
Reviewed by Valentina Marinescu, Bucharest University, Bucharest, Romania.

Structured around the narratives of twenty-two women, each identified by name or pseudonym, *Hide & Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering* is a book about marriage and commandments that oversee the life of Jewish Orthodox women and at the same time offers an ethnographic account of Jewish women, of their relation with God, religion and the community (at large and as a “family”). Many religious women have internalized the value of hair covering because it is based on an underlying Jewish principle – “modesty”. And it is around these two related terms-“hair” and “modesty”-that the present collection of essays is shaped.

Of utmost importance, in my opinion, is the “complete” (but not “circular”) structure of the book. Thus, it starts with a detail - the image of a young woman’s hair as Lynne Schreiber saw one day on an airplane, followed by the development of the main lines of inquiry regarding hair coverage in Jewish culture (*What is Hair?*). In the last article (*Halachot of Hair*) Lynne Schreiber offers a full and well-documented review of the religious views on this issue, stressing the fact that early classical rabbinic literature (Talmud and Midrash) presents an entirely different approach to the phenomenon of hair covering than the Bible. In the same essay, the author stresses the fact that rabbinic literature of the Middle Ages further reinforced the issue of women's hair covering as an integral part of Jewish religious observance, and points out that only in the modern era was the practice seriously challenged, as it fades from general societal convention.

The core-theme of the book is the explanation and understanding of the socio-religious and symbolic value that hair covering has for many Jewish women. The guiding principle behind day-to-day behavior of married women in traditional Jewish family was and remains that of “modesty,” which initiated the *mitzvah* connected to her physical appearance: this “external appearance” should be viewed as desirable only by her husband (and not by anyone else). The principle of “modesty” has a greater influence on Jewish women behavior; the most visible aspect of this value being a conservative dress code and hair coverage. Of all 613 commandments which govern behavior from morning to night and birth until death, the authors published in this book value for the most part the practice of hair coverage, and the wearing of a wig or hat. It had become a good deed or *mitzvah*, like getting education or helping others. Although nearly all Orthodox Jews adhere strictly to the laws of rabbinic Judaism, the practice of hair coverage differs between Ashkenazi Jews (those of eastern European origin) and Sephardic Jews (those of Mediterranean descent). The twenty two essays published in the book document these distinctions extensively, stressing in addition the extent to which religious observance is highly variable among Jews of different degrees of orthodoxy.

From a first reading of the book, it is understood that for a traditional Jewish woman, the family is the central social unit, around which her entire existence is formed.
For the female authors of the essays, the family represents the principal way of transmitting tradition from generation to generation, wherein Jewish culture takes a form of mobility. Alongside the breakdown of the family unit in secular society, it is noticeable that the book’s essays are set to prove that the Orthodox Jewish community has managed to protect the stability and sanctity of the family. For the Jewish married woman, the observance of the mitzvah of hair coverage represents more than a simple duty; it is a way of living and a way to increase “goodness” in the universe. At the same time, within the traditional Jewish family the husband and wife roles are well defined respectively. The book conveys, as such, a very distinct image of the traditional Jewish family: in this case the families understand the idea that rituals have symbolic communicative functions and can express concepts about relationships and derivative structures—this being the case of hair coverage.

But the stress put on the gender-role a Jewish woman has within the family (and the hair coverage that marks it) is only one level at which the book can be read. At another one, a deeper one in my view, a greater relevance is attributed to Jewish woman’s personal experience in telling the “general story” of hair coverage. This type of interpretation is favoured by the diversity of “gazes” or perspectives published in the book—the essays uncover an unfamiliar aspect in the daily life of the Jewish woman that is most likely unknown to non-Jewish people. The narratives dealing with the issue of hair coverage vary from the story of the preparation before the wedding (Devorah Israeli-Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow) to that of personal feelings concerning divorce (Barbara Roberts-In Decency), from the depiction of self-fulfilment through embracing this practice as a clear-cut symbol of adherence to the Jewish religion (Aviva Zacks-I’m Covering my Hair) to that of renouncing the use of hats without a total abandonment of the custom (Ruth Ben-Ammi-Proud in the Golan Heights). This wealth of perspectives captures the attention and leads to a deeper understanding of the custom of hair coverage. One can read about the difference between various types of wigs (artificial or natural wigs, East-European and American wigs) and, associated to that, one could better understand the relations between husband and wife, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law within a new family (Viva Hammer-My First Shaitel). Here the wig is more than a simple “cult-object,” and becomes a symbol for a new identity— that of a married woman.

At the same time, a “gender-sensitive” approach encompasses the gathering of narratives. I refer here to the (religious) male perspectives that, either in the article on the interpreted rabbi’s texts (Rivkah Slonim-Blessing from above and Blessing from bellow: The Lubavitcher Rebbe on “Kisui Rosh”) or in the personal story of a husband (Joseph I. Greenberg-Thinking outside the Hatbox: Reflections of a Husband). The “male gaze” further strengthens a woman’s decision to conform to themitzvahof hair coverage. Likewise, the book does not feature only articles that advocate the issue at question, but also contains essays with solid arguments against this custom (Erica Brown-“A Crown of Thorns:” Orthodox Women who Chose Not to Cover their Hair).

The narrative genre favoured in the volume (the presentation of stories in a personalized, “auto-biographically” form) allows the reader to avoid reifying these women, whose individual narration emerges as a complex process. The custom of hair coverage and wearing wigs or scarves is related both to life cycle events (such as,
marriage, and the birth of a child) and mundane events (such as, the choice between various types of hats). Significantly, various types of hair coverage are explored through episodes of daily family life (such as, the set of personal decisions involved in wearing snoods in Kaya Eisenberg-Halachah, Society, and the Snood), while this Jewish practice becomes of great importance for a widow (Shaine Splotlter-A Widows’s Peek).

The book contains not only narrations (despite the fact that they constitute the majority) but also a poem devoted to hair coverage (Julie Hauser-Out of Sight!). The ethnographical perspective portrays a rich view of Jewish social life. For example, the wig – as a simple material object – has both a spiritual value (pertaining to religious customs), and a definite physical existence (dealing with health issues). The essays devoted to the personal experience of Esther Marianne Posner (When my Wig Became my Shaitel), or the depiction of Fagie Rosen’s vocation as a Shaitel Macher (Lynne Schreiber-Behind the Façade: A Day in the Life of a Shaitel Macher) contain examples of the above.

Hide & Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering covers a particular domain that belongs not just to the study of women in Judaism, but also to the fields of anthropology, religion and cultural studies. In my opinion, Schreiber’s book could be relevant and useful for readers who are interested in questions of gender and narratives, gender and religion, and gender and communitarian involvement.