

## Covering of the Hair

You have promised to give your hand in marriage to a good and honest man, in order to establish a Jewish home together with him. This decision did not come suddenly to you. The years of your youth that lie behind you have been years of mental and spiritual training for your future vocation in life. In marriage you will find fulfillment and the satisfaction that stems from devotion to the intentions of God. You are prepared to place all of your energies in the service of this most sacred of ideals and to fill to the best of your ability the position in which Divine Providence has placed you.

You do not enter marriage unprepared, for you do not want to gamble with your life. It is to the realization of the Will of God that you consecrate your life. It has always been your most fervent desire to perceive and understand that Will. You wish to be able to see ever more clearly the paths upon which God's Will guides you. You know His law of life and pledge to give it unswerving obedience.

For would it indeed be a Divine law of life if you were to obey or disobey it at random? Such an attitude on your part would mean that you would no longer obey God, no longer feel bound to a Divine code, no longer heed His Word; you would stand helpless in His great world, and would not know the purpose of your life. But you do want to live; you want to know the purpose of your life, and therefore you need the guidance of His Law and swear to it your faithful allegiance. On the basis of His Law you set up your home together with your husband; it remains dedicated to His Law; and it is in accordance with His Law, too, that you raise your children and convert your home into a sanctuary in which the loving Presence of God may dwell.

Will you cover your hair after marriage? I see a look of surprise on your face. I do not know whether you are astonished at what is being asked, or whether you just wonder that such a question even need be asked of you. I hardly think that this regulation could be

foreign to you. You need only look around you and find Jewish women who cover their hair when entering into marriage. If you were merely surprised that this question need be asked at all, then I have judged you correctly and I am sure you will pardon the question.

But what if the covering should disfigure you or cause you discomfort? I see you smiling, and again I recognize you for what you are. For could such arguments influence you when it is a matter of following a sacred Jewish tradition or even a Divine law?

But if such arguments influence you, then there is one point I must speak to you about, for then I would know where my duty lies. Why, if this were really true of you, then you would indeed have cause to be ashamed of yourself. Life demands great sacrifices and, frequently, even the surrender of our dearest possessions, and the conscientious person does not hesitate for a moment as long as he knows that such sacrifices are required of him by the Will of God. And would anyone then hold back and hesitate to sacrifice considerations of vanity and convenience where there is a question of fulfilling ideal requirements? Jewish life expects of a woman that she become a loving and understanding partner to her husband and a wise guide to her children. Indeed, it would hardly redound to the credit of the future Jewish wife were she to refuse to cover her hair because of such motives. What would she then be able to tell her children some day if they should reach for a razor blade in order to satisfy their vanity; if they should feel that the Shabbos is a burden to them because it runs counter to their convenience?

Are you familiar with that chapter in the Torah (*Bemidbar* Ch. 5) which deals with measures that Divine Law has provided for dealing with a woman who has strayed from the paths of unblemished morality and chastity, from whose head the crown has fallen — a diadem which the Prophet (*Michah* 6:8) calls צניעות and which sees the highest glory for the Jewish woman in a life lived “quietly and modestly walking with God”? Such a fallen woman must come before the scrutinizing eye of God, she must stand before the Priest in the Temple, and the latter will remove the crown from her head — “he uncovers the head of the woman.” This teaches you, com-

ment the Sages (*Kesubos* 72a), that Jewish women never uncover their hair. Or, as *Sifre* formulates the rule that is derived from the passage ופרע את ראש האשה (*Bemidbar* 5:18): “This is to teach you that Jewish women are to cover their hair.” God expects that Jewish women will never uncover their hair. By the act of having her hair uncovered, the unfaithful is deprived of the right to bear this symbol of Jewish womanhood. Jewish women will wear it proudly; it is an Order with which God has decorated them. It may not always enhance their beauty, but it will always bring them honor. Has anyone ever refused to accept the Order of the Garter with which the King desired to honor him — just because its regalia does not suit his personal taste? Indeed, is it not the idea represented by the symbol that lends dignity and beauty even to the most unpretentious? And the Prophet said: It is not the garments that adorn the bride, it is the bride herself “who lends grace to her garments” (*Yeshayahu* 61:10).

By covering her hair and thus wearing this mark of distinction as required by God, the Jewish woman declares herself ready to comply with all the demands that the Law places upon her. This symbol is quite ancient — as old as the Law of God.

The mothers of our people, those glorious women who are the pride of our nation, who fully understood their vocation in life and upon whose selfless devotion to sacred duty the future of our people could safely depend — these women bore this symbol of dignity. What Jewish woman who truly understands her calling in life would not feel her heart beat more proudly at the thought that some day she, too, would be named along with those who conscientiously and with understanding took up the heritage left to their daughters by these women! The Jewish woman who covers her hair wears the visible token that ennobled the mothers of our people — and she will not prove unworthy of this token.

Of course it is just an outward sign and it may be worn by someone whose way of life is unworthy of the true significance of this sign. You yourself may know some women whose conduct is a mockery of this symbol, and, on the other hand, you are acquainted with others who do not wear it and yet their conduct is in no way

inferior to that of any other conscientious woman. All this may be true. But would this not be true also of other Divine commandments? Is not the milah, too, merely an outward sign which should admonish the boy to grow up to be a man of moral perfection? And is the mark of milah on a morally degenerated man not a gross mockery of all that milah would have him be? But what father would fail to have milah performed on his child for this reason?

But then you might say that the practice of covering the hair does not seem to be a custom followed by Jews only; it is the common heritage of the Orient, and thus it brings to mind the inferior position of women in the East and the degradations that were associated with the harem.

I know that such a thought will never enter your mind. You are much too aware of the dignity inherent in the Jewish woman, of the position that is hers, of the realization that a Jewish marriage is something sacred and ennobling. You have carefully studied the Divine Books; the mighty words of the Prophets have resounded in your ears, and you would never enter into marriage so poorly prepared for this sacred calling. And even if, upon superficial examination, there might seem to be some truth in this argument — might it not be possible that two persons might engage in the same practice, but each for quite different reasons than the other? Does not the Oriental also pray and offer up sacrifices, does he not also have temples, priests and prophets — and, still, would you be so thoughtless as to consider identical certain phenomena and concepts which, while seemingly alike, actually represent ideas diametrically opposed to each other by virtue of the spirit in which each is performed?

The covering of the hair is to be the outwardly visible sign which will show that the Jewish woman is ready to fulfill the ideals that she has been called upon to follow. Thus Jewish law wills it. The woman who uncovers her hair “treats Jewish law with utter contempt” (נקראת עוברת על דת יהודית) (*Kesubos* 72a; *Even Ha'ezer* 115). However faultless her own personal conduct and her conception of life, she still could not be spared this reproach. And it is sad indeed not to be able to accord to a woman the full measure of esteem

which would be due her because of her great merits in life — just because there was this one point to which she had not given sufficiently serious consideration. Had she been consistent in her thinking, she would have come to one conclusion only. And if she is blessed with children who have grown up to dedicate their lives to the same ideals she holds dear, then she may truly thank God upon her knees that all her endeavors of education did not come to naught because of this one inconsistency on her part. For what answer would she have been able to give her children had they questioningly pointed to that particular place in the book of God which enjoins the Jewish woman to cover her hair?

But wait. I am convinced that that Jewess — that mother as I imagine her to be pure of heart, serious of mind and profound in understanding — had she been acquainted with that particular verse in the Law, she would not have hesitated for an instant to bow her head willingly and proudly to the call of the Law. For it is ignorance above all, but also regrettable example, that has alienated many a home from this sacred commandment. The annals of history have yet to be written to prove just how often the example set by only one Jewish woman of importance was sufficient to cause this hallowed practice to vanish in the course of time from entire communities. But this fact would only serve to inspire dutiful Jewish women to set a new example and to take up once again this holy symbol with which Jewish law has sought to ennoble them. They will want to join hands across the ages with the mothers of bygone centuries and millennia who have shown them a glorious example of lives lived in service to God.

And even if their own mothers did not cover their hair, the daughters may be sure of their blessing and approval. For is there a happier feeling for parents than the knowledge that their children have surpassed them and have been able to achieve that which they failed to accomplish? Parents rejoice at the thought that their children have progressed from the point where they themselves had to leave off, and that their offspring have surpassed them, if that is possible, in active self-discipline. "We were not perfect," thus they would call to us from the eternal life, "be better, be stronger than

we have been, reach for the good that you could learn from our example and do not let yourself be misled by our faults — we were not perfect.” But what about “reverence” for the example set by our parents? Who would be so thoughtless as to apply this oft-abused term in this connection, this word that has all too often been used to serve convenience and self-deception so well? Do you also reverently cease your efforts for material gains at the point where your parents had stopped before you? Do you not, indeed, try to surpass their efforts wherever possible? Yet you would apply this false concept of reverence to your efforts towards moral advancement and thus endanger your own lives and the future of your children?

You are determined to cover your hair because you know that you thereby obey Jewish law, and it is your wish that all that Jewish law commands us takes firm root in your home. But the more you familiarize yourself with the thought of accepting this particular law, which is to designate you, also outwardly, as one of those women upon whose strength God has founded the future of His people, the more you will feel the urge to know more about the motives which may have led the Divine Lawgiver to expect His women to cover their hair.

Here, the words of our Sages come to your aid and show you the way to better understanding. They conceive of woman's hair as “ervah” (שער אשה ערוה, *Berachos* 24a), as a “nakedness,” the covering of which the Law demands. And this thought will take you back to the beginning of mankind when God handed a garment to the first human couple with which to cover their nakedness. Sensual urges had cost man his dearest treasures; the Divine Word of Life had to make way for the whispered insinuations of sensual considerations, the body triumphed over the Divine soul and the soul felt ashamed of the body. A poor light indeed is cast here upon the first woman. She had forgotten her obligations which had once brought her to man as עזר כנגדו — his helpmate — that she might, jointly with him as his equal partner, bring to realization a great Divine ideal of life, a goal that no individual could ever achieve alone. Broken was the bond of their marriage, a bond that lent nobility and dignity to their lives only as long as their life together would serve the fulfill-

ment of God's requirements. Dimmed was the light of life whose guard should have been her most sacred concern. The physical charms that she could regard as her pride and glory as long as they were instruments of the Divine soul were lowered to the animal level. And so they came to be ashamed of their bodies. And God, His discipline tempered by kindness, handed them garments to remind them henceforth to let the body step back, lest the soul be robbed of its sovereignty. The Word of God applies the term "ervah" to any life that does not allow itself to be governed by the Law of God. Wherever men succumb to the lure of animal lust, God sees in their true "nakedness" those who have thrown off the garment that calls them to the heights of life's attainments. Woe to the man and the woman whose marriage is but "ervah" in the eyes of God (*Vayikra* Ch. 18)! We stand mourning at the grave of human dignity forfeited.

The Jewish woman understood this admonition. Her marriage was henceforth to be Divine. Although she once dimmed the light of her husband's soul, she is henceforth resolved, as his *עוֹר כְּנֻגְדוֹ*, to increase that light for him, and, united with him, to consecrate her marriage to the fulfillment of the goals set by God. She lights the Shabbos candles for her husband to let him know that she is ready to build a home consecrated to the Shabbos, to a life that will find favor in the eyes of God. And she covers her hair (perhaps in mourning, as it were, because she once did succumb to sensual desires and thus robbed her marriage of its Divine quality [*Pirkei d'Rebbi Eliezer* 14]); she modestly hides that which would ordinarily commend itself to the eyes and the senses, for it is not that which is her pride. This symbol speaks loudly. Whoever wishes to respect and esteem her should honor in her the wife who brightens the path of life for her husband, and the mother who guides her children through life. Are our Sages not justified if they suspect "ervah" wherever a Jewish woman scorns this symbol, which commends itself to her under such lofty prerequisites?

Jewish women: If you wish to honor yourselves, if you wish to be recognized at first glance for what you are — then do not reject this Jewish symbol! The history of our people looks with pride

upon its women. They were once instrumental in saving their people; the redemption of the future, too, lies in their hands. The Jewish woman who proudly and confidently covers her hair upon entering the married state silently takes a sacred vow, and with profound understanding she sees the path that is ahead of her, a path to which she was called by Divine command.

You have understood me. This covering is a holy symbol for you. You will fulfill what it demands of you. You will now understand the proud and happy mother who saw high priestly honors vested in her sons and was asked which particular merit of hers enabled her to be so successful in raising her children. She replied simply: "The walls of my house did not look upon the hair of my head" (*Yoma* 47a). But you will also understand how right our Sages were when they said pensively and sadly, "Many did likewise and yet had no such success" (*ibid.*). For not all women at all times understood the meaning of this covering and its requirements — and not all those who did understand had sufficient strength to fulfill these requirements in their married lives. May God grant you His aid in this, your sacred endeavor.