personal friendship.

The first step in the access process included walking around the area where the group lives, visiting stores in the neighborhood, and the like. However, every attempt to start a conversation with the women this way, with the author presenting herself as a person who wants to learn about the group, was met with hostility and refusal. After many such attempts the author met a woman, who although she also refused to talk to her, recommended that she attend the wedding of the Rebbe's granddaughter, which was taking place at that time, and meet the women of the group in this way. Accordingly, the author's next step was to attend this wedding, even though she had not been formally invited. At the wedding she was invited to a Sabbath meal at the home of a family known for its hospitality. The author accepted this invitation, and from then on this home was open to her whenever she wished to go there. This was one of the most important and well-connected families in the group, and the author continued to visit them. This connection became a vital resource for the author to gather information about the group and getting to know many other women. Most of all, this connection provided the author with an acceptable identity among the women, making her legitimate and less "dangerous" to them.

The research included conversations and interviews with the group members, mainly women. Other material used as data included books, newspapers and pamphlets read by the members. On the issue of head-shaving, the author conducted in-depth interviews (Patton, 1990) with at least 30 women. Most of the interviews were conducted in Hebrew and took place in the women's homes, in the form of friendly visits. Because of the difficulty involved in making contact with the group members and getting them to cooperate, this study is based on convenience sample, that is, the practical possibility of approaching potential subjects. As the fieldwork progressed the author used the "snowball" method, making use of some of the first informants in order to reach a wider spectrum of group members. The study was based on the phenomenological approach, presenting information about the world as seen through the eyes of the research subjects, thus attaining insight into their experiences and beliefs (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The analysis was based on grounded theory development (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The grounded theory is appropriate when there is a general research question, with no hypotheses to prove or disprove, as is the case in this study. According to this method, people with common life circumstances have common social and psychological patterns, and so the purpose of the research is to generate categories of theorizing about the subjects' experiences. The analysis has two levels. The first is a general thematic analysis, looking for major themes and patterns in the interviews, while the second level consists of finding the meanings underlying the specifics found in the data, as well as the meanings of the first-level categories.

Findings

Turning the first head-shaving into a festive ceremony

The women's reports show that it is customary to hold a sort of intimate, festive ceremony to mitigate the emotional pain of the first head-shaving. In this ceremony the bride's mother and sometimes also her mother-in-law shave the bride's head and give her presents. Tzirel, one of the women of *Toldot Aharon*, described it this way: "They give the bride something personal, as well as a mirror, so she can see how nice she looks after her hair has been shaved, so she can see for the first time how she looks with the black kerchief." But while it is possible that the presence of the mother and the mother-in-law at this critical time, and their compliments to the bride on her "new look," actually succeed in mitigating the emotional pain of the shaving procedure, they may also have an opposite effect. Indeed, they may well cause the bride to feel pressure and anxiety, since she may see their presence as a reminder of the supervision she is being subjected to, to ensure that she does indeed observe the regulation.

This finding, as well as others described below, attests to the important role of the mothers and the older generation in transmitting traditional knowledge regarding various aspects of life cycle. Traditional knowledge is transmitted between generations through family rituals, history, and other informal interactions (Mendlinger and Cwikel, 2005/2006), as in the head-shaving ceremony.

A basic characteristic of religious ceremonies is that they are transformational, that is, they take the individuals undergoing them from one state to another (Turner, 1967). The head-shaving ceremony is transformational in this sense, since it takes the girl from the status of an unmarried woman to that of a married woman, a wife – a valued status that has many meanings for both the individual and the society, particularly in traditional patriarchal cultures like the ultra-Orthodox community (Goshen Gottstein, 1966; Heilman, 1992).

Construing the "new look" as attractive and comfortable

Even though Western society generally considers shaving a women's head as detracting and damaging her femininity, the bride is given a mirror to show that her "new look" suits her. Do the women really think this look is attractive? Many accounts by both newly married and older women show that they do not consider the "shaven look" to be unaesthetic or damaging to their femininity. On the contrary, they consider it flattering. This view is illustrated by remarks made by Tzirel and her daughter-in-law Shifra, who had recently been married.

> ***Shifra****: See, this [a shaven head covered with a black kerchief] really suits everyone. Everyone looks good in it …there's no dirt or mess on your face.*
>
> ***Tzirel****: Like this, without hair, is nice for everyone … In general, it solves many problems – you don't know what kind of hairstyle to have, your braid doesn't come out well, you take it apart and do it up again, it's just annoying, and often you don't like how your hair looks.*

This view can be explained by the approach that one's perception of one's body is a social construct influenced by social, cultural, religious and economic changes (Martin, 1992). Multicultural feminist theories claim that people's perception of

femininity, the meanings it has for them, and the way it is manifested – including women's external appearance – are varied and multi-faceted, and differ from one group of women to the next (Hill Collins, 1991; Hooks, 1984, 1990; Richardson, Taylor and Whittier, 2001). Accordingly, criteria for beauty, as well as perceptions and manifestations of femininity, are not absolute but rather depend on the social codes of different groups.

It is thus likely that the women who claim that the "shaven look" is flattering have developed different criteria for beauty, which do not match the accepted criteria in most modern Western societies. This is why they do not see the "shaven look" as unaesthetic or unfeminine. Rather, they see it as "cleaner", "purer", and, according to their own codes, even more flattering. From their perspective, esthetics is apparently a concept that includes much more than mere physical beauty, and cannot be isolated from their religious, cultural and social meanings. When they define what is flattering and what is not, the women combine the physical dimension with these additional values, leading them to see shaven heads and black kerchiefs as "beautiful."

Another explanation for the women's perception of the shaven look as flattering can be found in cognitive dissonance theory (Aronson, 1972; Festinger, 1954). According to this theory to be able to live in harmony with themselves, the women have developed rationalizing mechanisms - suggestion and auto-suggestion - helping them cope with the community's stringent requirements and adapt to the reality of their lives. Thus, the women's belief that the "shaven look" is flattering can in fact be interpreted as rationalization, helping them to resolve the dissonance they feel because of their obligation to obey the shaving rule.

This explanation does not contradict the earlier one, which claims that the women of the community have their own criteria for assessing beauty and esthetics, which are different from those of Western society. On the contrary, these explanations complement each other. The development of alternative codes for defining beauty can be interpreted as the outcome of the same rationalization mechanisms described above for developing an alternative culture of external appearance, due to the dissonance caused by the stringent modesty requirements.

The women's perception of their "shaven look" as flattering is not completely surprising. Paradoxically, the sight of a shaven head covered by a black kerchief can highlight the features of particularly beautiful women by demarcating their face into stark relief. It cannot be denied, however, that shaving the head creates a kind of dichotomy between those who are especially beautiful and those who are average or unattractive, since it leaves their faces completely exposed.

The "shaven look" as normative

Another factor allowing the girls of *Toldot Aharon* to construct a favorable view of shaving one's head, and also helping prepare the brides psychologically for the first head-shaving, is the fact that they have always seen their mothers without hair and wearing black kerchiefs As a result, the girls see shaving one's hair as normative and natural. Mindel put it this way:

> *The girls are used to it from early childhood and they know that this is what has to be done. This is how they are used to seeing their mothers. They don't know anything else and they know that one day it will be their turn. Girls always want to look like their mothers, even by shaving off*

their hair. It is not so hard for us because we grew up that way, we were born into it.

Tzirel points out that a girl's natural tendency to imitate her mother helps mitigate the pain of head-shaving. In contrast, in modern Western societies, by the time most girls are teenagers they no longer consider their mothers as models for imitation (Erikson, 1950). Thus Tzirel's remarks may be seen as indicating a different picture among the girls of *Toldot Aharon*, in which teenage girls do not rebel against their parents but rather continue to imitate them, even in external appearance. This is a result of the girls' early socialization into obedience and strong supervisory mechanisms for keeping the social order that prevents the girls from expressing their own wishes with regard to their external appearance, or their voice in general (Zalcberg, 2005).

Shaving one's head as "fun", "great joy", and an anticipated event

Some of the women even used the word "fun" to describe shaving, and indicated that when their hair grows even just a little, they immediately want to get rid of it. Leah stated, *"I love to shave my head, it's fun, it's pleasant, I do it every two weeks, especially now in the summer […] It's a mechaye [refreshing]."*

Fruma also claimed that shaving her head gives her a comfortable feeling: "*If I don't take it off it starts to itch, yuk. Why do you need hair? I take it off every week."*

Many of the women referred to their first head-shaving as "great joy" and an anticipated event. Shifra expressed this well:

> *Before I got married the head-shaving didn't bother me at all. Just the opposite, I was actually waiting for it! [full of enthusiasm] And I know, I know that people, even other ultra-Orthodox people, think that we are miserable because of the shaving, but it's really not true! [she laughed] It's fun! I couldn't wait!*

Hindeh supported what Shifra said:

> *My daughter who just got married had been counting the days until she could be shaven. She would tell me "Mama, another 30 days, another 29 days." We all wait for this moment. The girl can't wait to throw away her comb.*

Mindel expressed similar feelings:

> *Shaving my head [for the first time] was a great joy for me, a really great joy! You wait so much for marriage, and this – the shaving – comes with it, it's a sign that you're finally married.*

This shows clearly that, as shaving is directly linked to marriage, it symbolizes the long-awaited change in a girl's personal status to being a married woman, a wife. After all, the girls of *Toldot Aharon*, like those in other ultra-Orthodox groups, see their main goal as marriage, and the socialization process they undergo leads them to believe that they cannot be complete human beings until they get married (Goshen Gottstein, 1966; Zalcberg, 2005). Accordingly, the girls' wish to shave their heads is actually an expression of their wish to be married and the "great joy" they report stems from the fact that head-shaving symbolizes their attaining a valuable social status, the realization of their true aspiration -- being married.

Shaving one's head as "only one change among many"

Another factor that may perhaps mitigate the hardship of the first head-shaving is that it is only one of many changes and transitions undergone by a young woman (usually aged 18) when she marries. The parents choose the husband or wife for their children, with the young couple being allowed to meet for only a few seconds before their parents give the final approval for the marriage. Moreover, the meeting between the two is without privacy - the parents leave the couple in a room with the door half open to prevent the couple from being alone with each other, while the entire family waits nearby. Thus, on the night before the head-shaving ceremony -- the wedding night -- the bride must leave her parents' house, although she has rarely slept elsewhere until then, and go to live with a stranger with whom she has hardly exchanged a few sentences (Zalcberg, 2005). In addition, this is a man with whom she must have intimate relations on their very first night together, according to their interpretation of the commandment of procreation. It is therefore most probable that the young bride's having her head shaved is dwarfed by the other drastic experiences she is undergoing as part of becoming a wife. Fruma expressed this well: "*It is hard, but girls undergo many other changes when they get married, and the issue of the hair is only one of them.*"

Mothers foster positive attitudes towards head-shaving

It would be wrong to ignore the great energy invested by the mothers in the socialization process to construct the favorable view of head shaving among the girls and women of *Toldot Aharon*. The mentioned perceptions of the first head-shaving as a happy event symbolizing a daughter's marriage and improving her appearance reflect this ongoing process. For example, Tzirel insisted on the advantages of head-shaving during her conversation with several women of her family, with the author present:

> ***Author**: "When you saw yourselves in the mirror without hair for the first time, didn't you feel sort of …"*
>
> ***Shifra**: "No! [laughing] I enjoyed it, it's fun!"*
>
> ***Tzirel**: "What, everyone wants it, you can ask her" [pointing to Beila, her 18-year-old niece, who was sitting there with a long braid hanging down her back]*

Since the author was afraid that Beila might be embarrassed, she didn't ask her about it. But when Tzirel saw this, she herself asked Beila, *"Would you like to shave off all your hair already?"*

Beila answered with a shy smile, *"Of course, what do you think? I'm waiting for it, we all want it."*

Tzirel then looked at her 12-year-old daughter sitting next to her, and said to the author, *"Listen to her."* Then she asked her daughter, *"What do you say?"* In response, the daughter took her braid, threw it over her head and said demonstratively, *"Yuk, I don't want it* [the braid]*."*

Tzirel's behavior shows her function as the main socializing agent in giving the girls a positive view of head-shaving. This function is performed by all the mothers in the group. Tzirel made sure that all the participants in the conversation were involved in "selling" the "fun" of head-shaving and describing how much they longed for the day when they would be able to take part in this custom. This manipulation of Tzirel's is

clearly intended more for the girls themselves than for the author, the "stranger." After all, Tzirel realizes that the first head-shaving is not a voluntary, natural activity for the girls, something to be taken lightly. It requires an intensive and continuing process of preparation to get the girls used to the idea and to insure that the younger members and the generations to follow will continue their mothers' traditions.

Understanding the religious significance of head-shaving

Not all the women in the group long to shave their heads and regard it as "fun." Some of them admitted to the anxiety they felt just before their first head-shaving, and did not conceal the difficulty of getting used to the "new look."

Nevertheless, the women insist that their understanding of the religious meaning behind the shaving certainly makes it easier to accept it. It gives the procedure such a strong justification that it suppresses all their doubts and fears. Esti provided this explanation: *"It's hard, but we know how important it is for modesty, so there's no question at all … When I did it just now for my daughter, when I picked up the scissors, it hurts, it hurts inside this way, but … I always say it's our biggest trial."*

Similar sentiments were expressed in the conversation the author had with Rochel, Tzirel, and Shifra. The religious significance of head-shaving, as they see it, is preserving modesty, which will lead to redemption, perfection and the coming of the Messiah.

> ***Rochel: "****The first time I saw myself without hair it was strange for a moment, but one gets used to it afterwards. In any case, it goes away when you think about its meaning."*
>
> ***Shifra:*** *"It has very great meaning! They say that in a house with modesty there is also perfection and redemption and the Messiah will come soon, and hair is nakedness so you must…"*
>
> ***Tzirel: "****But even if you're afraid for a moment, there is no question ….".*
>
> ***Rochel: "****No, of course there is no question!...They say that it is because of the righteous women that the Jews were redeemed at that time."*

This conversation attests to the great importance of modesty for the women – so great that it can lead to the redemption of the Jewish people. This illustrates the great power and spiritual abilities the women attribute to themselves.

The idea that Jewish women are collectively responsible for the fate of the Jewish people is not new. Throughout the history of the group (Ratteh, 1994), as well as that of Jewish society in general, women have been called upon to be scrupulous about the modesty of their attire for the sake of the nation as a whole. In parallel, women who violate the modesty rules are seen as causing the whole community to sin, leading to the collective punishment of lengthening the Exile (Shiloh, 2001).

This conversation also reflects the women's need to make it clear to the author that they have no doubts about the head-shaving rule, and that even if some doubt lingers in a woman's heart, it can have no practical manifestation. In addition, it shows that the women tried to present a united front on the issue to the author. The women of the group, like those in other religious groups, tend to avoid sharing their internal controversies and ambivalent feelings with outsiders (Ayella, 1993).

Stories about the importance of head-shaving

Teachers are also part of this process as socializing agents, as can be seen from what Hanna said about the consequences of disobeying the shaving regulation:

> *I'll tell you a story that my teacher told us – after I heard this story, I realized there's no other way. And it's a true story!… A woman had a neighbor who died. At night, the dead woman came to her neighbor in a dream and told her that she was about to enter Heaven, and she went through gate after gate, each gate opening for her so that she could go through. But when she came to the last gate, something was stuck there. She tried to go through once and again and got stuck…then she saw that stuck in the gate was the hair from her head that didn't let her go through. She asked, "Why is it stuck like this? Why can't I get into Heaven?" Then she realized that, even though she wore a head-covering, some of her hair peeked out. Oy [Hanna trembled], after I heard this story there was no question in my mind. It no longer matters what happened, what's important is to learn from it.*

This story embodies the threat that the adults transmit to the girls, and the alarm it causes them to feel. After all, they all want to enter Heaven, and so they are willing to give up their hair if that is the way to get there. This story and similar ones are told to the girls by the main agents of socialization: their teachers and mothers. The message of the stories slowly infiltrates and is eventually internalized by the girls in one form or another. In this way the stories are a major method of internalizing the importance of head-shaving and creating a favorable view of it.

Head-shaving and black kerchiefs as signs of elitism and high piety

Hair is a powerful cultural symbol not only for individual identity but also for group identity (Synnott, 1987, 1993). Since *Toldot Aharon* is the only Jewish group where women as a collective shave their heads and wear black kerchiefs, this gives them a feeling of belonging to an elite circle, a kind of pride in being unique. Kroineh expressed this well: "The girls here know that this is the way we, the women of *Toldot Aharon*, are more scrupulous that anyone else, we do what should be done."

Freidel came from a different Hassidic community, joining *Toldot Aharon* by marriage. Like Kroineh, she believes that a shaven head covered by a black kerchief is a symbol of the highest level of religiosity a woman can attain, and that it shows that she belongs to the most extreme, elitist community. As she put it, *"My grandmother wore a wig, and when she heard that I was going to join Toldot Aharon she said to me, 'You? With a shaven head and black kerchief?' She didn't think it was for me. But it was important to me because I always wanted the most, including religiously."*

Mirel who belongs to a neighboring Hassidic group also considers the *Toldot Aharon* women as being on a higher spiritual plane than she is because of their willingness to shave their heads. As she put it, *"I wish that our women could remove the hair like the Toldot Aharon women…they are on a higher [religious] level than us*."

Thus, their unique appearance empowers the women of *Toldot Aharon*, giving them the collective identity of an elite group, and creates a clear distinction between themselves as belonging to the "top of the top", and those outside the group, including the women in other ultra-Orthodox groups. Thus the severe modesty requirements are a mechanism for isolating the group from the surrounding society in general.These

findings attest to the central role of women in representing the desired social order of the group and that which distinguishes the group from the external environment.

Ensuring compliance with the rules

Avoiding head-shaving is considered a more serious deviance than refusing to wear a black kerchief, because it means disobeying one of Reb Aharon's basic regulations (the black kerchief was adopted by him only when he came to Jerusalem). This distinction can be seen in the fact that the parents of a *Toldot Aharon* boy will not agree to a match with a girl who refuses to shave her head. However, a match can be made with a girl who refuses to wear a black kerchief. Therefore one can see some women in the group who wear kerchief of a different color.

When the author spoke with the women, very few of them expressed reservations about wearing a black kerchief, although many of them reported that they preferred to wear a floral one at home. This speaks for itself and shows that they are not entirely happy with the black kerchief. The few women who refuse to wear a black kerchief are mainly those who have married into the group, and they constitute a small minority. Nevertheless, they should not be ignored, both because their colored kerchiefs stand out so strongly against the prevailing black, and because they voice opinions that might otherwise remain unspoken. Aidel, a woman from a different community who married a *Toldot Aharon* man, is one example. She said, *"This was my condition for the match – not to wear a black kerchief, and my husband accepted it … I observe the commandments scrupulously, and I don't think that a black kerchief makes someone stronger [religiously]".*

Although the group regards a refusal to wear a black kerchief as a serious infraction, it is still willing to accept these women as long as they abide by the head-shaving regulation. Nevertheless, social supervision remains in force, as we can see from the author's conversation with Perel.

> ***Perel:*** *If we know that someone is not doing what they should in this matter, we send someone to tell them…there is a girl from abroad who married one of our boys but didn't want to wear a black kerchief, so they sent me to her. I came to her, I bought them a nice silver present and I tried to talk to her about the black kerchief, how important it is here. I told her that if she doesn't wear it, it will be very difficult for her here, and even if everything is all right now, later it will be hard to make matches [for the children].*

We see that women who refuse to wear a black kerchief are visited by a member of the "modesty supervisors." The "supervisor," in this case Perel, acts in a rather sophisticated way. First she addresses the woman nicely, bringing her an expensive gift, and then she attempts to persuade her to conform. But when this does not succeed, she resorts to a threat regarding the woman's future in the community – she will encounter social difficulties and worse, her children's future could suffer, her behavior might jeopardize their future marriage. This last threat is particularly serious since marrying off one's children is regarded as a most difficult undertaking for parents, and is their top priority (Zalcberg, 2007).

Another finding from the women's reports is that heavy pressure is also exerted on husbands whose wives wear a colored kerchief. The pressure comes from the yeshiva, the men's workplaces, and social contacts within the group. Despite all this, there are still women who refuse to submit to the dictates about the color of their kerchief. In

some cases, a woman's standing in the group is strong enough for her to be left to do as she wishes in this matter.

As refusing to shave one's head is considered much more serious than refusing to wear a black kerchief, both the women who violate the shaving regulation and their families are excommunicated. As Perel explained, “If someone doesn’t cut her hair every month, then she’s out of the synagogue. There is no such thing here! It's the most important thing.”

Silenced voices

So far we have only heard the voices in favor of shaven heads. Even those women who dared to describe a little of their fear of the first head-shaving did not consider it a traumatic experience leaving deep scars. However, there were also women who revealed great difficulty, doubts and even resistance to head-shaving. Their voices are heard almost in a whisper, and only among a small number of women, since this is an extremely serious challenge to the community's rules, and is considered ”almost like apostasy.” These are the "silenced voices." They are "silenced" because the community cannot tolerate expressions against head-shaving within the group, since this would constitute a threat against the desirable social order, and might undermine the bulwark that preserves the community's isolation from the world outside it.

Although, for example, Tzipora and Sara both obey the shaving regulation, they expressed great emotional pain in connection with their daughters' first head-shaving. Their remarks show that the head-shaving has the potential for causing complex and even destructive consequences. Tzipora says, "*My daughter was depressed for about two months after her hair was shaven off.*"

Tzipora is the only woman who confessed such sentiments to the author, although it seems likely that there are other brides in the group who experienced considerable difficulty in adjusting to the "new look." After all, it is only natural that such a radical practice, which can reduce the attractiveness of a young woman and radically change her appearance, might lead to acute reactions of sadness and depression. But even if cases similar to Tzipora’s daughter exist, the group as a whole and its members as individuals choose to silence them. Sara said,

> *Before I cut off my eldest daughter's hair, I … I almost couldn’t do it, I really couldn’t. And when I did it I almost started to cry…and I said to myself, that’s it, what I’m doing with her hair is like a sacrifice for her marriage, like a thanksgiving sacrifice to the Holy One Blessed be He, otherwise it would have been impossible.*

It seems particularly difficult for Sara to find a rationalization that might help her to deal with her deep conflict when the time came to shave her daughter’s head. The only way she manages to resolve her dissonance is to see shaving off her daughter's hair as a sacrifice that she is obliged to make, as a price she has to pay for the important thing that has happened to her daughter - her marriage - which is more valuable than hair.

Both Tzipora and Sara describe the emotional pain they felt at their daughters' first head-shaving rather than at their own. The reason for this may be that their own head-shaving has become a routine, with the difficulty long-since blunted or repressed, while their daughters' experience is still fresh, and as mothers they feel their daughters' pain more intensely than their own. In addition, since the issue is so

sensitive, it might be easier for them to admit to emotional pain in shaving their daughters' heads than in their own case.

Despite their pain, neither Tzipora nor Sara expressed opposition to head-shaving, but only acceptance of the decree. Bluma, in contrast, expresses real resistance to the practice, even though she too conformed and shaved her head completely until recently. As opposed to the voices heared so far, Bluma dares challenge what is done to the women of the group. Here are some excerpts from a conversation the author had with her after she noticed - as Bluma was tying on her kerchief - hair peeping out from under it!

> ***Author:*** *Bluma, I see that you don't shave off all your hair as is customary.*
>
> ***Bluma:*** *Why do you say that, I actually take it all off…I must shave again now, I left a little but I always take it off....The truth is that I want to grow my hair now.*
>
> ***Author:*** *To grow your hair? How can you do that?*
>
> ***Bluma:*** *I would do it modestly…. Here I will take it off [she touched the top of her forehead] and here I will take it off [pointing to the sides], and here I will leave it [pointing to the top of her head], I will cover it with the kerchief so no one will see it.*
>
> ***Author:*** *But why do you want to keep your hair?*
>
> ***Bluma:*** *Because it looks nicer […] When I shaved my head for the first time it made me very angry! When I looked in the mirror I was very angry with myself for doing it! I had such beautiful hair and suddenly…it looked terrible…It is disgusting for the women here as well, but from an early age, from the day they're born, it's put into their heads that it's better this way and that it looks nicer, so it's okay. And at night their husbands don't see it because it's covered. But it's really disgusting. Once my husband saw me with a little bit of hair and he said that I am much prettier with hair.*

Bluma's remarks attest to the great difficulty of the newly married woman in accepting the "new look" that she sees in the mirror, the intense pain and anger that she feels.

It seems that the various mechanisms described above, which the women use to cope with the shaving regulation, do not help mitigate Bluma's difficulty in dealing with this practice. In other words, the process of suggestion that the shaven look is flattering does not work for her, and it seems that she is not impressed with the religious reasons behind the practice either. Moreover, she does not regard shaving to be a natural and self-evident activity. Even the fact that she has been doing it for six years, since her marriage, does not blunt her wish to stop.

Bluma dares to challenge the accepted *Toldot Aharon* norms and says what other women may have thought but dared not express. She believes that the other women's reported satisfaction with their shaven look is the result of a social pressure and the use of various forms of suggestion which they internalize very well.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has presented the way the women in an extreme religious group in Jewish society perceive and cope with the severe modesty norms imposed on them. The findings of the study show that there is a variety of outlooks among the *Toldot Aharon* women, ranging from the totally positive perception of these practices as "fun" and desirable through ascribing them a deep religious meaning and empowering effect for the women, to the opposite view that they are not easy for the women, damage one's attractiveness and cause great pain. The existence of these different voices attests to a lack of unanimity among the women with regard to these practices, as with religious practices in other areas of life. This means that even the most extreme religious groups are not monolithic, and the women within them see their world in different ways, as is true in any social system.

Nevertheless, in spite of the differences in expression, most of the women's remarks do not express rebellion against the head-shaving plus black kerchief custom. On the contrary, many women expressed a positive view of these modesty norms, even to the extent that some girls reported eagerly awaiting their first head-shaving, and some women considered the "shaven look" as pretty. At the same time, the reports show that a variety of mechanisms must be used and extensive efforts deployed for these norms to be upheld. The group, like other religious groups, is interested in preserving the existing social order and maintaining its stability, and has therefore developed these mechanisms to ensure the women's obedience to these severe norms. This suggests that the expressed positive views are to a large extent the result of persistent indoctrination and that shaving one's head and wearing a black kerchief are, after all, practices that are not a voluntary or natural for the women.

Indeed Shiloh (2001) claimed that the male society sets the halachic and social codes for women's appearance without paying any attention to the women's feelings. Therefore, we can also interpret these positive views as "false awareness" - an adaptation and internalization of patriarchal demands (Tong 1998), since the head-shaving requirement was initiated by the religious authorities, who are all male. This interpretation fits in with cognitive dissonance theory (Aronson 1972; Festinger 1954), which sees the women's positive views as a rationalization that helps them resolve the dissonance between the shaving rule that was dictated to them and their true intimate wishes.

It is equally possible, though, that the compliance expressed by these women is a result of their identification with the religious significance attributed to the head-shaving practice - the importance of extreme modesty. The logical extension of this outlook is redressing the criteria for assessing beauty and esthetics that differ from those of Western society (Hooks, 1984, 1990; Richardson, Taylor and Whittier, 2001). From the women's perspective esthetics may include much more than mere physical beauty and may be inseparable from their religious, cultural and social values.

The truth behind these women's words is hard to discern (Hartman and Marmon, 2004), and it does not really matter. What interests us is the way the women experience and construct their reality. Whatever approach one takes in interpreting the women's attitudes, the findings seem to show that the picture is even more complicated. For even though it is the male hegemony that determines the halachic and social codes without considering the women's feelings, the central role of women in preserving these codes cannot be denied. After all, it is the women who are the

main socializing agents for modesty and they serve as supervisors to prevent deviations. In other words, the women are not merely a present/absent entity that can be dismissed by saying that the male society has forced upon them halachic and social codes dictating their external appearance; rather, ironically, it is the women themselves who invest their best energies in implementing the various mechanisms for preserving the old codes and the existing gender order.

In addition, the findings indicate that even in the most extreme religious groups the women are not merely defined as the "other" (Beauvoir, 1974), whose status is defined only in accordance with their husbands. They can achieve their own status and represent the features that distinguish their group from the general society, by scrupulously observing the group's religious practices and displaying their religious zealousness (in this case, in the realm of modesty). As the severe modesty practices mark the women's collective identity, the women can be seen as being at the forefront of the group's cultural war with the surrounding society. After all, the most important distinction for this group, as for the ultra-Orthodoxy generally and for many other religious groups, is the one between the "inside" (their own world) and the "outside" (everyone else), which they see as tantamount to the distinction between good and evil (Yaffe, 2001). Accordingly, the women see themselves as part of an elite group as opposed to the others, who are in error. In this way they stress the group's unique identity and distinction, as well as its religious superiority, and construct a "wall" which separates the group from the general society and helps it preserve its isolation and self-identity as a counter-culture.

In addition, one can interpret the women's assertion that the "shaving look" is beautiful as a way of challenging the hegemonic conception of beauty common in Western secular society, thus expressing their protest and defiance of the values of this society in general (Seigelshifer, 2006). Similar phenomena are found among members of other minority groups that have used their hair to strengthen their ethnic or collective identity and defy the hegemonic conception of beauty. This can be seen, for example, among considerable numbers of Muslim women, who cover their heads as a way of defining themselves as part of a counter-culture to the hegemonic conception of womanhood prevalent in the West (Weitz, 2004), to assert their identity and express alternative values to those of Western society (Smith, 1987).

Thus, it seems that the practices of head-shaving and wearing a black kerchief, which are regarded in Western society as a clear example of the regulation of women's bodies and a form of patriarchal oppression, might paradoxically be seen by the women of *Toldot Aharon* as an expression of empowerment and superiority.

The findings of this study describe the hegemonic voices in the *Toldot Aharon* group, the views of the dominant social center of this group. Yet, some "alternative," underground views have been heard as well. Even though the latter dissident views were expressed by only a small minority, they should not be ignored. The very fact of their existence shows that even within the most extreme groups there is a minority of women who strive for greater openness. Hence, these groups, in spite of their strict rules and self-isolation, are not completely immune to the feminist influences of the "outside" world.

Notes

* This article is based on a broader study of the world of the Hassidic women in the *Toldot Aharon* group. The research was conducted for a doctoral study under the supervision of Prof. Menachem Friedman, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Friedman for his mentoring. In addition, my thanks go to a number of funds for their support during the research: The Schupf Fund, the Memorial Fund for Jewish Culture, and the Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Center for the Study of Jewish Women at Bar-Ilan University.

[1] Those few who did so (Seigelshife, 2006) did not investigate it among zealot groups but among Modern-Orthodox Jewish women.

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