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## Ervah: Hidden Sensuality

*Photoessay by Na'ama Batya Lewin*

**R**eligiously observant women in today's American Orthodox Jewish society can be classified by how they cover their hair. Each community follows its own "correct" style for *kisui rosh* (covering the head). Some cover all their hair. Others reveal natural hair. Some wear custom-made *sheitels* (wigs) of natural hair or synthetic sheitels. Some cover their heads with a hat, a turban, a snood, a kerchief, or even a "shpitzel." And others wear synthetic sheitels topped with a hat.

As an Orthodox woman and a New York based photographer and artist, I tried to "blend in" with various local Orthodox communities. Would I



be accepted if I dressed like the community's women? Would they befriend me even if I was a total stranger except for my dress and my hair-covering? In the winter and spring of 2001, I visited the Brooklyn communities in Williamsburg, Boro Park, Crown Heights, and Flatbush. In Manhattan, I spent time at the Upper and Lower East Side, as well as on the Upper West Side. I shopped in Cedarhurst and Monsey. I tried to dress like the women of the neighborhood, and I photographed myself in their surroundings.

Hair-covering displays a woman's dedication to her Judaism and identifies her affiliation. It is ironic that a practice which is designed to preserve modesty is, in today's society, the most public display of religious observance and identification. As I was growing up I discovered that what I wore was viewed as a measure of my religious observance. How long was my skirt? Did I wear pants? Was the top button of my blouse closed? How I dressed would affect the match—the *shiddukh*—that would influence my adult life.

***ervah* (n.) Hebrew—  
nakedness, lewdness,  
shame, unchastity.**

I was surprised to learn, after I was married, that my style of dress continued to classify me, maybe even more than before. I chose to wear a hat, and I chose to display some natural hair. This marked me. I was not Lubavitch or Satmar. Nor was I a “yeshivish” woman from Boro Park or Flatbush. I looked too modern with brown curls hanging to my shoulders. Distinctive hair-covering not only identifies women in the Orthodox Jewish community, but divides them. “One of us” is readily distinguished from an “outsider” by how a woman covers her hair. “If she covers her hair differently than I do, she does not practice my style of Judaism.” In its own way, the religious community puts as much emphasis on how a woman looks as does today's secular community.



**The hair of a woman is considered ervah.**

*—Talmud Berachot, 24A*

There are those women who cover most of their own hair with a hat or *tichal* and expose less than a *tefach* [approximately 74mm]. As a sub-category of this group are those who expose more than a *tefach* relying upon the opinion that hair which extends beyond the hairline is not subject to any prohibitions.

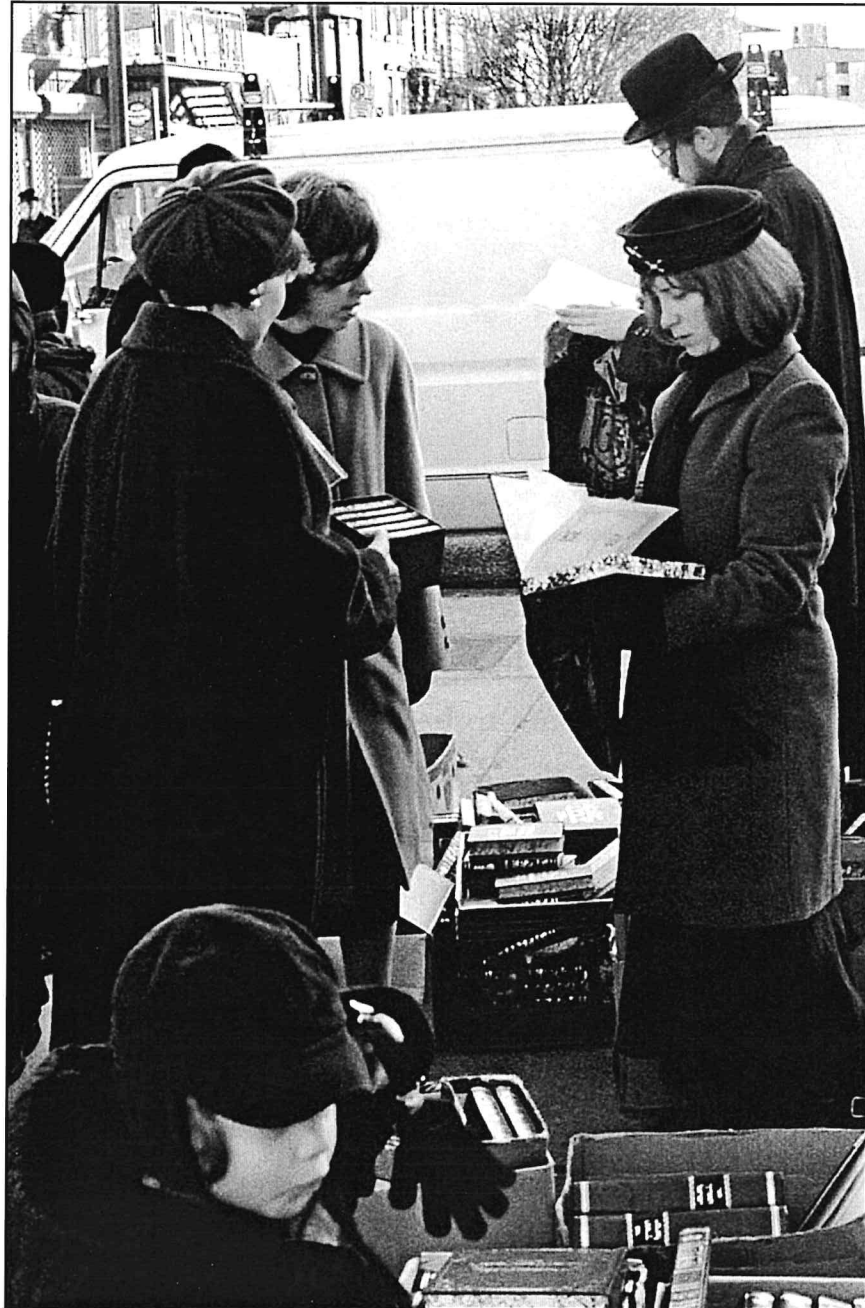
—Rabbi Mayer Schiller, “The Obligation of Married Women To Cover Their Hair,” *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, vol. 30 (1995), pp.103-104.





There are others who, while wearing a wig, cover most of it with a hat or other covering of some sort. This appears to be an attempt to combine the opinion of those authorities who permit a small amount of hair to be uncovered with those who permit wigs. In other words, if the wig be prohibited, at least the majority of it is covered; and if the wig be permitted then there is certainly no problem.

—Rabbi Mayer Schiller, “The Obligation of Married Women To Cover Their Hair,” *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, vol. 30 (1995), pp.103.



**A man is forbidden to gaze at a woman with  
intent to enjoy her beauty.**

—Maimonides, *Hilhot Issurei Biah* 21:2

