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Great Expectations: the role of the wig stylist (*sheitel macher*) in orthodox Jewish salons

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Abstract

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Wigs are curious liminal objects that hover somewhere between the categories of prosthesis and clothing and offer a variety of possibilities for the transformation of appearances from hair substitution and covering to disguise. In this article I focus on the particular demands and expectations placed upon the *sheitel* (Yiddish term for wig) worn by increasing numbers of married Jewish women who identify as *frum* (Torah-observant). Based on research in Jewish wig salons in Britain and the United States and on Jewish online forums, internet discussions and blogs with a wider geographic reach, this article sets out to show the complex web of material, social, emotional, aesthetic and moral concerns that cluster around the *sheitel* and to highlight the role of the *sheitel macher* (wig stylist) in managing these anxieties and expectations. If all wigs are fraught with expectations in terms of their capacity to enable successful social performances, *sheitels*, it is argued, carry a particularly high burden of expectations owing to their contested and multivalent role as material embodiments of religious commitment, social status and fashion competence and owing to the ambivalent feelings many Jewish women have towards their wigs.

A. The Paradox of the *sheitel*

The *sheitel* occupies a contested place in contemporary Judaism. It is worn by a wide variety of women from Ashkenazi backgrounds including not only those who belong to strict Haredi sects but also other Jewish women who identify with varying degrees of orthodoxy.¹ Some favor it as an appropriate form of head covering which serves the purpose of keeping a woman's hair concealed whilst at the same time conveniently offering the appearance of hair. Yet precisely because it is made from hair, the *sheitel* is considered redundant or even hypocritical by others who suggest that wigs defeat the very purpose of hair covering. Within orthodox Judaism, *kishoi roi* (the law of head covering) is intended not only to keep a married woman's hair private to all men except her husband but also to indicate her marital status to others and ensure that her modesty is maintained. A glamorous *sheitel* that looks realistic and is often intentionally more beautiful than a woman's own hair seems to fail on both the latter counts. Some Jewish wig wearers respond to the accusation from other *frum* Jews that their wigs are too realistic by wearing a hat on top, thereby adding an extra layer of modesty and making their marital status explicit. This has given rise to the development of collective styles of head covering amongst some sects. For example in Williamsburg, an orthodox neighborhood of Brooklyn in New York, women from the Satmar community are recognizable by the small pillar box hats they wear on top of their neat well-coiffed above-the-shoulder *sheitels*. In the main shopping street of Lee Avenue there is even a specialist shop selling a wide variety of elegant silk black and navy hats designed for wearing on top of wigs. (see Fig. 1)

The nuances of the *sheitel* tend to be lost on people who identify as conservative or reform Jews, most of whom consider head covering unnecessary. For example, a Reform responsum in 1990 reads, "We Reform Jews object vigorously to this requirement for women, which places them in an inferior position and sees them primarily in a sexual role" (Salzberg n.d.). In their view *sheitels* are a primitive hangover from the past, indicative of oppressive patriarchal norms which

should have no place in contemporary Judaism. At the other end of the spectrum, some strictly *frum* Haredi women consider the *sheitel* insufficiently modest by comparison to other forms of head-covering such as scarves, turbans and snoods. For example on the website, Tznius Tips, an authoritative *rabbonit* (rabbi's wife or female leading authority) dressed in a deep black hat can be seen delivering a lecture on head covering in which she specifies that *sheitels* are only permissible if they meet the three criteria of being recognizable as wigs, being no longer than the top vertebra of the spinal cord and being neat and modest. The video of the lecture ends with a disclaimer on the screen which states that "there is no kosher wig today" as contemporary wigs do not meet the condition that they are recognizable as wigs.² These different readings of the *sheitel* make *sheitel* wearing subject to a variety of moral judgments from friends, relatives, rabbis and the wider community, adding pressure to headwear choices. Whether she likes it or not, a Jewish woman's headwear places her within landscapes of orthodoxy and is often read as a barometer of community affiliation and a litmus test of her level of piety and religious observance (Schreiber 2006, 14; Carrel 1999; Tarlo 2016a).

The religious logic of the *sheitel* is made more complex by the fact that it is not a traditional form of Jewish headwear and there are no biblical references to wigs in the Torah (Jewish bible). What the Torah and the Talmud (interpretive texts) do contain, however, are passages that associate hair covering with virtue and hair exposure with sexual impropriety and immorality. There is, for example, a much-cited reference in the Torah to a married woman suspected of adultery being shamed in public by a priest uncovering and exposing her hair (Numbers 5:18). Also popularly cited is a passage from the Talmud describing a woman who has seven sons who are all high priests. Asked how she merited such sons, she replied that not even the rafters of her own house had ever seen her hair (cited in Salzberg n.d.). From such references comes the assumption that virtuous Jewish wives traditionally kept their hair bound and covered and that Torah-observant Jews should do the same. According to Jewish law (*Halakhoth*) a woman's hair is considered erotic (*ervah*) and along with other areas of the body including the neck, upper arms, elbows, thighs and knees, should be kept covered in conformity with the principals of modesty (*tzniuth*). There is a considerable body of rabbinical opinion offering commentary on these matters. For example, in Eliyahu Ki Tov's *The Jew and his Home* (a manual for Torah-observant Jews), it states, "A woman's hair is lovely. Reserved for her husband's eyes, her loveliness is sacred, in keeping with the laws of modesty" (1963, 77, cited in Carrel 165). According to some sources, a woman's failure to cover her hair offers her husband grounds for divorce (*ibid*). The close relationship between religious orthodoxy, patriarchy and domestic hair politics is playfully captured in a cartoon by New Yorker cartoonist, Benjamin Schwartz (Fig. 2). Today injunctions about hair covering are reproduced in a variety of formats from circulars, posters, pamphlets, tapes, YouTube videos, websites and blogs. Most women who self identify as '*frum*' and who follow the teachings and interpretations of orthodox rabbis, consider head covering to be part of the commandment of modesty (*tzniuth*) which is one of the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) that observant Jews are entreated to follow.

Whilst such textual interpretations explain the fact of head covering they do not explain the form. Why *sheitels*? For this it is necessary to turn not to religious texts but to fashion history. As Leila Leah Bronner points out in her historiography of Jewish head covering practices, the *sheitel* first came into fashion when European Jewish women began to follow Parisian ladies of fashion in the sixteenth century

(Bronner 1993). The adoption of the wig by Jewish women was initially condemned by most rabbinical authorities either on the grounds that wigs represented inappropriate emulation of the ‘ways of nations’ or on the grounds that wigs could evoke the same feelings of sexual arousal in men as a woman’s own hair (ibid). The fact that women persisted in wearing their *sheitels* in spite of rabbinical condemnation highlights a dynamic that has continued to characterize *sheitel* debates ever since. As I have discussed elsewhere, the *sheitel* cannot be understood exclusively as a religious phenomenon. Its evolution and development have always depended on a relationship of creative friction between religious regulation and fashion that has played out differently at different historical moments (Tarlo 2016b).

Recent developments in wig technology such as delicate lace fronts, machine-stitched hair wefts and micro-mesh caps along with the adoption of modern advertising techniques have, in recent years, served to accentuate the fashion status of the *sheitel* whilst the rising cost of human hair on the global market makes human hair wigs a luxury item and status symbol (Tarlo 2016a). A long off-the-shelf machine-wefted human hair *sheitel* retails at around £700 to £1000 whilst a custom-made *sheitel* sells for between £2000 to £5000 depending on whether it is machine stitched or hand knotted. Some contain a mixture of machine-stitched wefts with hand-knotted lace fronts and closure pieces to give a more realistic look at the hairline and parting. Whilst synthetic wigs are considerably cheaper they do not have the same kudos and appeal either as items of fashion or social status. Many modern *frum* wives and brides-to-be prefer to invest in the more realistic and costly human hair *sheitel*. Jewish-owned companies, familiar with the desires of their clients, use modern media such as Facebook and YouTube advertisements and tutorials to highlight the glamorous possibilities of the *sheitel*. For example in 2013, the American company, Freeda wigs, began offering *sheitel* makeovers, launching the idea through giving a wig makeover to the hip *frum* blogger Allison Joseph, otherwise known as the “Jew in the City.” In the video documenting the process, Joseph, who sports a neat shoulder length wig, is admonished for having worn the same *sheitel* for four years of episodes of “Jew in the City.” We are told that she needs a fun new look. Later in the video we see her in the *sheitel* salon and shop dancing playfully, but not immodestly, in a variety of Freeda wigs before finally emerging transformed in a long and luxuriant wig which has been cut and curled to give an extravagant Kim Kardashian kind of look with an excess of luscious shiny locks. For an example of glamorous wigs on sale in another New York Jewish wig salon, see Fig. 3.

“Jewish modesty is not about looking unattractive or ugly,” Joseph comments, “it’s about keeping certain parts of yourself private from the rest of the world.”³ She goes on to mention how she learned that Freeda wigs was given a blessing by the Lubavitcha rabbi who wanted women to feel beautiful in their wigs so that they could perform the mitzvah of head covering more easily. This is a reference to Rabbi Sneerson, leader of the Lubavitch community until his death in 1994, who, from the 1950s onwards, campaigned in favor of women wearing attractive wigs as he felt that if *sheitel* were made more appealing it would encourage more women to cover their heads (Slonim 2003). For him wigs were superior to scarves because scarves could be whipped off at whim whereas women were unlikely to take off their *sheitels* since their hair would be squashed underneath. *Sheitels* could, he argued, have a beneficial moral effect on children and grandchildren, and husbands were encouraged to purchase expensive, high quality wigs to make it easier for their wives to cover. It was a marriage of religious law and fashion. Following this logic, Joseph

comments that she has always felt beautiful in her Freeda wigs and “doing mitzvahs with joy is such an essential part of Judaism.”

Another American company, Milano Collection, which has showrooms in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, also makes ample use of modern media, releasing video publicities when launching new wigs (for an example of Milano hair pieces with velcro fastenings for attaching to hats, see Fig. 4). In a video entitled “Victoria has a Secret,” a young woman with long flouncy hair is seen luxuriating by a swimming pool looking cool and sexy in her natural looking hair which only emerges as a wig at the end of the video when she removes it teasingly.⁴ Here the wig features as some sort of undetectable beauty secret for Jewish women. Meanwhile practical tips on *sheitel* upkeep and how to achieve particular looks are offered through a series of “Wig Wisdom” videos given by a Milano stylist from within a *sheitel* store. In addition, some *frum* women set themselves up as wig reviewers on social media. In one video called, “Sneak peak of the up and coming Milano wig,” a woman sporting a pale blond ‘secret wig’ with dark roots which replicate the effect of undyed roots, offers a number of close-up shots of her wig along with commentary such as, “This looks ultra natural – better than my bio-hair ever did.”⁵

Whilst the Internet is a space where *sheitels* feature as objects of glamour and desire, it is also home to discussion forums and blogs in which *frum* women often express more ambivalent attitudes towards their wigs. In one discussion forum on the progressive *frum* website, *imamother.com*, for example, a number of women have posted up spoof poems to their *sheitels*, some set to popular tunes or written in the form of Shakespeare sonnets. Some express extreme dislike of their wigs, lamenting the sight of them on the dressing table, complaining about the discomfort of wearing them or expressing their desperate desire for an improved replacement.⁶

In a particularly evocative article published in the American Jewish online magazine, *Tablet*, the writer Tova Ross gives a detailed description of her complicated relationship with her *sheitel*, “a custom-made \$1200 masterpiece of long silky layers dyed a deep, rich chocolate color” which she named Esmeralda (Ross 2015). The wig was seductive, giving her an undeniably sexy and sophisticated look but it was also uncomfortable and awkward to wear. “Esmeralda and I simply didn’t take to each other,” she comments (*ibid.*). When she moved “away from the keeping-up-with-the-Goldbergs rat race of Brooklyn” (*ibid.*) to a town outside New York, she found that her *sheitel* singled her out amongst other members of the local synagogue as a virtuous paragon of orthodoxy – a role which she found oppressive and uncomfortable. She started feeling resentful towards Esmeralda and eventually abandoned her, first in favor of a scarf and finally in favor of uncovered hair. Her attitude to head covering symbolized a wider disillusionment with many of the rules and regulations that accompany strict Torah observance. “And while my spouse has been open and supportive of my exploration,” she writes, “he genuinely loves the rules I find so restrictive and finds they enhance his spirituality while I have come to feel they can only hinder mine” (*ibid.*). Her article points to shifting landscapes of orthodoxy within some Jewish families where different levels of observance often co-exist. Whilst she was FFB (*frum* for birth) her husband had been brought up in a more liberal family but their levels of observance have since reversed. For Tova Ross, her *sheitel* acted as a register of her feelings towards orthodoxy. Though she has stopped wearing Esmeralda, she finds she cannot bear to throw her out but instead leaves her on display on her dresser as a witness to her life and as “the original symbol of her discontent.” She ends by commenting, “after all, I’m still really fond of her – now that I don’t have to wear her” (*ibid.*).

Tova Ross's article highlights a number of themes that surfaced in my own ethnographic research amongst *frum* women in London and New York. Many women expressed finding wigs uncomfortable and restrictive but also seductive since they symbolized an ideal of Jewish womanhood and gave the opportunity to have almost perfect hair (see for example Fig. 5 where social conformity, moral virtue and fashion awareness are all on display in the orthodox neighborhood of Williamsburg in Brooklyn). They therefore invested considerable amounts of time and money in their wigs and found themselves developing complicated relationships with them as if the *sheitel* were a register of their feelings towards themselves and their faith. Whilst people complained of the social and moral judgments attached to *sheitels* and were critical of the rising costs of human hair wigs, they nonetheless found themselves judging each other by their *sheitels* in terms of what they implied not just about levels of religious observance but also about social status and fashion. Many explained that they found head-covering the most difficult commandment to keep but, unlike Tova Ross, most of the women I interviewed did not consider abandoning their wigs. Rather they took the mitzvah of head covering as a perpetual challenge worthy of pursuit that was all the more worthy precisely because it was such a demanding challenge. In these personal narratives the *sheitel* was associated with high levels of self-sacrifice and personal struggle. Its adoption marked a woman's struggle to live a Torah-observant life but it also featured as an opportunity to have beautiful hair. No doubt partly because many women found head covering so difficult, they invested large amounts of time and emotion on trying to find the perfect *sheitel* and on getting improvements made to existing *sheitels* (Tarlo 2016a). Most women had at least three *sheitels* – two for everyday wear and one for Sabbath and special occasions. Some had many more than this. Not only did they have to maintain these wigs but they also maintained their own hair underneath, getting it cut, styled and in some cases dyed.⁷ Far from taking focus away from hair, the *sheitel* seemed to encourage intense levels of engagement with it, for *sheitels* were objects of intense moral, religious, aesthetic, practical and financial concern. In these circumstances it is not surprising to find that women placed extremely high expectations on their *sheitels* and that wig stylists found themselves in the complicated position of trying to manage this heady mix of expectations in the context of the salon.

B. Jewish Wig Salons

Jewish wig salons are generally located in areas with high concentrations of orthodox Jewish residents. From the outside they tend to be discrete establishments with humble exteriors, minimal signage and frosted or blocked up windows which prevent people from looking in. Yet behind these humble exteriors are dynamic spaces in which *sheitel machers* offer a wide range of services from wig washing, cutting, coloring, fitting and styling, education about wig maintenance, psychological support and fashion advice. Some also sell off-the-shelf wigs and offer in-house alteration services whilst a few offer bespoke wig making on site. Gaining access to such spaces as an outsider was not easy. These are secluded spaces that operate by appointment only and cater specifically to the orthodox Jewish population as well as people suffering from hair loss who come to them for their specialist knowledge of wigs. Initially my enquiries were greeted with wariness but later *sheitel machers* proved extremely receptive to discussing the challenges of their trade, and generously allowed me to spend time in their salons and to observe and interact with clients. One theme that emerged strongly from these encounters was the extent to which *sheitel machers* saw themselves as therapists and advisors as much as

stylists. “It’s not just about styling hair but listening to people and dealing with their emotions,” a North London stylist, Rifka told me whilst working a pair of straightening tongs through a *sheitel* perched on a mannequin head in her salon (see Figs. 6 and 7).

We get so much emotion in here – women bursting into tears needing advice and new brides who want their wigs to be perfect straight away. But it’s never like that. I have to prepare them and teach them that a wig needs styling and that every head is different and everyone moves differently too. People need to try a wig on and get used to it. They have to think first about fit, comfort and color, and only later about getting the details right such as adding baby hairs or highlights. It’s like finalizing a dress. You don’t put the beadwork and lace on straight away. But brides get very emotional. They want to look perfect right away. You have to prepare them and manage their expectations. If I charged for a therapy session and threw a free haircut in on the side, I would be rich by now!

Rifka was referring to the fact that for many brides, the prospect of covering their hair is a daunting one, met with a mixture of excitement and dread. The wig marks a transitional moment from girlhood to married status. Most brides wear their *sheitels* for the first time either on the occasion of the wedding or, more commonly, the morning after their wedding night. A *sheitel macher* in New York informed me that according to Kabbalistic Jewish teachings, sexual contact is thought to charge the hair with a new erotic aura which is what necessitates its covering. Choosing whether to cover their hair and contemplating the different possibilities was a major preoccupation for young women approaching marriage and was met with a certain amount of trepidation.

Gali, a *sheitel macher* from an Israeli background who runs an upmarket family business in North London that offers custom made human hair wigs made by her husband and employees on site, pointed out that how a bride feels about wearing a *sheitel* depends both on the levels of religious observance maintained in her family and on the quality of her natural hair.

If you are from a very religious family then there’s no question. You know you will wear it [the *sheitel*] and that is that. But if a girl is medium level religious and if she has really nice hair, then she’s upset. If she has rubbish hair then she’s glad to wear it. But for some it’s very hard. If you have stunning hair it feels ridiculous to put a wig on it. Those are the people who want the very best wig possible. They will pay anything to have really beautiful hair. It’s much more difficult for them and yes, of course, there are sometimes tears!

One important role of the *sheitel macher* is to prepare brides for this transition and help them adapt to the prospect of wearing wigs. As *sheitel* wearers themselves they are only too aware that the relationship between a wig and its wearer is not a simple one. It has to be worked on. As Rifka put it, “You have to learn the wig and the wig has to learn you. It’s a two way process.” Stylists often encourage their clients to take a wig home, try it out, get used to its feel, before committing to how it should be adjusted. Gali’s receptionist, Leah, summed up the learning process by saying “It’s like wearing a bra for the first time! It takes about half an hour to put it on and it feels really strange. You have to break it in. Later, if you go out without it, you start to feel

naked!” Reflecting on the moment when a woman connects to her wig she commented, “It’s important and it’s deeply personal. It’s something we can help people with but only so far. At the end of the day only *you* can recognize the *me!*” This question of recognition was important. Although many women searched for wigs that they considered more beautiful than their own hair, they simultaneously wanted to hold on to a sense of the familiar to maintain continuity with their sense of self. “It’s normal that people want hair that looks like their own,” Gali told me. “It’s not about dressing up. It’s about making the best of yourself. But most people don’t just want a replication. They want an improvement!”

One way *sheitel machers* try to make wigs feel less alien is by incorporating some of a woman’s own hair into her wig. This is considered permissible by Jewish law because, once hair is disconnected, it no longer carries the same sexual connection and becomes a covering rather than a body part. Gali showed me a particularly long and glamorous glossy brown curly wig she had just made for a new bride whose own hair was long dark and curly. “This girl has beautiful hair so she’s going to find it hard to cover,” she told me. “What I’ve done is incorporate a little of her own hair into the front of the wig so that it looks more natural. The rest is made with fine quality European hair which is dyed to match her own...Having a bit of it in the front will make her feel more like herself.”

Later the girl in question who was due to get married the following week, came into the salon for a fitting. I saw her eye herself up in the mirror in her new wig as if rehearsing her imminent role as young wife. Her expression was dignified and seductive as if the glossy wig gave her new gravitas and sophistication. Gali warned her that given the length of the wig it was going to feel uncomfortably heavy and that she should try walking around with it at home to get used to the feel before her wedding. As she watched the girl leave the salon with her wig on a long necked polystyrene head, she sighed, giving the impression that she knew from experience just how challenging this young woman would find the experience of covering her beautiful hair. When another woman left the salon, after discussing a range of potential alterations for her wig, Gali told me that the client in question would never be content with her wigs because she simply hated wearing them. The young woman complained about the heat, weight and itchiness of the wigs but really she was suffering from psychological resistance to the *sheitel* that no stylist would ever be able to alleviate.

If helping brides-to-be adjust to their impending marital status was an important role of *sheitel machers*, so too was helping them manage their hair in relation to marital breakups. In particular there was the delicate question of whether a woman should continue to cover her hair in the case of divorce. Many people commented that it was inappropriate for divorced women to stop covering their hair since a person should never climb backwards in their level of religious observance. At the same time it was recognized that it was tough on divorced or widowed women to be expected to cover as this gave the impression they were married, thereby putting off potential suitors. In a pensive essay entitled, “A Widow’s Peek,” Shaine Spolter, a school teacher of Hebrew and Judaic Studies in Maryland, reflects on how covering her most distinctive and appealing feature – her red hair – may have played a role in preventing men from approaching her for marriage after she was widowed with seven children when still in her thirties. She had consulted her rabbi for advice and been told “one should not descend in levels of holiness but rather must constantly ascend” (Spolter 2003, 117). As a result she had always kept her hair hidden under hats. “Thus, I remain an oxymoron, a non-married person with a

married person's obligation," she writes. "I embrace my responsibilities both with joy and sadness. I am joyful to fulfill those obligations which elevate me to a level of holiness, but sad that I can't reach my full potential as a *shnayim* – a twosome" (ibid, 119).

Whilst the women I met took seriously the importance of consulting their rabbis for advice on such matters, they turned to *sheitel machers* for practical solutions. Three young divorcees I met in London had, with the help of their *sheitel machers*, found ways of adjusting their *sheitels* to reflect their changed status in subtle ways. One was wearing an undetectable half wig attached to a baseball cap; another wore a so called "U" wig which enabled her to pull some of her own hair over the parting area, thereby disguising the fact that she was wearing a wig and yet a third had invested in an "i-band" a lace fronted fringe that was particularly effective in concealing the fact that she was wearing a wig. In the case of the young woman who wore the "U" wig, she had told her rabbi that if she were not allowed to wear this type of undetectable wig, then she would stop covering her hair altogether. The third had managed to convince her rabbi that covering her hair was unnecessary and possibly even inappropriate given that she was in her early twenties and hoping to re-marry. In this way women at the more liberal end of the orthodox spectrum found ways of negotiating with rabbis whilst at the same time still showing respect for their authority.

While practical and psychological support are important facets of the *sheitel macher's* role, so too is her role as fashion mediator. Many of the *sheitel machers* I met had initially gone into the trade through frustration at the frumpishness of the wigs previously available to Jewish women. Not surprisingly, they were enthusiastic promoters of the idea that wigs could be fashionable and desirable, offering an improvement on women's actual hair and they themselves often wore wigs that were entirely undetectable. Some also modeled the latest wigs and hair pieces on the market, advertising new products to their clients and giving examples of how to achieve certain aesthetic effects. For example the first time I met Rifka, she had her hair styled in a three-part arrangement. Her own long hair was concealed under a woolen beanie (crocheted hat). Attached to the inner rim of the hat by Velcro fastenings were long wefts of Chinese hair which hung well past her bosom, whilst attached to the front was a lace fronted fringe piece designed to give a naturalistic look. The overall effect was cool and hip and looked decidedly 'unwiggy' (see fig. 6).

The quest for wigs that do not look like wigs was something of an obsession for many women, and *sheitel machers* often went to considerable lengths to help them achieve a natural look. Techniques included adding fine angora goat's hair to the edges of the wig to give the impression of baby hairs, adding highlights and low lights, and adding hand knotted 'closure pieces' to make a realistic looking parting. It is as if the feeling that covering is unnatural has created a fetishization of the natural in the *sheitel*. Finding aesthetic techniques for disguising the fact that a woman is wearing a *sheitel* has become an important part of the *sheitel macher's* art. Claire Grunwald, a highly experienced *sheitel macher* who learned wig making in Nuremburg just after the Second World War and has been making wigs in Brooklyn for over 50 years, has recently put these techniques to new uses by making custom-made hand-knotted lace fronted yak hair beards and *peyos* (side curls) for orthodox Jewish men suffering from alopecia. That such hairpieces are commissioned at considerable cost is a reminder that appropriate hair management is also an issue for men especially in strict Haredi communities. Claire took pride in the fact that her

beards, like her wigs, were entirely undetectable when worn. She herself wore a highly naturalistic wig which could easily be mistaken for her own hair (see Fig. 8).

Yet the naturalistic appearance of some *sheitels* is also what attracts criticism from those concerned that wigs are deceptive and insufficiently modest. On YouTube a young rabbi can be seen recounting the cautionary tale of a married woman in Los Angeles who had gate crashed a Jewish singles night, hiding her marital status under a wig that was so realistic that nobody realized that she was not available for courting. In this tale the deceptive nature of the wig becomes indistinguishable from and indicative of the untrustworthiness of the wearer.⁸ Some strict Haredi sects prefer women to wear synthetic wigs or to paint over the parting area of their wigs, thereby making the wig less naturalistic. Others advocate hats and headscarves as preferred coverings.

In her article, “Searching for the Perfect Wig,” Carol Ungar describes the escalating pressures around *sheitels* and the difficulties of resisting the cult for wig perfection in and around Jerusalem. On the one hand she feels discontented with the matronly and outdated *sheitel* she wears with hair, “so stiff it could probably be mowed into toothbrush bristles” (Ungar 2012). On the other hand she feels ambivalent about the “hyper-natural and hyper-expensive ‘I can’t believe it’s a *sheitel*’ wigs” currently in fashion. Unable to resist the appeal of these glamorous wigs and “too vain to resign herself to a headscarf or hat,” she finds herself on an interminable quest in search of the perfect *sheitel*. “That is because, in the haredi world in which I live,” she comments, “a *sheitel* is like high-heeled shoes: it is a sign that I’m ready to venture beyond the supermarket.” After much visiting of *sheitel* shops in orthodox neighborhoods and attending one-off evening *sheitel* sales, she ends up with the latest hair piece – a fringe that can be clipped on and worn with her band fall (a half wig attached to a hair band). “On my head, the piece is an eighteen-year-old’s hair framing my 53-year-old face, like Dorian Grey in reverse,” she comments. But by the time she gets it home, the clip has sprung open and she decides she looks more like Marge Simpson! So she ends up back where she started – dissatisfied with her old wig but incapable of finding the perfect alternative. It is an almost paradigmatic account of the impossibility of ever quite finding complete satisfaction in a *sheitel*.

The quest for perfection presents itself as a major challenge to *sheitel* stylists who are charged with the role of bringing new life to tired and worn out *sheitels*, taming wild *sheitels* into submission and revamping favored old *sheitels*. When a new *sheitel* is purchased it generally contains too much hair so that it can be cut and styled to suit the specifications of the wearer. However cutting a wig is not like cutting a person’s own hair, not least because the hair does not grow back. Furthermore the cost of human hair wigs adds to the tension around cutting them. *Sheitel* suppliers tend to protect themselves against complaints by making it clear that once cut a wig cannot be returned. Many also specify that they will only guarantee a wig if it is brought back to the salon for washing and styling rather than being looked after at home where the risk of damage is greater. (Fig. 9)

Not all *sheitel* stylists are women. In New York, Italian-American stylist, Ralf Mollica has long been catering to wealthy Jewish clients by supplying hand-knotted custom-made wigs to order. Highly attuned to the complex balance of modesty and glamour expected in wigs, he told me,

The orthodox girls all want an improvement. It’s like God didn’t give them quite the right color, texture or hairline, so they have to go to the supergods to

sort it out! An improvement generally means more hair but if you add too much it stops looking natural and gets farcical 'cos the wig that looks really natural is the *no wig wig*!

Ralph spends much of his time convincing his wealthy American and international clients of the need for more subtlety in their wigs. Similarly Roi Karach, a young Israeli hairdresser who has gained a reputation for *sheitel* styling in North London, finds that he spends a lot of time thinning wigs to achieve a more natural look. Referring to his background in engineering, he talked about the need to develop the right techniques for cutting machine-made wigs which were structured in lines of wefted hair.

If the wig has been made in a series of lines, then if you layer it that will make a series of steps which looks terrible. So you have to learn to cut into it at angles. Usually when I'm cutting a wig I use three or four different types of scissors... The wig is not built like a human head of hair so you have to think around it differently.

In cases where he is unable to touch female clients, Roi cuts wigs on mannequin heads with the owner standing nearby, trying the wig on from time to time, sometimes with the additional supervision of a husband.

Another North London stylist and wig maker, Natania, offers a range of services including adding highlights, low lights and extensions to wigs (see Fig. 10). When I met her she had plans to set up a wig rental service, enabling women to experiment with different styles by renting glamorous and exciting wigs for special occasions. Her experiments were in part motivated by her own frustrations at the restrictions of wearing a *sheitel* and at the limitation of styling options that wigs enabled. She had been experimenting with ombre dying techniques and fishbone plaits. The idea that, through providing aesthetic improvements, they were also providing moral encouragement and support for religious observance, was a common theme. Onat, a *sheitel* stylist interviewed in her shop in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, comments about her work: "It supports them [young women] in adding more laws to their life. That's my whole purpose here, to help those girls to lift up their confidence in the way that they know they look gorgeous and modest at the same time and serve God to the fullest in the nicest way."⁹

Beyond the physical, aesthetic and emotional challenges of wig management is the complexity of religious politics in which women's opinions are subordinated to those of male religious authorities. Rabbinical opinions are divided over wigs and when particularly prominent respected rabbis issue decrees about them, their opinions have repercussions for wig makers, stylists and wig wearers alike. Such was the case in 2004 when Rabbi Elyashiv, a 94-year-old rabbi in Israel announced a prohibition on the use of Indian hair in Jewish wigs. His objection was based on the fact that some of the Indian hair commonly used for *sheitels* was purchased from Hindu temples in South India where pilgrims travelled to undergo the ritual of tonsure (shaving). This raised concerns that such hair might be idolatrous according to Jewish Law and should be shunned since no Jew should gain benefit from anything derived from an idolatrous source. Elyashiv declared Indian hair non-kosher and called on women to burn their *sheitels*. Though based on partial and limited understanding of Hindu practices, it was a pronouncement that had major repercussions in *frum* circles, causing havoc to wig traders and wig wearers.¹⁰ The

idea that *sheitels* worn to improve religious practice were tainted by associations with idolatry in foreign lands was distressing and disturbing to many, especially since wigs were worn on the head, the most elevated part of the body (Landes 2010). Whether or not they agreed with the ban, and most of those with whom I spoke very clearly did not, *sheitels machers* found themselves having to cope with its aftermath. Claire Grunwald in New York remembers receiving endless phone calls from panicked clients who did not want to part with their precious wigs but did not dare wear them either. It was, she remembered “a terrible time” which had long standing repercussions for the Jewish wig industry. Following this controversy, *sheitel* manufacturers have made efforts to avoid the use of Indian hair, preferring to use the more expensive and less widely available European hair or sourcing hair from China.

The question of hair provenance remains, however, an issue of anxiety and concern that is currently being exploited by some Haredi rabbis in Israel who are keen to abolish the wearing of human hair wigs altogether. In 2017 four rabbis launched a new crusade against the human hair *sheitel*, arguing that it was impossible to ever know the true provenance of hair and claiming falsely that 98% of the hair on the global market was from Indian temples. Quoting from a number of unsubstantiated sources culled mainly from the Internet they have produced anti-wig propaganda and set up a telephone hair hotline on which they claim to offer “the truth about Indian hair” and make dramatic claims about the idolatry that is being perpetuated through human hair *sheitels*. Whilst these rabbis have not been successful at obtaining support from key figures of authority in the Haredi world, they have nonetheless caused considerable anxiety to some *sheitel machers*. One wig maker, Daniele Sullivan, has made a direct plea addressed to Rabbi Lazer Brody Shlita over YouTube, arguing that as a master wig designer with twenty-three years of experience, she has the skill to distinguish between different types of hair and avoid using Indian hair for making wigs (Sullivan 2017). This ongoing controversy points to how *sheitel machers* have to be ready to respond not only to the material and emotional needs of their female clients but also to the international patriarchal politics of strict rabbinical authorities.

Conclusions

Religious dress practices are often interpreted as static forms of social control through which women’s sexuality is contained and religious boundaries held in place. In the case of orthodox Jewish communities, their clothing and hair practices have been cited as examples of “fossilized fashion” – that is, fashion that becomes frozen in time long after a particular style becomes outmoded in the rest of the population (Arthur 1999). Whilst in many ways the *sheitel* conforms to the logic of patriarchy, what I have shown in this article is that *sheitels* are in fact subject to constant changes, and that *sheitel* fashions, far from simply obeying the rulings of rabbis, form part of a woman’s multi-layered world of religious and fashion observance. The decision to cover hair with hair plunges many orthodox Jewish women into a world of highly nuanced hair choices from which others read not only their wealth and fashion sense but also their community affiliation and levels of religious observance. Aiding women through this landscape of choices is the *sheitel macher* whose role combines beauty work, religious awareness and therapy, as she assists women with the challenges of head covering and with finding ways to convert a difficult commandment into an appealing choice.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMeggy7886o>

Mahtov Yitzchak, Tragedy of Married women wearing *sheitel* in LA,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLHb6a7-Vz4>

“Of Long Sheitel/s, tight clothing and high heels.” A short mussar speech by Rabbanit Kineret Sarah Cohen to the married Jewish ladies on the topic of long sheitel/s tight clothing and high heels.<http://tznius.tips/of-long-sheitels-tight-clothing-and-high-heels.html>

Sheitel Talk, <http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=55593&highlight=sheitel/>

“Sheitel Shop with Lisa Ling,”
https://www.mikvah.org/media/sheitel/sheitel_shop_with_lisa_ling

Sullivan Daniele, Indian or human hair wig? In response to Rabbi Lazer Brody Shlita.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a23Jn8KKnE4>

“Victoria has a Secret” NG Imports (Milano Collection Wigs) – 30-sec, Lemonlight
<https://vimeo.com/226205561>

Why some Jewish women are rejecting the Headscarf (2010), Published July 13, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9q9L6jq9sXA>

Figures

Fig. 1 The Hat Salon, Lee Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn 2010 © Emma Tarlo

Fig. 2 © Benjamin Schwartz. In 2015 the website, Attempted Bloggery, featured Schwartz’s cartoon in a caption-writing competition. The winning caption by Stephen Nadler read: “*Sometimes I wish he’d get out of my hair.*”

Fig. 3 Wig display at Georgie Wigs salon, Brooklyn 2015. The wigs will be styled and trimmed to suit the personal tastes of clients. © Emma Tarlo

Fig. 4 Trendy hair and hat combinations with Velcro fastenings from the American company, Milano Collection, on display at Rifka’s salon, North London, 2015. © Emma Tarlo

Fig. 5 Williamsburg chic, Brooklyn 2010 © Emma Tarlo

Fig. 6 Rifka at work, North London 2015 © Emma Tarlo

Fig. 7 Re-styling wigs for Passover at Rifka's, North London, 2015 © Emma Tarlo

Fig. 8 Claire Grunwald selecting hair, Brooklyn 2015 © Emma Tarlo

Fig. 9 Honey blond wigs awaiting haircuts at Millano Collection's New York showroom, Brooklyn 2015. © Emma Tarlo

Fig.10 Advertisement for Rafaele wigs, London 2015. © Natania, Let my Beauty Shine

¹ Orthodox Judaism is a broad term which encompasses a number of branches of religious Judaism where members adhere to strict interpretations and application of the laws and ethics of the Torah, as legislated in Talmudic texts. It incorporates a wide variety of perspectives and sects from strict and comparatively insular Haredi sects often referred to by others as 'Ultra-Orthodox' to more liberal groups who identify as Modern Orthodox.

² Tznius.tips/the-halochos-of-wigs-sheitel-as-a-hair-covering.html

³ Jew in the City: Freeda Wigs Makeover Edition, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMegqy7886o>

⁴ "Victoria has a Secret"

⁵ Sneak peak of the up and coming Milano wig' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQ0L4BO-E4Q>

⁶ See, for instance, SheitelTalk, <http://imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=55593&highlight=sheitel>

⁷ In a small minority of Haredi sects, women shave their head on marriage and continue shaving once a month at the end of their period before taking a ritual bath. However, the majority of orthodox women who wear wigs, including most Haredi women, keep their own hair underneath.

⁸ Mahtov Yitzchak, "Tragedy of Married women wearing sheitel in LA,"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLHb6a7-Vz4>

⁹ Onat, speaking in 'Sheitel Shop with Lisa Ling', <https://www.mikvah.org/media/sheitel-shop-with-lisa-ling>

¹⁰ For details of Hindu tonsuring practices and the repercussion of the ban on Indian hair, see chapters "Tonsure" and "Idolatry" in Tarlo, *Entanglement* (2016). For further details of Hindu and Jewish theological ideas concerning hair and their relevance to this controversy, see Fleming and Reed (2011).