

## THE SHEITEL CONTROVERSY UPDATED

### The Status of Indian Temple Hair

The *sugya* on *Avodah Zarah* 50b is at the heart of the sheitel controversy. We find it hard to imagine how hair can attain the status of an offering to an idol – what act of sacrifice has been performed on the hair? Let us first see how this *sugya* answers this question, then briefly summarize the halachic outcome. The controversy has recently erupted once again, and we shall see what changed to reopen the debate for *poskim* to reconsider their position.

### FORBIDDEN OFFERINGS

Our *sugya* teaches that there is a difference between an object worshiped as an idol, which acquires the status of an idol, and *tikroves avodah zarah*, offerings to an idol. One is forbidden to derive benefit from both items, but *tikroves* has the stricter *halachah* of being forbidden forever, unlike an idol which a non-Jew can be *mevatel* (nullify), after which a Jew can derive benefit from it. However, not all offerings attain the status of *tikroves*. To be classified as *tikroves*, the offering must bear similarity to the way offerings are made in the Beis HaMikdash. Tosafos (s.v. *ba'inun*) provides the example of offering loaves of bread to an *avodah zarah*, which would constitute *tikroves* because they are similar to the *minchah* sacrifice. The Gemara discusses serving an idol by breaking a stick in front of it. Since this is an object that is not offered in the Beis HaMikdash, it cannot be considered *tikroves* unless performed by one of the four methods of worship in the Beis HaMikdash (*shechitah*, pouring/sprinkling, sacrificing and bowing). The case of the broken stick is one where it is an object that is normally used for that particular idol worship and the breaking of the stick has some similarity to the act of *shechitah* performed in the Beis HaMikdash, which separated the head of the animal from its body, and cutting the hair is a similar action. This is an oversimplification of a complex *sugya*, but hopefully it should provide sufficient background to understand how haircutting can be considered an act of offering to an *avodah zarah*.

### INDIAN TEMPLE HAIR

The question of Indian temple hair was first posed to Rav Elyashev in 1989. He was advised by a Hindu expert Dr Anand Mohand, who who taught at CUNY, that by shaving one's hair, a person surrenders his ego and vanity to the idol. On that basis Rav Elyashev ruled that Indian hair sheitels were permitted as the hair itself is not an offering but an act prior to worship, to prepare oneself with the subjugation of one's ego. However, he said that the matter required further research to see if this was really true, as others claimed that the hair should be considered an offering to *avodah zarah*. Because of growing uncertainty with this *psak*, in 2003 he sent Dayan Aharon Dovid Dunner on a fact-finding mission to visit the main temple in India and to interview the people on site through an interpreter. Standing in the queue with the pilgrims, many told him that they were tonsuring (shaving) their hair as an offering. When he reported this back to Rav Elyashev, a new ruling was issued forbidding Indian temple hair as *tikroves avodah zarah*, a serious Torah prohibition, and supervision was necessary to ensure that a sheitel did not contain Indian hair. Rav Yisrael Belsky contested this new ruling, arguing that it is not the ignorant people who define religious principles but we always rely on experts in the field, and they say it is not an offering, but simply removing impure hair before entering the temple. We must assume that the pilgrims have in mind that they want to comply with what their religious leaders dictate. After correspondence and detailed discussion, Rav Elyashev rejected Rav Belsky's contentions. There were several other issues, but this was the main point of contention. *Poskim* had to align themselves with one of these two approaches, but many argued that even if one accepts that it is an offering, there is uncertainty that hair of unknown origin is temple hair. Furthermore, there are other uncertainties such as whether both the barber and the pilgrim have this intent. Although a single uncertainty would not permit a Torah prohibition, a double uncertainty (*sfek sfeka*) would render the item permitted. On that basis, many Rabbanim permitted any sheitel where the source of the hair was uncertain.

### NEW EVIDENCE

A group of *avreichim* in America were studying this *sugya* and were unhappy with the situation where there were uncertainties regarding *tikroves avodah zarah* which were not being addressed and required further investigation. They decided to conduct their own inquiry of pilgrims using a carefully designed questionnaire. Working in conjunction with Indian citizens who spoke both English and the local language, they surveyed 400 past pilgrims to analyze their understanding of the tonsure ceremony. The results revealed that around 85% confirmed that they regarded the cutting as an offering to the deity. In view of the importance attached by Rav Elyashev to the intention of the barbers, who traditionally belong to the priestly Nai Brahmin caste, they also

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions.

We are working on a report to help understand the intent of people who tonsure their hair. Please circle the correct answer.

Have you tonsured in the past or would you consider tonsuring in the future?

☒ A. Yes ☐ B. No

Question 1: When tonsuring, is the hair being given in some way to the deity or is the purpose just to remove the hair (to remove ego, sins etc.)?

☒ A. The purpose is just to remove the hair.  
☒ B. The hair is being received by the deity.  
☐ C. I don't know.  
☐ D. Other (please explain)

Question: So, to ask the same question again in a different way, when tonsuring, is the hair being received by the deity?

☐ A. No ☒ B. Yes  
☐ C. I don't know ☐ D. Other (please explain).

Question 2: (If you answered that the deity is receiving the hair), is the cutting of the hair just to get the hair off and after it could be offered, or is the cutting itself giving or part of the giving of the hair to the deity?

☒ A. The cutting is just to get the hair off for offering afterwards.  
☒ B. The cutting of the hair is giving or part of the giving of the hair.  
☐ C. I don't know  
☐ D. Other (please explain).

Question: So, to ask the same question a different way, is the cutting of the hair part of the giving of the hair to the deity?

☐ A. No ☒ B. Yes  
☐ C. I don't know

conducted a survey of barbers in their Telugu language. 22 out of 22 answered that the cutting was done with intention that it was an offering to the deity. They also carried out an in-depth documented study of market statistics which proved that the vast majority of *sheitels* were sourced from Indian temple hair. With the mounting evidence that most of the sheitels are made from Indian temple hair, Rabbonim issued a new notice last year as reproduced overleaf.

### IDENTIFYING THE SOURCE OF HAIR

The uncertainty as to the source of the hair arises because China produces most of the world's wigs. Ligezhuang township, Qingdao, alone produces 40% of global high-end wigs, specializing in sheitels. The hair trade is unregulated, and one can never be sure of the source, whatever the label says. Rav Elyashev wrote that he was informed that 75% of the Indian hair export was temple hair. The temple tonsures between 50,000 and 100,000 pilgrims each day, so there is a colossal supply. Others quoted statistics that only 20% was temple hair. These widely disparate figures can be reconciled because the low figure is taken from statistics of all types of hair, but the 75% figure isolates the category of Remy hair used for sheitels, which is typically Indian temple hair.

### IS HINDUISM IDOL WORSHIP?

Rabbi Daniel Sperber writes about a Hindu Jewish Leadership Summit which he attended together with other Rabbis in 2007 and 2008. The Hindu religious leaders denied that Hinduism is an idolatrous religion, explaining the outward manifestations of idolatry in a completely different fashion. The way in which Indian religious authorities understand their own religious approach is not the same as the Torah's approach. They believe that one G-d created the world, but that He manifests Himself in everything that He created. Therefore, all His creations must be worshiped, with the result that they have countless idols. It is therefore difficult to understand how Hindu experts can be relied upon in assessing their religious practices from the Torah perspective.

### SURRENDER OF THE EGO

The primary point of contention was whether cutting the hair was an offering to their idol or an act of removing something impure. It was claimed that the hair was not allowed to enter the temple because it was impure. The shaved hair is placed in a receptacle called *hundi* to complete the ceremony. Yet there is also a *hundi* in the temple itself where some pilgrims place strands of their hair in front of the deity, contradicting the assertion that entry of hair into the temple was forbidden (see table where the hair collected from the temple *hundi* is listed separately). In this connection, I would like to highlight a comment of one of the pilgrims in the National Geographic documentary – Inside Tirumala-Tirupati. He said: “When our daughter was born I decided to offer our hair to the deity.” The interviewer commented: The ritual is considered a symbolic effacing of the ego and the purging of vanity before appearing in front of god. Here we see the same concept of surrender of the ego, but it is expressed in conjunction with a gift of hair to the deity, meaning that the gift is a symbol of humiliating oneself like bowing while making an offering. Further evidence that the pilgrims are gifting the hair is evident from the notice displayed over the entrance to the tonsure building as a place of surrendering human hair **to** the deity rather than **for** the deity, which would have been the appropriate expression if the tonsure, or hair cutting, was as a preparatory act of purging impure hair.



### CUTTING HAIR IS AN OFFERING

An extract from a court case reported in The Hindu of 8<sup>th</sup> January 1957 reveals the purpose of the hair cutting. “The plaintiffs (TTD, the organization that controls the temple) did not want to prevent the appellants from carrying out their trade. There was no objection to the appellants running their shaving salons on Tirumala Hills and carrying on the profession of hair-cutting and hairdressing of anyone who visited their saloons. There did not seem to be any objection to the appellants shaving the heads of their customers, but the only thing they were not entitled to do, according to the plaintiffs, was to shave the heads of pilgrims who wished to give their hair to the deity as offering. Therefore, what the plaintiffs wanted was not an exclusive right to carry on the profession of a barber. So all that the plaintiffs wanted was, an injunction restraining the defendants from inducing the pilgrims to believe that they were offering their hair on their heads to the deity when they got their heads shaved by the appellants and other defendants.” We see that the official position of TTD was that the haircutting was an offering to the deity. It should be noted that the temple only started selling the tonsured hair in 1965, so there was no commercial reason for their objection to others cutting the hair. This is also apparent from the notice illustrated alongside that if the hair is cut elsewhere, it will not be counted as an offering for the deity. Another important point is that the temple website endorsed by senior priests, and all other sources, connect the hair cutting to mythological legends explaining why the hair is being gifted to the deity. The hair is clearly an offering.

### CURRENT SITUATION

After Rav Elyashev's psak in 2004 a system of controls was instituted to provide a *hechsher* for sheitels.



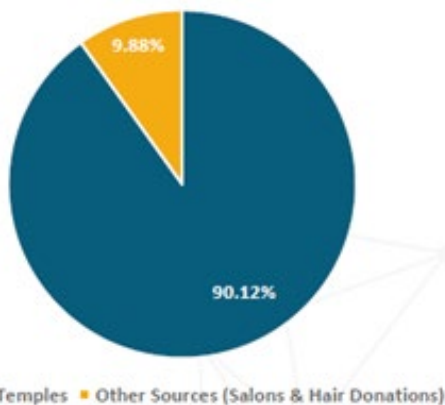
Unfortunately, the *hechsher* on sheitels has been found to be unreliable, as Chinese copy and attach the *hechsher* label even if they are not under supervision. Rav Mordechai Gross, the *Rav HaMachshir* insists that the *hechsher* must be verified by asking for the supplier's Kashrus Certificate to ensure he is supervised. In the meantime, some people are switching to synthetic sheitels, but as they often also contain real hair, they send them for "shatnez" testing to ensure that they contain no real hair. *Kallos* sell their ponytails, which are cut before marriage. European and Brazilian hair is often Indian hair, but there is a new system being developed where direct hair purchases are made by reliable Jews in European villages where hair is cut, avoiding the global wholesale market. Sheitels made with such hair are inevitably very expensive. This hair has to be sent to China to be made into wigs, and the hair is marked with paint to stop them switching it for other hair (they now use invisible paint because the Chinese copied the paint markings). Another option is that *sheitelmachers* claim that one could be guaranteed that unprocessed hair lighter than no. 6 (brown) is not Indian hair, which is naturally black. After processing with acids which removes the cuticles, it can be changed to any color, but unprocessed brown hair cannot be Indian hair. However, even this is now unreliable, because an Italian company has developed a non-acid process using lengthy osmosis baths which changes the pigmentation of Indian hair without removing the cuticles, so this is no longer a reliable indicator. Each person must consult his Rav for guidance in this matter and no doubt *poskim* will be examining the fresh evidence and presenting their opinions in new *teshuvos* on this matter.

The following site provides links to many publications for further reading on this subject.  
[https:// www.star-k. org/articles/kashrus-kurrents/16164/sheitel-controversy-addl-info/](https://www.star-k.org/articles/kashrus-kurrents/16164/sheitel-controversy-addl-info/)

The stock position of Human Hair put for sale is follows.

1. First Variety	--	4000 Kgs
2. Second Variety	--	14250 Kgs
3. Third Variety	--	22640 Kgs
4. Gray Hair	--	150 Kgs.
5. Hundi Hair	--	175 Kgs.

Note that the small quantity of hair placed in the hundi in the temple itself is listed separately (2004).



Supply of Remy hair from India by source - 2022

Sl. No.	Variety of Human Hair	Category	Stocks Kept for e-Auction (in kgs)	Upset price (Rs / Kg)	Value of the stock
1	1 <sup>st</sup> variety 27" and above	Category A True / full black	1,100	52,217.00	5,74,38,700.00
2		Category B Grey / Partial Grey / Dyed hair	2,800	35,000.00	9,80,00,000.00
4	2 <sup>nd</sup> variety 19" to 26" approx	Category A True / full black	4,200	24,591.00	10,32,82,200.00
5		Category B Grey / Partial Grey / Dyed hair	22,700	13,307.00	30,20,68,900.00
7	3 <sup>rd</sup> variety 10" to 18" approx	Category A True / full black	2,500	9,283.00	2,32,07,500.00
8		Category B Grey / Partial Grey / Dyed hair	13,300	6,185.00	8,22,60,500.00
9		Category C Loose/ non Remy hair	2,600	4,510.00	1,17,26,000.00

Quantities of temple hair e-auctioned in May 2024

## Letter of Gedolei Yisroel

BS"D

Elul 5784

The issue of wigs containing Indian hair has been a subject of discussion for over twenty years. In 5764 (2004), a psak was issued by the *gedolei hador* forbidding these sheitels as *tikroves avoda zara*.

Many have relied on a *heter* based on the opinion that the hair tonsuring performed in the Indian temples is not done with the intention of sacrificing the hair to the *avoda zara*. Furthermore, the lenient opinion maintained that even if the practice was indeed *tikroves avoda zara*, it was presumed that the hair used in sheitels did not originate from these temples.

Recently, there has been more clarity based on many testimonies and much detailed research. It has become clear that the practice of hair tonsuring is indeed a form of *tikroves avoda zara*. It has also been established that the vast majority of hair used in sheitels comes from this source. Therefore, the issue is relevant again with full severity.

As of the present time, an acceptable *heter* has not been presented for this serious issue. According to many *Rishonim* the transgression of deriving benefit from *tikroves avoda zara* is in the category of sins for which the halacha is *yehoreg v'al yaavor* (one must give up one's life rather than transgress).

It is our opinion that there is no way to avoid this severe problem other than ascertaining that the hair is not from the temples, through strict supervision of the hair from when it is cut off the head until the completion of the production process. As of now, such supervision is something which is almost non-existent.

The difficulty that this imposes on the *tzibbur* is well understood. However, our ancestors throughout the generations sacrificed their lives *al kiddush Hashem* so as not to be contaminated by the impurities of *avoda zara*, r"l.

Chazal say "Ifum tzaara agra," according to the greatness of the difficulty so is the greatness of the reward. The Torah has already promised (Devorim 13:18), "No part of the banned property should attach to your hand, so that Hashem will turn back from His anger, and give you mercy and be merciful to you and multiply you..."

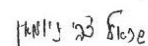
In the merit of abstaining from *avoda zarah* and its accessories, may Hashem make us worthy of the time when all *avoda zara* will be destroyed, with the revelation of Hashem's kingdom, may it be speedily in our days, Amen.

  
Elya Ber Wachtfogel

  
Aharon Feldman

  
Aryeh Malkiel Kotler

  
Yaakov Shraga Horowitz

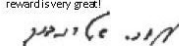
  
Yisroel Tzvi Neuman

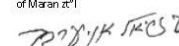
It is clear and simple, and I have already published it as such, and anyone who has a drop of Yiras Shamayim will be careful at least for the future, and his reward is very great!

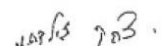
My father in law HaGon HaRav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt"l was very stringent regarding hair that comes from India, and it is appropriate to abide by the Psak of Maran zt"l.

The words of my brother-in-law HaGon HaSadol Azriel Auerbach are true and firm.

  
Sarel Rosenberg

  
Moshe Shternbuch

  
Azriel Auerbach

  
Yitzchok Zilberstein

  
Moshe Mordechai Karp

The clear opinion of Maran HaGon HaRav Elyashiv zt"l is well known concerning the hair from India which is in the category of *tikroves avoda zara*. In order to clarify the topic due to the fact that certain Rabbanim have different opinions, in the year 5778 I was part of a group of prominent Rabbanim who heard the testimony of a witness who was sent to the temples in India and returned with clear proofs that it is *tikroves avoda zara*. Therefore I hereby repeat the opinion of Maran that there are severe transgressions in this matter.

  
Nachum Eisenstein

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