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# Hindu Hair and Jewish Halakha*

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**Abstract:** This pair of essays reflects upon the unexpected encounter of Hindu and Jewish perspectives in the wake of the prohibition of wigs with human hair from India for use by Jewish women by prominent Haredi ("ultra-orthodox") legal authorities in May 2004. The rulings sparked distress among Haredi communities in New York, London, and Jerusalem; some women took to the streets to burn their wigs, attracting international media attention. Yet questions about the status of the wigs also occasioned intensive halakhic discussions of Hindu rituals among Orthodox Jews, centered on tonsuring practices of pilgrims to the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple near the city of Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, India. These essays explore some of the insights that arise when one examines the controversy from historical perspectives, and in relation to theoretical questions about comparison and the study of religions. The first essay focuses on the tensions surrounding hair and its interpretation within Vaiṣṇavite textual traditions and ritual practices, while the second essay situates the controversy within the history of Jewish discourses about ritual, "idolatry," and the "Other."

**Résumé :** Ces deux articles portent sur la rencontre inattendue des perspectives hindoue et juive à la suite de l'interdiction, en mai 2004, par des autorités religieuses Haredi (juifs "ultra-orthodoxes"), des perruques de cheveux humains, à l'usage des femmes juives, en provenance de l'Inde. Cette interdiction a provoqué la détresse parmi les communautés des Haredim de New York, de Londres, et de Jérusalem. Des femmes sont descendues dans la rue pour brûler leurs perruques, attirant ainsi l'attention des médias internationaux. Cependant, des questions sur le statut des perruques ont aussi

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suscité d'intenses débats halakhiques, parmi les juifs orthodoxes, sur les rituels hindous, principalement sur le rituel de la coupe des cheveux (tonsure) des pèlerins du temple dédié au dieu Veṅkaṭeśvara près de la ville de Tirupati dans l'état Indien de Andhra Pradesh. Ces articles explorent la controverse du point de vue historique et son rapport aux questions théoriques sur la comparaison dans l'étude des religions. Le premier article se concentre sur les tensions entourant les cheveux et son interprétation dans les traditions textuelles et rituelles viṣṇouites. Le deuxième article situe la controverse au sein de l'histoire des discours juifs sur le rituel « idolâtre », et sur l'« Autre ».

**Keywords**
hair, tonsure, Hinduism, Judaism, Veṅkaṭeśvara, Tirupati, *avodah zarah*, idolatry

**Mots clés**
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On 13 May 2004, a letter was issued by Rabbi Yosef Efrati proclaiming that *sheitels* [wigs] containing human hair from India were not appropriate for Jewish use. Rabbi Efrati cited the opinion put forward by the influential *Posek* [legal expert] Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv of Jerusalem that such *sheitels* should be categorized as *tikrovet avodah zarah* – as an offering to an "idol." Rabbi Elyashiv confirmed this ruling in a brief letter on 25 May 2004:

> At the request of several of the important rabbonim in the American exile, I hereby reiterate my opinion that in the light of the practical facts reported by HaGaon Rav Aharon Dovid Dunner, dayan in London, one should not use sheitels made from human hair brought from India, as my opinion was publicized by my friend, HaGaon Rav Yosef Efrati on 21 Iyar, 5764.[1]

At issue was the hair tonsured from pilgrims to the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple, which is typically cut as part of a vow, and sold by temple administrators to European and other wig-makers.[2] In the weeks following Rabbi Efrati's letter, women in Haredi ("ultra-orthodox")[3] Jewish communities in the USA, UK, and Israel discarded or destroyed their wigs – some even burning them in the streets. Images of piles of wigs, aflame because of the concern for "Hindu hair," were plastered across newspapers around the world.[4]

To our knowledge, there has yet to be an analysis of the 2004 *sheitel* controversy from historical, sociological, or anthropological perspectives. The small set of published discussions about it, so far, have focused on the halakhic bases for the decisions (Flug, 2005) and the implications for Jewish practice (Sperber, 2009) and Hindu–Jewish relations (Goshen-Gottstein, forthcoming).[5] In this pair of articles, we would like to look more closely at the issues and events surrounding it, with an eye to some relevant historical trajectories.

In recent years, the controversy has been a lively focus for reflection on Halakha and Jewish identity (Flug, 2005; Sperber, 2009), and it has also been a significant locus for the emerging discourse of Hindu–Jewish dialogue (esp. Goshen-Gottstein, forthcoming).

It is in the context of reflecting upon and critiquing the 2004 rulings, for instance, that Daniel Sperber (2009) notes that he participated on 5–6 February 2007 "in the first 'Hindu–Jewish Leadership Summit' at Delhi, India . . . attended by a delegation of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and some prominent European rabbis, and religious leaders of the Hindu Dharma," at which "a 'Declaration of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation' was co-signed by all participants."[6]

Our aim here, however, is rather to explore some of the insights that arise when one examines the events surrounding it from historical perspectives within the context of Religious Studies. Approaching the controversy as historians of premodern religions – specializing in Hinduism and Judaism, respectively – we attempt to glean some of the theoretical insights that might arise from this surprising "crossing" of far-flung cultures, seeking to shed light on both in the process (cf. Werner and Zimmermann, 2006). We suggest, moreover, that the case may provide an interesting focus for reflecting, more broadly, on some of the challenges involved in scholarly acts of comparison as well (cf. Bourdieu, 1997).

Much has been written about the "invention" of "Hinduism" by British and European colonists, scholars, and missionaries (e.g., Lorenzen, 1999; Fleming, 2009; Nicholson, 2010), and recent scholarship (e.g., Schopen, 1997: 1–23) has also pointed to the persistent Protestant and Christianizing assumptions about religion that have been brought to bear on South Asian ritual, images, and worship. Furthermore, just as the very category of "religion" has been mapped onto and derived from the model of Christianity (see further, Asad, 1993: 28–29; Smith, 1998; Bell, 2006: 29–30), so notions of Judaism too have been shaped through its history and study as the "Other" of Christianity and the West (see further, Boyarin, 1994; Heschel, 1999). Insofar as the 2004 *sheitel* controversy occasioned Orthodox Jewish theorization of Hindu rituals for halakhic aims, it may point us to a number of different perspectives on ritual and difference – surprisingly distant from the Protestant perspectives embedded within much of the modern Western study of "world religions" (see further, Masuzawa, 2005; Holdrege, 2007).

In what follows, we approach the 2004 *sheitel* controversy as an encounter between religions that both challenges and enables us to explore such alternate perspectives. In the first essay, "From Tirupati to Brooklyn: Interpreting Hindu Votive Hair Offerings," Fleming reconsiders the representations of the rituals at Tirupati among the Haredi *Poskim* and in the popular Western press, in light of the rich complex of traditions related to hair and tonsuring in South Asia. By considering and describing the Vaiṣṇavite rituals in question through premodern textual sources, as well as first-hand observation of contemporary practices, this essay points to the problems with Western concepts of "idolatry" in relation both to Hindu practices and to Jewish concepts about *avodah zarah*. In the second essay, "Hair, Halakha, and the Theorization of Ritual Practice," Reed then reflects upon the investigations and rulings that led to the controversy, situating them within the history of the Jewish discourse about *avodah zarah*, ritual, identity, and difference. This pair of essays thus seeks to illumine the power and limits of ideas about "idolatry" and the "Other," while contributing to the rich scholarly discussion of the multivalent religious meanings of hair and its cutting (e.g., Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981; Hiltebeitel and Miller, 1998). In the process, we hope to help lay the groundwork for further scholarship on the 2004 *sheitel* controversy, within and beyond Religious Studies.

# From Tirupati to Brooklyn: Interpreting Hindu Votive Hair Offerings

*Benjamin James Fleming*

In May 2004, groups of Haredi ("ultra-orthodox") Jews burned piles of wigs in the streets of Brooklyn and other New York boroughs.[7] These demonstrations were sparked by reports – the result of a series of investigations by prominent rabbis – that such wigs might contain hair culled from worshippers engaged in image-veneration in Hindu temples in India. Although wigs with Indian hair were once a popular choice among many Haredi women, the wigs – suddenly it seems – became suspect because they were deemed products of "idolatry." Or, at least, this is the standard narrative that was presented by popular news sources at the time.[8]

One of the main sources for the hair in question was the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple near the town of Tirupati in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India. Pilgrims who come to the temple often hope that, through engagement with (esp. seeing) the divine image of Veṅkaṭeśvara, they will receive worldly benefits. The offering of hair occurs in this context. Tonsuring constitutes the fulfillment of a vow. It occurs prior to viewing the image and, thus, may also function as a preparatory rite for worship of the central Veṅkaṭeśvara image.

As one means to support the temple economically, tonsured hair is then gathered to be sold for wigs. The Veṅkaṭeśvara temple is a major international supplier of hair; since 2002, for instance, it has taken in more than $6 million annually from the sale of tonsured hair to European, Chinese, and other distributors.[9] Until the recent halakhic ruling, a major market had been Haredi women who cover their heads with *sheitels* [i.e., wigs].[10] *Sheitels* with human hair cost thousands of dollars, and the 2004 ruling, therefore, had a large impact on their daily lives.[11]

From the picture presented by the international news media, it seemed that the rejection of these wigs was sparked by negative and simplistic views of "idolatry" from within Judaism.[12] On closer investigation, however, we see that the various halakhic rulings on the status of the wigs encompass a complex set of issues pertaining to a precise definition of the tonsuring practice.[13] The media focused on the fact that the act was done for a Hindu god and associated it with image-worship *qua* "idolatry." However, according to the halakhic interpretations, it was not the association of the act with a Hindu god or image that made the wigs problematic for Jewish women; rather, it was the possibility that the hair is given as a sacrificial offering to the god.[14] In order to make an assessment, observers were sent to Tirupati to witness the Hindu practices first-hand, to determine whether or not the devotees were "offering" the hair. They did so with great attention to the details of the Hindu practices, but they interpreted them in conjunction with laws about Greco-Roman religion in the Mishnah and Talmud.[15] The conclusion of most was that the hair was, in fact, cut as an offering to the god.[16]

The 2004 *sheitel* controversy is interesting for the comparative study of religion at several levels. This case of Orthodox Jewish interpretation of Hindu worship provides a perspective not dominated by Protestant Christian assumptions (cf. Holdrege, 2007). Arguably, the Western scholarly understanding of Hinduism was shaped by biblical strictures against "idolatry," and especially by the Protestant Christian ambivalence

towards religious art (Eire, 1989). In early scholarship on India, image-worship was largely presented in either black or white terms: it was either seen as entirely negative (as in the case of the condemnation of Hindu image-worship as misguided or "primitive") or as entirely positive (as in the case of apologetic attempts to interpret Hindu images as exactly the same as Christian symbols of the divine; see further, Fleming, 1999: 72–73; cf. Eck, 1993: 78). By contrast, the Orthodox Jewish observers who visited the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple brought other types of questions: Is tonsuring an act of sacrificial "offering"? What is the status of the hair after it is cut? Is the hair a gift to the god? Is the hair itself pure or impure?

In this essay, I will survey hair-related traditions in premodern and contemporary Hinduism with a focus on these questions. First, I will consider the place of tonsuring in the worship of the Veṅkaṭeśvara image today. Then, I will survey passages from ancient and medieval Sanskrit literature that might shed light on the conflicting views of the tonsured hair in the "insider" and "outsider" reports about the practice. For this, I will consider three types of ritual acts that help illuminate the contemporary views and practices of tonsure at Veṅkaṭeśvara: [1] throwing hair into a ritual fire, [2] gaining austerities at a pilgrimage, and [3] making a vow. I will suggest that we find, both in the ancient texts and in the contemporary practices, certain tensions surrounding the understanding of hair. Such tensions may have affected how the practice of tonsure was viewed from the outside, in this case, by Orthodox Jewish observers. They may have also shaped how devotees, barbers, and priests described these rituals, when prompted by the questioners to explain them (cf. Bourdieu, 1997: 18–20).

## 1. Tonsuring at the Veṅkaṭeśvara Temple at Tirupati

The Veṅkaṭeśvara temple (fig. 1) is located on Tirupati hill (also referred to as Tirumala) in the southern part of Andhra Pradesh state, perhaps two or three hours outside of Chennai (Madras) by road.[17] By some estimates, the temple compound on Tirupati hill attracts 30,000–50,000 pilgrims every day. Its central deity, Veṅkaṭeśvara, is considered an incarnation of Viṣṇu. The image of this god is understood by pilgrims to embody much of Viṣṇu's pan-Indian religion and theology as well as traditions particular to the god Veṅkaṭeśvara.[18] The latter is seen as "The God on the Hill," to employ the title of a recent translation of 15th-century Telugu poems dedicated to him (Rao and Shulman, 2005). This status is reinforced by his categorization as a *svayambhū-mūrti*, a self-manifesting image.[19] Situated on the hill, the presence of the god permeates from every direction, mediated through the gates of the compound. The sanctity of the god constitutes the entire mountain. It is in this way that Veṅkaṭeśvara is thought to preside over Tirupati as a whole.

I had the opportunity to visit the temple and to observe the tonsuring procedures in person in 2003. Despite the way that the news media has presented the issue since the 2004 controversy,[20] it is clear that the pilgrims who cut their hair there do not "offer" the hair in the sense of giving it directly to the image itself. In Indian *pūjā* rituals, offerings such as food are made directly to an image. By contrast, the tonsuring ritual resembles a preparatory rite. The hair is cut, not in the temple, but in a separate building set aside for this purpose. When visitors enter this building, there is an open area where

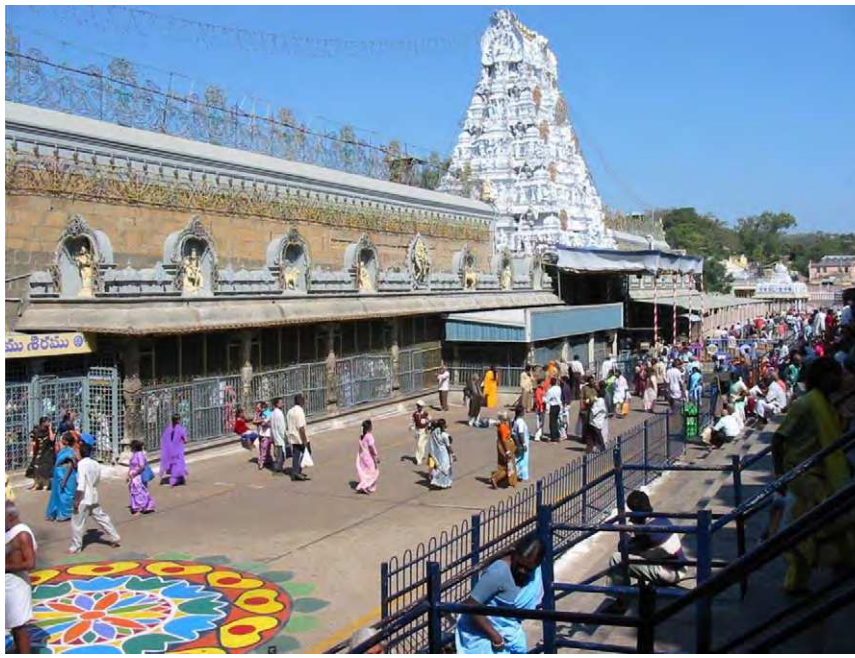

**Fig. 1.** Veṅkaṭeśvara temple, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. Photo by the author.

several barbers sit on the floor and cut the hair of pilgrims (figs. 2 and 3).[21] The hair, when cut, falls to the cement floor, where it remains until it is collected by temple workers and dumped in a large cement warehouse on another part of the temple grounds.

I had a chance to see one of the warehouses where tonsured hair was taken after it was cut (fig. 4). It was a private, closed building with no windows, filled with enormous piles of black hair. Although the building is closed to the public, I was allowed to look inside. They stopped me, however, from taking photographs; I am rather unclear as to what privacy or confidentiality issue was at stake with regards to photography, since the workers happily gave me a short tour of the facility. In the warehouse building, the hair is placed into burlap bags, and then loaded onto large transport vehicles and shipped away (fig. 5). The warehouse building is set far away from the site of the actual hair-cutting as well as from the main ritual arena of the temple – presumably, because it is considered part of a separate industry, distinct from the pilgrimage industry and the worship of the Veṅkaṭeśvara image in the temple. From these warehouses, hair is shipped out to factories to be processed, and then sent to distributors and wig-makers in various parts of the world.

The worshipper who wishes to fulfill a vow has his or her hair cut as part of a broader purificatory process prior to approaching the idol. This process also involves bathing to remove dirt and dead skin, and getting rid of feces and urine, among other activities; these are treated as ''remnants'' of the worshipper and hence categorically impure. Similarly, the worshipper does not have anything to do with the hair once it is cut off the head.

**Fig. 2.** Tonsuring Room at the Veṅkaṭeśvara Temple in Andhra Pradesh. Photo by the author.

Rather, the routine of cutting the hair is part of preliminary purification, and the remnant hair is gathered in warehouses away from where ritual activities are performed – although admittedly still within the temple grounds upon the sacred mountain.[22]

From the above description, we may suggest that tonsuring is not a rite in the same sense as *darśana* (i.e., ritually viewing the image), and hair is not offered to the god in the same way that fire, money, or food are given directly to the image in the temple. Apparently, worshippers do not have any concept of what happens to the hair after it is cut. This, arguably, is fitting with the ritual context, since their concern for the hair ends with the act of tonsuring – not unlike tossing out the garbage (i.e., disposing of ritual impurities).

How can we explain, then, the confusion that arose surrounding the status of the hair as "offering," both among the Orthodox Jewish observers and in the media coverage? The rulings about the hair were based on a variety of first-hand accounts from Hindus as well as first-hand observation of the rite. When asked, Hindu priests in North America and devotees in India consistently described the hair as an "offering" to the god, whether in the sense of a self-sacrifice or in the sense of a gift. No mention was made by any Hindu "insiders" of any impurity associated with the hair.

To explore this interesting gap between ritual practice and the explanation of ritual practice, we will turn to consider a selection of traditions about hair in Sanskrit literature. Here, the practice of tonsure at the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple in Tirupati will serve as our teleological focus, shaping our selection and analysis of textual traditions about the status of cut hair.

**Fig. 3.** Tonsuring at the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple, Andhra Pradesh. Photo by the author.

## 2. Tensions Surrounding Hair in Sanskrit Literature

In his 1995 article, "Deconstruction of the Body in Indian Asceticism," Patrick Olivelle builds on the social-scientific idea of the body as a socially-constructed entity. Within Indian tradition, he suggests that we can distinguish between two kinds of constructed bodies (Olivelle, 1995: 188–210; see further, Lorenzen, 1996: 975–976; Olivelle, 1998: 11). One is constructed by Brahmins; it is essentially pure, but in constant danger of being contaminated. The other type of body is constructed by the ascetic tradition and is, by definition, impure.[23]

For our purposes, this distinction is significant because it points us to base tensions within Indian ritual practice, which mirror, to some extent, the ancient tension commonly noted between society and forest. Here, I am interested in how these two conflicting impulses continue to be expressed and explored in later centuries through ritual practice and through reflection, by the ritual practitioners, through the preservation and interpretation of earlier textual traditions.[24] For our understanding of the practices at Tirupati, most significant is the onset and rise of pilgrimage culture and the widespread establishment of sacred geographies associated with major post-Vedic Hindu gods.[25] Such developments may shape attitudes towards the body, at least insofar as great power is associated with the newly-risen pilgrimage sites; *tīrthas* have the ability to transform any person no matter what their background and even apart from the strict austerities of an ascetic life.[26] In this context, the tensions between the "Brahmanical body" and the

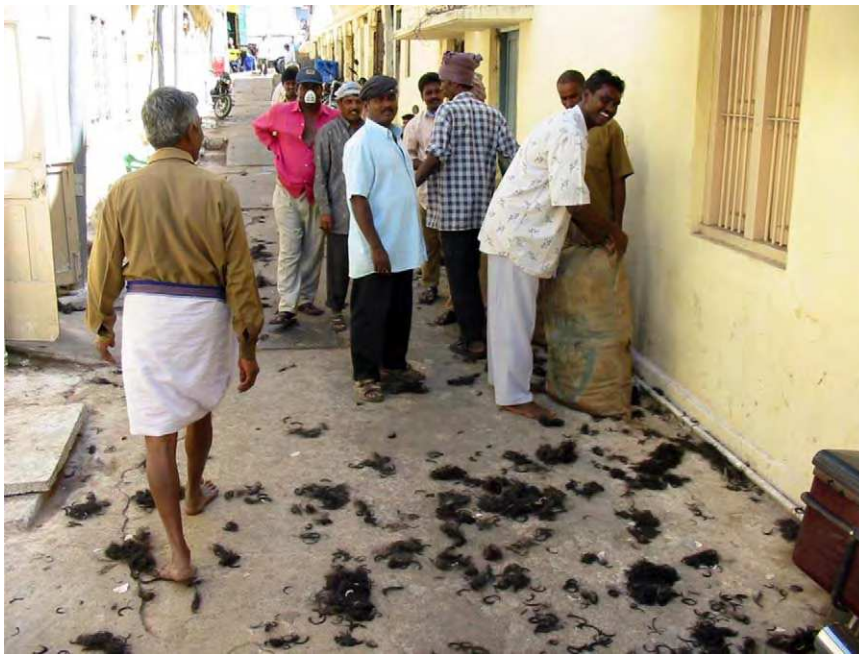

**Fig. 4.** Outside one of the main hair storage warehouses, Veṅkaṭeśvara temple, Andhra Pradesh. Photo by the author.

"ascetic body" seem to have lessened – or, at the very least, we seem to see further integration of once more polarized attitudes.

Yet, arguably, the same ancient tensions may continue to play out, in new ways, within medieval and contemporary traditions surrounding hair – a substance that can be understood both as part of the body and as a byproduct of it.[27] It is within this general discussion of the rise of pilgrimage culture in medieval India and its potential relationship to the rise of new body concepts that we arrive at our discussion of hair. We will consider a set of sample passages, drawn primarily from the *Mahābhārata*. The *Mahābhārata* is an apt text, for our purposes, since this Epic is a transitional work that both absorbs earlier traditions and maintains something of their character. I have chosen to employ Nīlikaṇṭha's edition, not because of problems I hold with the Critical Edition, but because Nīlikaṇṭha's work is a fully stratified, living (as opposed to constructed) text and likely to contain numerous medieval additions to the Epic, especially those from South Indian manuscripts. These characteristics and additions of Nīlikaṇṭha's edition make it more adaptable for our present circumstances (including, for example, passages not found in the Critical Edition). Furthermore, this massive textual corpus is itself a source for a variety of medieval and modern traditions, which continue to retell and rework it in interesting ways; this is particularly relevant for understanding the Vaiṣṇavite tradition of which Veṅkaṭeśvara forms a part.[28]

In what follows, I will consider a selection of passages, primarily from the *Vana Parvan* ["Forest Book"], which represents the period during the Pāṇḍava's exile in the

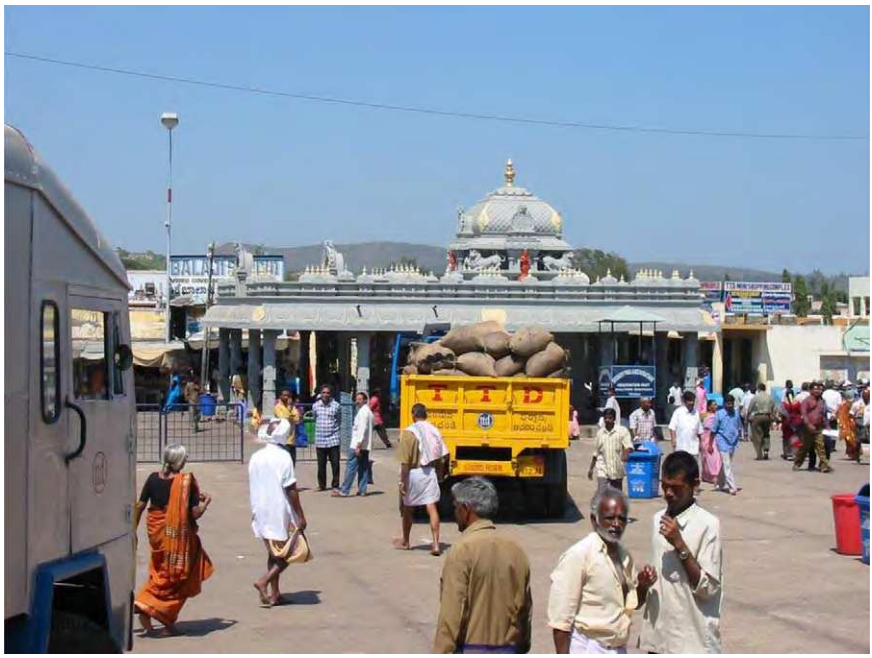


**Fig. 5.** Trucks delivering bags of tonsured hair for distribution outside the temple complex. Veṅkaṭeśvara temple, Andhra Pradesh. Photo by the author.

forest and which contains numerous references to ascetic practices. In these passages, we see different kinds of offerings being made: one of hair being cast off and doused in water, one of hair being thrown into a ritual fire, another an offering in order to become purified at a pilgrimage, and a fourth representing a vow. Additionally, I have included an interdict against selling hair, found in the *Adi Parvan* ["Book of Beginnings"]. However sparsely, I hope these passages can inform our general understanding of hair in Hindu practice, as understood within the context of multiple layers of ritual and reception in Vaiṣṇavite traditions in South India.

## *2a. Vana Parvan* 136.9–11

> Then the ascetic who possessed a highly volatile temper, tore off a matted lock of his hair, threw it into the fire, with the correct Sanskrit verses. At this, there sprang out of it a female resembling her[29] in beauty. And then he ripped out another twisted lock of his hair, and offered it again into the fire. At this point a demon jumped out! He was terrible to look at and had frightful eyes.[30]

Even without the space required to consider the full context of this short passage within the larger flow of the narrative, we can here note that hair is being offered as part of a fire ritual. On some level, this tradition thus draws from the kind of ritual offering of hair in the *śrauta* rituals described in late Vedic sources.[31] The main difference here is

that impurity is clearly associated with the ascetic's lock of hair, in that it potentially brings forth demons. In this passage, then, we see both of Olivelle's categories of "constructed body" present: pure and tainted. Impurity, in this case, has become associated with hair removed from the head.

## *2b. Vana Parvan* 200.96–97

> The carrying of the triple staff, the vow of silence, mass of braided hair, shaving the head, covering one's person with barks and deerskins, the practice of vows, ablutions (at a pilgrimage site), the worship of fire, living in the woods, emaciating the body, all these would be deceitful if one is not resplendent.[32]

In this passage, we see a mendicant who has gone forth from his home life. Hair is contemplated in the context of ritual acts imposed on the body, and these acts suggest that the body is impure. "Shaving the head" is here a means to achieve internal purity (i.e., to make one "resplendent"; *nirmala*). This passage expresses negative views toward hair similar to those perpetuated in legal traditions. Within the Dharmaśāstras, for example, hair is treated as something dead, similar to skin, bone, or ash (*Manusmṛti* 4.221), and the cutting of hair can be performed when the body is considered impure because of a specific sin (e.g. the murder of a Brahmin) in a rite performed on the edge of a town (*Manusmṛti* 11.79). Such examples would seem to fit with Olivelle's "construct" of the ascetic body. As suggested by Nīlakaṇṭha's commentary to the *Vana Parvan* passage (200.97), the word for "ablutions" [*abhiṣecana*] evokes someone visiting and bathing at a pilgrimage site [*tīrtha*].[33] In this sense, this passage suggests some of the attitudes drawn from ascetic considerations of the body. At the same time, it may draw out this early construct together with the more populist ideology associated with pilgrimage tradition.

## *2c. Vana Parvan* 83.58–62

More directly related to pilgrimage spots are two successive passages from *Vana Parvan*, namely, 83.58–60 and 83.61–62. The passages are part of a longer discourse on pilgrimage that is itself framed by the main story-line of the *Mahābhārata* epic. During the forest-exile period of the Pāṇḍava brothers, four of the brothers receive the sage Nārada as they wait for Arjuna to return from his quest for divine weapons. The four brothers listen to Nārada's tale about the ancient *ṛṣi* Pulastya and the grand-patriarch Bhīṣma. As part of a reward bestowed on Bhīṣma for his excellent ascetic practices, Pulastya tells him about the benefits and value of pilgrimage as compared with other kinds of religious endeavor (such as sacrifice). The two passages of concern to us relate to practices to be performed at two distinct pilgrimage sites. The first, *Vana Parvan* 83.58–60, states:

> There is a *tīrtha* called Mother and when a man bathes there his children increase and he enjoys not a little prosperity, O King. One should afterwards go to the *tīrtha* called Śītavana ["Cool Grove"] with restraint and strict diet. O Great King, the eminence of this *tīrtha* is difficult to obtain elsewhere. A man is purified by going there and taking just one look,

> O King. By drenching (or casting off) his hair in that *tīrtha* a man acquires purification, O Bhiṣma.[34]

Here, in a manner similar to the example cited above from the *Manusmṛti* (11.79), we see that one is purified through the act of "drenching" [*abhyukṣya*] one's hair in water or by "casting off" one's hair into water at the *tīrtha* (and thereby drenching it).[35] Further articulating the relationship between pilgrimage and hair, the passage immediately following (i.e., 83.61–62) states as follows:

> A pilgrimage site [*tīrtha*] is there, O Great King, known as Śvāvillomāpaha ["Removing Porcupine Quills"];[36] where, O Tiger Among Men, wise Brahmins are devoted to that sacred place [*tīrtha*]. O Bhiṣma [*bharatasattama*], the excellent Brahmins that bathe there attain the highest satisfaction. At this site (called) Śvāvillomāpanayana, O Bhiṣma, they remove their hair while (practicing) breath exercises and, purified by ablutions, O King, they proceed on the greatest journey.[37]

It is perhaps against the background of these kinds of characterization, also seen to some extent with *Vana Parvan* 136.9–11 and 200.96–97, that we might consider the modern example of Tirupati. This is to say that there is within the tradition, at times, a negative view of the body that is attached to the hair. The hair itself can become the symbol of bodily impurity, as if impurities rise up into the hair and thus can be removed with it.[38] This impurity can be got rid of through other activities, such as pilgrimage and penances, but also through the ritual removal of the hair.

Additionally, we see that the passages preserve something of earlier characterizations of the "Brahminical body" and "ascetic body" in the heuristic dichotomy posed by Olivelle.[39] It would seem, at least from these few textual examples, that hair is on its way to being deemed impure at the time of the *Mahābhārata*, and especially so with respect to its transmission in the medieval recensions represented by Nīlikaṇṭha's 17th-century text. Notably, this is a development that we see even more clearly in the genre of Dharmaśāstras, which, like the *Mahābhārata* and other Epics, had a vibrant and lively tradition of transmission, redaction, and commentary throughout the Middle Ages. In the Dharmaśāstras, as in the *Mahābhārata*, hair is not an offering as such, but more like a discarded remnant, akin to bone, dead skin, and ash.[40]

## 3. Interpreting Tonsured Hair as "Offering"

Arguably, the absorption and transmission of traditions, rituals, and ideas about hair – which develop alongside ideas about the body and its byproducts – are part of a long historical process shaping the contemporary practices with which we are here concerned. The modern pilgrim goes to a pilgrimage center and has his or her hair cut as a fulfillment of a vow. Within this simple act are, however, embodied some of the earlier dynamics, as expressed both through the elements of the ritual and in the range of ways that the act can be perceived and explained.

When we consider the details of the act of tonsuring, the treatment of the hair does not, as we noted, fit at all with the treatment of an "offering." This is clear from the

location of the tonsuring, from the fact it is done as preparation to approach the image, and from its association with other kinds of preparatory cleansing. That the impurity of hair is assumed is also clear from the low caste of the barbers who perform the actual act of tonsure.[41] With regard to the ritual actions, the cutting of hair can be likened to the washing of dirt from the body. Within the ritual, the hair is treated, in other words, like an impure bodily byproduct, whether as a symbol of an impure body or as the discarded impure parts of a potential pure body.

Yet, when prompted to explain the practice by the Jewish visitors, devotees seemed to convey a view of hair as pure. In this, they may have been evoking the symbolic sense or experience of the act of removing the hair, as some kind of self-sacrifice or as part of the hardship of the vow itself and the other activities associated with it. In this broader symbolic sense, the whole act of the vow must be taken into consideration: the hair is only a small element within this larger schema, but the schema of the vow may shape the perception of the meaning of the hair, and especially its explanation to outsiders. For the Jews who observed the ritual, moreover, the focus was solely on the question of the status of the hair. In response to their question, devotees may have spoken of hair only as it bears on the broader symbolic complex, namely, the vow and its fulfillment. This may help to explain why hair is here implied to be pure inasmuch as it is described as a "gift" to the god.

Tensions between the ideas of the body as pure and impure, then, seem to play out in a new way within the multiple possible interpretations of the hair that is cut in the tonsuring ritual at Tirupati. We have seen how this dichotomy has been resolved, to some extent, in medieval and modern pilgrimage traditions, and yet, at the same time, remains as a generative tension within Hindu practice. It is this tension that may, in part, have affected how these hair practices were viewed and interpreted by "outsiders" – in this case, by the Orthodox Jewish observers and legal experts who concluded that the hair was simply an "offering" to a Hindu god.[42]

## Hair, Halakha, and the Theorization of Ritual Practice

### *Annette Yoshiko Reed*

This essay is the second of a pair exploring different perspectives on the 2004 *sheitel* controversy with a focus on questions relevant for scholarship on comparative religion and ritual. Whereas the first reflected upon traditions and tensions surrounding hair within Hinduism, this essay considers the rulings and *responsa* of the Jewish authorities involved. I shall suggest that an examination of these discussions raises interesting issues about hair and identity. At the same time, the events surrounding them point us to some of the challenges attendant in theorizing the ritual practice of the religious "Other" – not only for the *Poskim* [i.e., legal experts] involved in the controversy, but perhaps also for those of us whose scholarly endeavors take us into the inevitably foreign landscapes of the past.

At the outset, I should make clear that I do not approach this issue as an expert in modern varieties of Judaism, nor in anthropological or sociological methods for studying contemporary religious practices and communities.[43] Rather, these events sparked my imagination as a scholar of ancient Judaism reflecting on the challenges of extracting, from relatively scant surviving evidence, some sense of the ways in which Jews

negotiated the boundaries of their identities while dwelling in the dominantly polytheistic cultural contexts of Hellenistic and Roman empires.[44]

In response to questions about the possible inclusion of tonsured hair from the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple in wigs popular among Haredi women, Rabbi Elyashiv and others looked to the laws concerning *avodah zarah* [lit. "strange worship"] in the Mishnah and Talmud.[45] That the 2004 *sheitel* controversy thus resulted in a surprising crossing of present and past was noticed by many involved. Writing in the heat of the controversy in summer 2004, for instance, Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff (2004) proclaimed:

> Had someone told me six months ago that I would be dealing with a *shaylah* [question] pertaining to *Hilchos Avodah Zarah*, I probably would have laughed. Who could imagine that in the modern world, *shaylos* [questions] about these issues would affect virtually every *frum* [observant] household. It goes to show us how *ayn kol chodosh tachas hashemesh*. There is nothing new under the sun (*Koheles* [Ecclesiastes] 1:9).

A similar point was made by Mordecai Plaut (2004), the editor of *Dei'ah veDibur*. He introduced his reflections on the controversy as follows:

> We are very far removed from *avodoh zora* in many ways. Anshei Knesses Hagedoloh eliminated the *yetzer hora* for *avodoh zora* around 2,500 years ago, and certainly the old-time idol worship is virtually nonexistent in the West ... it sometimes can seem as if it is all a part of the dead past and nothing more ... .

Plaut went on to note that the controversy served the positive purpose of drawing attention to *avodah zarah* and the need for Jewish attentiveness to it. Likewise, Rabbi Joshua Flug (2005: 33) concludes his summary of the halakhic debate by stressing that – whatever its ultimate results – the debate provided "an opportunity to learn about topics such as *tikrovet avodah zarah* and *kavua* ... that are not usually studied in the context of practical halacha."

What is interesting, for our purposes, is that this discussion of the status of *sheitels* containing hair from India drew, not on modern Western understandings of "Hinduism," "world religions," or religious difference, but rather on late antique Jewish models for understanding the ritual practice of the "Other." In the North American and European contexts, Jewish life has been defined mainly in terms of the encounter with the secular and Christian "Other" and, especially in Israel, with reference to the Muslim "Other" as well. Yet, due to this recent controversy, laws forged in antiquity to deal with Jewish life in the Roman Empire were redeployed to tackle new questions raised by the unintentional encounter with Vaiṣṇavite worship in India, among relatively closed communities of Haredi Jews,[46] who were touched unexpectedly by a non-Christian, non-Muslim "Other" by virtue of the strange contingencies of globalization.[47]

Scholars of antiquity often grapple with the theoretical issues attendant on the attempt to reconstruct religious practices primarily from the evidence of texts – as compounded, throughout the field of Religious Studies, by the traditional tendency to subordinate the whole realm of ritual practice to the beliefs and doctrines that such texts express. On a theoretical level, this recent case of contemporary inter-religious interaction is thus an

interesting locus for reflecting on the challenges scholars face when trying to analyze rituals and practices, apart from the Protestant Christian biases that have arguably shaped the field from its very inception (cf. Asad, 1993: 28–29; Masuzawa, 2005: 18–19). If the halakhic negotiation of this inter-religious encounter gives us a rare chance to see some of these ancient laws in action, it may also show us their limits, and provide a model that cautions us against assuming that their ancient formation and applications were any less fluid, multivalent, or complex.

In a recent essay on the categories of "religion" and "history," CT McIntire (2006: 88–89) imaginatively charts how the field of Religious Studies might look today, if its earliest scholars had sought to map the diversity of religious expression using the Indian concept of "dharma" as a model, instead of the Western concept of "religion." For McIntire, this thought-experiment in creative counter-history serves as a way of highlighting just how much Protestant Christian values and categories have shaped modern scholarship on "religion," in general, and the comparative exercise, in particular. By peering, for a moment, at contemporary Indian practice as seen through the lens of Jewish Halakha (cf. Holdrege, 2007), we might similarly gain some insights into modern scholarly assumptions about the mapping of ritual and religious difference.

## 1. Halakha as/and Ritual Theory: *Avodah Zarah* and the "Other"

The Hebrew term *avodah zarah* literally means "strange worship," and it is used to refer both to the foreign worship practices that Jews must avoid (for example, "idolatry") and to the objects of such worship (that is, "idols"). The term is a distinctively rabbinic one, forged in the wake of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE (Urbach, 1959: 139; Halbertal and Margalit, 1992: 3–4; Grossmark, 2005: 213–214).

In the ancient Israelite traditions in the Hebrew Bible, one finds injunctions to refrain from worshipping foreign gods (e.g. Exod 20:3; 23:13) and to destroy objects and sites of foreign worship in the Land of Israel (e.g. Exod 23:4). By contrast, late antique rabbis in Roman Palestine re-conceptualized non-Jewish worship in terms of the more pragmatically-oriented category of *avodah zarah* (Urbach, 1959: 190–192; Grossmark, 2005: 226). This category, and the laws surrounding it, are pointed towards determining what types of activity and objects Jews should try to avoid; they presume, in other words, a high degree of contact, interaction, and economic commerce with non-Jews, and they negotiate Jewish identity, not by means of calls to destruction, but rather with rules that delineate, in intricate detail, a delicate buffer zone between Jewish and non-Jewish practices (Halbertal, 1998: 159–172).

In the late first and early second centuries, however, this was perhaps easier said than done. When the laws concerning *avodah zarah* were first formulated, there was arguably no category, either among Jews or non-Jews in the ancient Mediterranean world, akin to our present notion of "religion" (see further, Fredriksen, 2003; Boyarin, 2003, 2004). Cult, as Daniel Boyarin (2003: 70) has stressed, remained inextricable from culture. Although there were sacred spaces, priests, and sacrifices, there were no clear lines separating the "religious" and the "secular" in Roman Palestine.[48] Tokens and images

of deities permeated the landscape, from the piles of stones set up to Mercury along the roadsides (*m.AZ* 4.1) to the statues of Aphrodite in the public baths (*m.AZ* 3.4).

It was through legislation that the rabbis of the Mishnah drew such lines. Notably, they did so partly with an appeal to the parallel of what they saw as proper Jewish worship. This is suggested already from the very term *avodah zarah*. An act can only be categorized as "strange worship" if it qualifies as "worship" [Heb. *avodah*] in the first place.[49] In defining *avodah zarah*, moreover, the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem Temple served as a significant touchstone for late antique rabbis, even though the Temple no longer stood when the Mishnah or Talmud were compiled. Acts and objects offered in the Jerusalem Temple were interpreted as "unambiguously cultic acts" and thus forbidden (Schwartz, 2001: 165), irrespective of the sanctity granted to them by any specific non-Jews. The practitioner's perception does figure, however, as another sufficient criterion for determining what is and is not *avodah zarah*: an object can be categorized as an "idol" if it is worshipped (e.g. *m.AZ* 4.4), and an act can be categorized as "idolatry" if it forms part of the customary practice through which devotees honor a particular deity.

In contrast to early Christian ideas about "idolatry" [Gr. *eidōlolatreia*] as coterminous with false belief,[50] the rabbinic determination of *avodah zarah* is predicated on practice; "the Mishnah," as Seth Schwartz (2001: 165) has observed, "requires *action* of its idolators, especially cult-related action."[51] From non-Jewish cultic actions and their associated objects, Jews are forbidden to benefit, and hence the Mishnah includes laws to proscribe the sale of animals, foods, or goods that might be used for *avodah zarah* as well as outlining laws to ensure that Jews do not gain economic or other benefits either directly from *avodah zarah* or indirectly from *tikrovet avodah zarah* (i.e., the offerings made to idols).

## 2. Hindu Tonsure, Brahmanical Theorization, and the Rabbinic Gaze

In relation to wigs containing hair from India, the halakhic concern has been whether or not the hair falls into the category of *tikrovet avodah zarah*. According to the Mishnah and Talmud, an object is categorized as such if it meets one of three conditions (see further, Blidstein, 1971: 188–198). First is to be an object of the type offered in the Jerusalem Temple. Second is to be an object used by non-Jews in ritual acts akin to acts of worship in the Jerusalem Temple (or, more specifically: slaughter, pouring/sprinkling, sacrificing, or bowing). In these two cases, an object need not be perceived by any non-Jew as being related to their own worship in order to be treated, from a halakhic standpoint, as *tikrovet avodah zarah* and thus forbidden for Jewish use. To these criteria, however, is added a third – namely, any food, object, or animal that is customarily used in practices that non-Jews perceive as acts of worship. Hence, for instance, if one lives in a place where small animals are customarily offered to a god, one must thus avoid selling any small animals to one's Gentile neighbors (*m.AZ* 1.6).

Among the *Poskim* discussing the status of the tonsured hair from Tirupati, there was little doubt that the Tirupati pilgrims were devotees of the god Viṣṇu or that they worshipped him through the Śrī Veṅkaṭeśvara idol. Yet this did not suffice to render wigs

containing their hair problematic for Jewish women to wear. The rulings and *responsa* of the *Poskim*, rather, focused on the ritual actions and participants in the tonsuring at Tirupati. In short, it was largely assumed that the ritual status of the tonsured hair – as *tikrovet avodah zarah* or not – must be decided by determining whether or not the ritual of its cutting could be technically categorized as an act of *avodah zarah*.[52]

The discussion about its status took place in two stages, first in 1989 and later in 2004. To questions about wigs containing hair exported from India,[53] the initial response was to investigate this matter by contacting experts in Hinduism, including a Hindu priest living in North America as well as a non-Indian scholar of Hinduism.[54] Among the questions asked were who precisely cut the hair, where it was cut, what happened to the hair afterwards, and whether or not this practice was considered an act of sacrificial offering within Hinduism.[55] It was on the basis of this information that lenient rulings were made by most of the rabbis involved in the 1989 discussion, permitting such wigs to be worn by the women in their communities.[56]

Rabbi Elyashiv likened the situation to a case described in the Mishnah, where a Jew slaughtered an animal for a non-Jew, thinking that the non-Jew was going to eat the animal, only to learn later that the meat was intended to be offered to an idol (see *b. Hullin* 38b). Since the Mishnah and Talmud absolve this Jew of responsibility for his accidental act of idolatrous sacrifice, Rabbi Elyashiv reasoned that it is the ritual actor who determines the status of the offering, not the one for whom it is done. Hence, the non-idolatrous nature of the tonsuring is signaled by the fact it is done by a barber rather than a priest.[57]

Yet another argument was predicated on the distinction between sacred and mundane space.[58] The ritual of tonsuring is performed in buildings outside of the actual temple, not in front of the idol. The hair, likewise, is not customarily brought into the temple or placed on the altar. As such, the ritual act of tonsuring does not qualify as "worship" in the technical sense of the term (i.e., *avodah* as defined in the Mishnah, Talmud, etc.). In addition, from the initial reports, Rabbi Elyashiv also posited that the hair does not fall into the category of an offering of *avodah zarah* because the tonsuring was not perceived as an act akin to the cultic offering of sacrifices to a deity. Rather, the act of cutting the hair had been explained to them as a personal act of self-sacrifice and as purification in preparation to approach the image.

What prove interesting, for our purposes, are the ways in which these contemporary rabbis navigated some of the same challenges with which scholars in Religious Studies also struggle. By virtue of their halakhic framework of interpretation, the conventional Western biases towards belief and doctrine were largely sidestepped, and the focus fell on ritual practice. In interpreting the practices in question, moreover, attention was paid to the location, the acts, and the status and roles of the various ritual actors. It was assumed that the meaning and status of the material involved (in this case, hair) were shaped by the practices and by the broader religious system in which they operate.[59] And perhaps most strikingly, the rabbis interpreted the Hindu practices simultaneously through two lenses. They tried to determine the meaning of the acts as perceived within the tradition itself.[60] And, at the same time, they self-consciously engaged in the application of categories, models, and concepts from their own religious world – in this case, the mishnaic and talmudic laws as well as the model of sacrificial worship in the Jerusalem Temple.

## 3. Between "Outside" Observer and "Insider" Reportage

In 1990, the case seemed settled. Fourteen years later, however, new doubts were raised about the self-perception of the act of tonsuring by Tirupati pilgrims. Among those to voice their concern were – intriguingly – some Jews who had visited India and participated in this very ritual at Tirupati, prior to embracing the Haredi way of life and joining Orthodox Jewish communities.[61]

From the evidence of the reports, it is unclear how influential these particular witnesses were in re-opening the halakhic case of the tonsured hair from Tirupati. Their involvement, however, does raise some interesting points about the blurry lines between ritual "insider" and "outsider" observer – even in a case where they might appear, at first sight, to be clear. The very fact that first-hand participants in the tonsuring rituals at Tirupati could be found among Haredi Jews cautions us against assuming that these "ultra-orthodox" communities are quite as closed as they appear. It also serves to remind us of the allure of India for many contemporary Jews.[62] Indeed, arguably, the equation of Hinduism and *avodah zarah* by these particular Haredim is interesting precisely because it is perhaps atypical of the encounter of Hinduism and Judaism in our own times.[63]

For the debate about the status of the tonsured hair, the concerns of these and other Jews sufficed to spark a new investigation. Accordingly, in 2004, two delegations were sent to India to investigate – the first an Indian couple living in Israel, and second a group led by London Rabbi Aharon Dovid Dunner. Both were equipped with lists of questions for the Tirupati pilgrims and barbers, oriented towards determining their perception of the tonsuring practice. Rabbi Fleisch (2004) describes their questions and observations as follows:

> The pilgrims were asked: If your intention is to give a present why do you cut it here and therefore have to wait for hours in a queue? Why don't you cut it at home and send it to the G-d? They answered: No, we want to cut it here because here we are in a holy place. The cutting must take place in a holy place. They were asked: Why do you do it? They answered: Our idol loves our hair. The barbers told them that their intention in cutting the hair is two-fold: to earn a good salary and to fulfill their religion. The barbers are of a low caste yet they must belong to the same religion. Most pilgrims either verbalized or thought the name of their idol before or during the haircut. Everyone has to enter the haircutting building without shoes (including the visiting party!). On top of this building an idol was mounted and in one of the rooms there were further idols.

This new information raised new concerns.[64] The delegates had learned that some Tirupati pilgrims perceived their shorn hair as a gift to the god and that some of the barbers saw their role as something more than just an ordinary hair-cutter. Comments by pilgrims also shed doubt on the seemingly clear issue of sacred space: by some accounts, the whole mountain was sacred to Viṣṇu. Moreover, the observers noted that those who tonsured their hair took off their shoes prior to entering the appointed space for its shearing (i.e., the *Kalyana Katta*) – an action that seemed to signify sanctity (cf. Exodus 3:5). Irrespective of the normative interpretations given by Hindu priests, it became clear that some of the ritual participants saw themselves as engaging in what could be defined as a cultic act. In response, Rabbi Elyashiv reversed his earlier decision, reasoning now that "one should classify this practice based on the way that worshippers practice."[65]

This ruling, issued on 13 May 2004, caused rioting in the streets of Haredi neighborhoods in New York and beyond.[66] It also prompted a flurry of *responsa* by other rabbis.[67] Some, for instance, disputed the privileging of the words of a small handful of pilgrims over what they saw as the customary and traditional understanding of tonsuring at Tirupati, to which the Hindu priests were seen to bear witness.[68]

From a scholarly perspective, such questions again sound familiar. Should one define the nature and purpose of a ritual based on its interpretation by religious specialists and in authoritative writings? Or should one (also or instead) try to recover the worshippers' own sense of the ritual?[69] Is the latter even possible, given the diverse ways that different ritual participants experience, interpret, and explain their acts – particularly when confronted by "outsider" questions?[70] Likewise, does one best define a "religion" in terms of individuals or institutions? And, particularly in the realm of ritual practice, where and how does one even draw the lines between "religious" and non-"religious"? How does one differentiate when observing a different culture where such categories may not exist in the same ways (cf. Asad, 1993: 55–81)? If one depends on "insider" reports, whom does one choose to believe, and why?

## 4. Hair, Gender, and the Negotiation of (American) Jewish Identity

So far, we have considered the question of tonsured hair as it has been discussed within the halakhic rulings. By means of conclusion, I would like to shift our perspective on the controversy back to the "outsider" stances of scholarship, by focusing on the question of hair. From this vantage point, we may glimpse some of the gaps and silences in the halakhic discourse about Indian hair and Jewish wigs among Haredim.[71] Scholarly attempts to use the Mishnah's own comments on *avodah zarah* to recover something of ancient interactions between Jews and "pagans" in antiquity,[72] for instance, often encounter similar gaps and silences – signaling the descriptive limits of the "insider" accounts, as well as the broader challenges of using legal discourse to reconstruct social realities. Similarly, from just the halakhic discussion in 2004, one would be hard-pressed to explain why some women responded by burning their wigs in the streets.

In the halakhic discourse about Hindu tonsuring, as we have seen, hair has been treated as a neutral ritual agent capable of being permitted or forbidden for Jews depending on the precise nature of its use. One might ask, however, whether hair here bears any resonances beyond its halakhic indeterminacy. Perhaps most striking, in this regard, may be the manner in which the halakhic discourse about *avodah zarah* has served to efface the structural and ritual similarities between Jewish and Hindu practices surrounding the cutting of hair, precisely by virtue of the selective appeal to the cultic practice of the Jewish past (i.e., sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple) as the model for the interpretation of non-Jewish ritual practice in the present. Tacit – perhaps already in the Mishnah – is the effacement of the very possibility of any parallels between *avodah zarah* and contemporary Jewish practice.[73]

By contrast, when we view this controversy through the lens of the "outsider" from the perspective of the comparativist, what is highlighted is a set of structural similarities. The votive offering of hair at Tirupati resonates with the use of hair-cutting as a ritual

marker of liminality and transition in contemporary Haredi customs. Just as some children go to Tirupati for their first haircuts, so the first cutting of a boy's hair signals a moment of transition between infant and student in many Haredi communities.[74] In addition, some contemporary Haredim maintain the custom, developed in medieval Hungarian, Galician, and Ukrainian communities, of young women shaving their heads upon marriage.[75]

When approached from the "outsider" perspective of sociological inquiry, the latter practice also points us to the contested place of the *sheitel* among Haredim and to its function as a locus for negotiating the identity politics of gender and assimilation – two other themes notably absent from the rabbinic rulings.[76] Writing about *sheitels* from a sociological perspective,[77] Ariella Brown (2004) proposes that part of the attraction of these wigs for Haredi women may be that they assuage traditional Jewish anxieties about American standards of beauty, as often emblematized by the negative associations of "Jewish hair."[78] The wearing of such wigs may thus serve to fulfill what might appear, at first sight, to be two conflicting aims: [1] the assertion of Haredi distinctiveness through the observance of the Talmudic injunction for married women to cover their hair,[79] and [2] the assimilation to American standards of beauty; by means of wigs, these Jewish women can have straight hair, blond hair, and modern hairstyles.

Notably, the doubled character of wig-wearing does not seem to have been lost on Haredi rabbis. Since the halakhic rationale for women to cover their heads is to express modesty and to mark them as married, rabbinic authorities have repeatedly critiqued the wearing of wigs, particularly in cases where the wigs are so realistic (like the ones made from Indian and other varieties of human hair) that the wearer seems not to be wearing a wig at all; in some communities, in fact, *sheitels* are thus forbidden. Yet, in other communities, Haredi women retain the custom nonetheless.[80]

Arguably, then, it is in the context of inner-Jewish and inner-communal tensions – between law and custom, men and women, identity and assimilation – that we might best understand the response of Haredi women to the ruling of Rabbi Elyashiv in May 2004. The ruling disrupted what was arguably a delicate balance between traditional observance and the temptations of assimilation. It did so, moreover, by shifting the reference-point for debates about wig-wearing to the Hindu "Other" – an "Other" much more obviously "religious" and "Other" than secular Western societies like the USA and UK.

Seen from this perspective, it is striking that women chose to burn their wigs – an action more consistent with biblical calls to destroy the idolatrous than with rabbinic precepts concerning the avoidance of offerings to *avodah zarah*. However the hair tonsured at Tirupati is understood within Hinduism, these Jewish acts of burning wigs can be read as creative counter-ritual, framed in response to their own perception of this particular hair as having been a sacrificial offering to a foreign god.[81] But, in burning the tonsured hair, these women arguably turned it into precisely what it does not seem to be at Tirupati: a ritual agent of unambiguously religious meaning and power. It is perhaps a poignant testimony to the power of ritual that it was this perspective – among all the various "insider" and "outsider" views voiced and possible – that ended up holding sway, disseminated by the international news media and lingering in the public imagination.[82]

## Notes

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1. English translation from *Dei'ah veDibur*, 13 Sivan 5764.
2. See further, "Karmic debt returns as global venture," *South China Morning Post*, 27 July 2002; J Angwin, "A head trip: Indian hair finds parts in Hollywood: Temple locks are in demand for western hair extensions," *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 August 2003; DJ Wakin, "From top of the head to the bottom line," *New York Times*, 13 June 2004; S Rai, "A religious tangle over the hair of pious Hindus," *New York Times*, 14 July 2004; S Majumdar, "Indian temples do brisk business in women's hair," *WeNews*, 9 July 2006; R Ridley, "The high price of holy hair: The hottest new extensions come from Indian virgins," *Daily News*, 3 August 2006. Cf. Berry (2008).
3. "Haredi" (pl. Haredim) is here used in place of the more value-laden "ultra-orthodox" as an umbrella category for traditionalist Jewish groups including but not limited to various types of Hasidic Jews. Despite their differences, such groups share the ideal of preserving the laws and customs of the idealized past, in resistance to modern and secular values, and they are largely centered in enclave communities, relatively isolated from non-Jews in the surrounding societies (see further, Shilhav, 1989; Heilman, 1992; Baumel, 2006). Haredim make up a very small percentage of Jews. SC Heilman (1992: 11–12), for instance, estimates that of about 12 million Jews worldwide, 1.5 million are Orthodox and only 550,000 Haredi, with the majority of the latter living in Israel. SD Baumel (2006: 4–5) cites other estimates whereby Haredim make up approximately 3–4% of British Jews, approximately 5% of French Jews, and approximately 5% of American Jews, although he also makes note of claims that the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn is itself home to more than 40,000 Haredim. Although a relatively small number of women were directly affected by rulings surrounding *sheitels* with hair from India, these events attracted broader interest, not least due to the implications for Halakha, Jewish identity, and inter-religious dialogue; see, e.g., Flug (2005); Sperber (2009); Goshen-Gottstein (forthcoming). Note too, the treatment of these events in a recent play: Samantha Ellis's *Cling To Me Like Ivy*, first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre on 11 February 2010.
4. E.g., "A hair-raising fear of idols," *Ha'aretz*, 14 May 2004; DJ Wakin, "Rabbis' rules and Indian wigs stir crisis in Orthodox Brooklyn," *New York Times*, 14 May 2004; "Orthodox Jews burn wigs in Williamsburg," *News Day*, 17 May 2004; TJ Lueck, "Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn burn banned wigs," *New York Times*, 17 May 2004; "Orthodox Jews burn Indian wigs," *The Hindu*, 19 May 2004; A Radoszkowicz, "Some still split hairs over wigs," *Jerusalem Post*, 20 May 2004; "Bonfire of the hairpieces," *The Independent*, 21 May 2004; S Bates, "Orthodox Jews face wig ban after Hindu hair inquiry," *The Guardian*, 21 May 2004; J Remsen, "A religious question comes to a head," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 May 2004.
5. Much of the data for reconstructing the events surrounding the controversy is thus what Michael Meister (2009: 111) has termed "soft evidence" – e.g., temple pamphlets, community newsletters, popular press, and Internet discussion-lists and other forums. See, for

example, the extensive set of documents collected and posted on-line by Shaya Potter (http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~spotter/sheitel/).

6. Records of reports from this and subsequent meetings can be found on-line at the website of the World Council of Religious Leaders (http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.com/).
7. On the term "Haredi," and the place of Haredim within contemporary Judaism, see Heilman (1992: 11–39); Heilman and Friedman (1991); and n. 3 above.
8. See n. 4 above.
9. A temple leaflet that I obtained while visiting the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple in February 2003 claims an income of $6.7 million yearly from the sale of tonsured hair. An article from the following year in the *New York Times* quotes the temple's executive officer as citing a comparable sum for 2003 (S Rai, "A religious tangle over the hair of pious Hindus," *New York Times*, 14 July 2004). A similar figure of over $6 million was cited more recently in "Tirupati Balaji," *The Economic Times*, 2 August 2009. Berry (2008: 65) notes, more broadly, that "the global trade in human hair begins as major Indian temples, along with the country's hair exporters, earn a combined revenue of approximately US$300 million. According to journalist Julia Angwin, in 2002 Venkateswara Temple earned US$5.6 million through its hair auctions, twice as much as in 2001. The money gained from its hair auctioning is used to provide free food and housing for pilgrims, as well as to run five hospitals, twelve colleges and other charitable institutions; the temple is one of the wealthiest religious institutions in India, with an annual budget of US$120 million." For further information and details about temple financing and events, see the official temple website "Tirumala, Tirupati Devasthānams" (http://www.tirumala.org/).
10. Notably, not all Haredi women follow this practice, and *sheitels* were already much contested even before the 2004 controversy discussed here. On hair-covering, *sheitels*, and the debates surrounding them, see further, Shapiro (1990); Broyde, Krakowski, and Shapiro (1991); Heilman (1992: 310–312); Bronner (1993); Schiller (1995); Brown (2004); Fader (2007); Weiss (2009).
11. The summary of the event by Sperber (2009) emphasizes this element: "Those devout women, who upon hearing that their *sheitels* were 'idolatrous' immediately burned them. . . . However, I imagine they were plagued with pangs of anguish, not only because they had to destroy what for them was a very costly and personal part of their apparel, but even more in that for many years they had been covering their heads with 'idolatrous wigs,' trespassing – albeit unwittingly – one of the most serious prohibitions in Jewish law."
12. That is, as rooted in the prohibition of image-worship in the Torah (e.g. Exod 20:4; Deut 4:25). For instance, an article in the *New York Times*, published on the day after the ruling, summarized the rationale as follows: "The rabbis said the hair may have been used in Hindu religious ceremonies, which like other pantheistic practices are considered idolatrous in Orthodox teaching … Prohibitions against idolatry are based on Judaism's founding monotheistic beliefs, and echo strongly in homes where even portrait photographs are banned as graven images" (Wakin, "Rabbis' rules and Indian wigs").
13. Such attempts were drawn out of traditional legal discourses rooted in ancient Jewish encounters with Hellenistic and Roman cultures, as discussed below by Reed in the companion piece to this essay.
14. The question of how closely such rituals parallel ancient temple sacrifice was, in particular, an important consideration; see further, Flug (2005).

15. As noted below by Reed in the companion piece to the present article, this information was mainly drawn from the tractate *Avodah Zarah* of the Mishnah (ca. 200 CE), as dedicated to the issue of *avodah zarah* [lit. "strange worship"] in the context of "pagan" worship in Roman Palestine, as well as from the Talmud and other commentaries.
16. The decisions and proclamations of the rabbinic authorities who engaged with the initial observation of the Hindu rituals have been subsequently critiqued and reconsidered in supplementary discussions, most notably in Sperber (2009) and Goshen-Gottstein (forthcoming); cf. Steinsaltz (2005). It is clear from these later discussions that the initial rulings were far from universally accepted among Orthodox Jews, let alone among the full range of other Jewish communities.
17. The official temple website (http://www.tirumala.org/) refers to the mountain as "Tirupati hill" or "Veṅkaṭa hill," but it is also commonly called "Tirumala hill." The latter, however, is a bit redundant, since *mala* means "hill" in Telugu (*tiru* means "sacred" or "blessed," but can also refer to the wife of Viṣṇu; cf. Sanskrit *śrī*). To avoid redundancy while retaining clarity for non-specialist readers, I here employ "Tirupati hill" when referring to the sacred mountain location of the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple, following Rao and Shulman (2005).
18. Within the god's theology, for example, Veṅkaṭeśvara is considered an emanation [*vyūha*] of Viṣṇu, rather than an *avatāra* as such. This comes out of South Indian Vaikhānasa Āgamic traditions (Colas, 1996: 111–115).
19. That is, a natural rather than man-made image. With regard to the categories and status of images, an article about *svayambhū-mūrtis* is currently being undertaken by Gerard Colas (e.g., 2006). Note, however, that the category of "natural" is not entirely clear, as the term is sometimes applied to "man-made" images, with the sense that certain images are considered more elemental than other types of human-installed images. In any case, this categorization grants an image a higher status than others and connects it more strongly to the surrounding geography.
20. The misconstrued idea of "offering" in the media is seen, for example, in a *New York Times* article that describes one woman's pilgrimage to Tirupati hill in the following way: "When she came to the temple three years ago, Ms. Subhasri, 35, offered her waist-length hair to the temple deity, Venkateshwara, in a sign of absolute devotion. She then prayed that her husband, Satyanarayana Raju, be cured of his acute stomach ulcers" (Rai, "A Religious Tangle"). No analysis or consideration of the assumed ritual is ever presented, but the article simply draws on some latent understanding of "offering" that is never examined.
21. These barbers are of a low caste status, which speaks further to the interpretation of hair in Indian tradition (i.e., as being impure). At the sister Tirupati temple near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, one can also have one's hair cut to fulfill a vow. Although the temple's official website (http://www.svtemple.org/) terms this ritual "Hair Offering puja," it is stressed that no locks of hair will be cut by priests. Family members cut the hair of their relatives when only strands of hair are being "offered." Moreover, for full tonsure, the temple refers pilgrims to "Tony's Barber" and other local salons.
22. It is precisely such gray areas of defining sacrality that caused the shifting set of interpretations among the Jewish interpreters; see, for example, Fleisch (2004).
23. An important source for exploring Olivelle's thesis is the early and especially the later Vedic material in the genre of *śrauta* rituals, such as presented in the *Śathapatha Brahmana* (ninth century BCE) or the *Mānava-śulbasūtra* (seventh century BCE). Especially as a number of

these *śrauta* texts were written as late as the second century BCE, they may represent an ongoing tradition of "orthodox" rituals, with strict observance of ritual protocols. If we follow Olivelle's model, this would presumably suggest that the *śrauta* ritual texts follow strict rules of bodily "purity," which typically include hair. There is, for example, a hair-cutting festival associated with the Rājasūya sacrifice, a ritual that sees a king temporarily transformed into the more sacred status of Brahmin; see the *Mānava Śrautasūtra* of the *Maitrāyaiī Satrheā* 9.5.5.42–44. Note also 1.7.3.23, which compares the hair razor to Agni (god of fire, fire itself, etc.) in rituals performed by Brahmins. This is very much unlike the low caste status associated with hair-cutting in most Hindu contexts today – such as we see at Tirupati.

24. Even as earlier Vedic traditions were transmitted throughout the medieval period, they served as a corpus that could potentially be reinterpreted more generally in the context of more egalitarian *bhakti* movements, especially those connected with specific pilgrimage sites.
25. The evidence of these developments is especially preserved in the Purāṇas, and Nibandhas. With the rise of the pilgimage-focused traditions we see generally the acceptance of and imposition of a more egalitarian valuation of the body onto low caste peoples and women that had not previously been in evidence.
26. For example, bestowing on them the fruits of the earth and liberation.
27. In his treatment of South Asian rituals related to hair, Olivelle (1998: 20) examines cases of tonsuring tied to pilgrimage only in passing, stating: "People also shave when they go to a place of pilgrimage [*tīrtha*], an act that may be regarded as either an initiatory or a penitential separation from society."
28. There are, of course, a variety of Vaiṣṇavite traditions that developped in the medieval era following the initial impulse that is represented by the Epic. The worship of Veṅkaṭeśvara may be contextualized within South Vaiṣṇavite traditions and within the Vaikanāsana sect in particular. Some aspects of this sect may be dated to around the ninth century CE; see Colas (1996: 111–116). Like many Hindu "sectarian" traditions, there is a certain fluidity of sources and ritual traditions that develop over centuries (elements of the Pañcarātra sect are clearly integrated into that of the Vaikanāsana, for example), and these have also been integrated within the context of pan-Indian traditions such as the Epic traditions.
29. That is, the ascetic's daughter-in-law [*snuṣā*] mentioned earlier in the text (3.136.6).
30.

    sa tadā manyunāviṣṭas tapasvī kopano bhṛśam |
    avalu[p]ya jaṭāmekāṃ juhāvāgnau susaṃskṛtaiḥ || 9 ||
    tataḥ samabhavan nārī tasyā rūpeṇa saṃmitā |
    [a]valuṣyāparāṃ cāpi juhāvāgnau jaṭāṃ punaḥ || 10 ||
    tataḥ samabhavadrakṣo ghorākṣaṃ bhīmadarśanam | 11ab

    I amend the text slightly to eliminate what are likely scribal errors.
31. See n. 23.
32.

    tridaṇḍadhāraṇaṃ maunam jaṭābhāro 'tha muṇḍanam |
    valkalājinasaṃveṣṭaṃ vratacaryā 'bhiṣecanam || 96 ||
    agnihotraṃ vane vāsaḥ śarīrapariśoṣaṇam |
    sarvāṇyetāni mithyā syur yadi bhāvo na nirmalaḥ || 97 ||

33. Nīlakaṇṭha glosses *abhiṣecanam* in the following way: "*Abhiṣecana* means a bath at pilgrimage sites during a Yajñānta or Avabhṛtha (rite)" [*abhiṣecanaṃ tīrtheṣu yajñānte 'vabhṛthe vā snānam*]. The gloss suggests that we read the verse with reference to the pilgrimage [*tīrtha*] tradition; and indeed, earlier in the text we see that this is the context for the general discourse. See Kinjawadekar (1979): 329.
34.

    mātṛtīrthaṃ ca tatraiva yatra snātasya bhārata | prajā vivardhate rājann atanvīṃ
    śriyamaśnute || 58 ||
    tataḥ śītavanaṃ gacchen niyato niyatāśanaḥ |
    tīrthaṃ tatra mahārāja mahad anyatra durlabham || 59 ||
    punāti gamanādeva dṛṣṭam ekaṃ narādhipa |
    keśān abhyukṣya vai tasmin pūto bhavati bhārata || 60 ||

35. See Hopkins (1910: 33–34) for a treatment of this passage and its variants. Hopkins poses a possible reading of casting the hair into the pilgrimage waters rather than simply drenching the hair with the water. Similarly, Ganguli (1896) translates "casting-off" for *abhyuklat*, while Van Buitenen (1975) renders it as "sprinkling" in the parallel passage in the Critical Edition (3.81.49).
36. The Critical Edition employs Śvānalomāpaha (3.81.50), but oddly marks no variants for this passage.
37.

    tīrthaṃ tatra mahārāja śvāvillomāpahaṃ smṛtam |
    yatra viprā naravyāghna vidvāṃsas tīrthatparāḥ || 61 ||
    prītiṃ gacchanti paramāṃ snātvā bharatasattam[a]* |
    śvāvillomāpanayane tīrthe bharatasattama || 62 ||
    prāṇāyāmair nirharanti svalomāni dvijottamāḥ |
    pūtātmānaś ca rājendra prayānti paramāṃ gatim || 63 ||

    My edition has *bharatasattvam*, which is ungrammatical. The supplementary passage noted for 3.81.50 of the Critical Edition (03*0391_01) contains *bharatasattvama*, as does the Bombay edition (1908) at 3.81.62. I have, thus, amended the text here.
38. When categorizing shaving rites related to vows, Olivelle (1998: 19–20) states: "A person undergoing a penance or vow [*vrata*] also is separated from society, and many of the major penitential practices of Hinduism are preceded by the shaving of the penitent. Some sources give a reason for this practice: sins become lodged in the hair. Thus a person who wishes to expiate sins should shave the hair."
39. Thus, while the theme of the ascetic's impurity is clearly related to all of these passages (esp. 200.96–97), the Vedic theme of casting one's hair into the fire is preserved in 136.9–11; this is not something that we see preserved in the pilgrimage traditions in general, and not, specifically, in the case of the typical pilgrim at Tirupati.
40. There are certainly cases in Indian literature where discarded hair is deemed sacred. Here I am thinking about the *Saṃghabhedavastu* of the *Mūlasarvāstivādan*, a Vinaya text containing a narrative of the Buddha's life in which the "bodhisattva," when he leaves the palace, cuts off his topknot which, in turn, is scooped up by Indra and honored by the gods, who instituted a Festival of the Hairknot; see Strong (2002: 12). This is a different case, however, in that this is the hair of an auspicious being, and it is not *he* that offers the hair, but the gods who worship and honor the hair as a relic.

41. See n. 21 above for the case of the Diaspora community associated with the Veṅkaṭeśvara temple in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
42. That these perspectives cannot be considered universal even among Orthodox Jews is evinced by the ongoing discussions, debates, and critiques since 2004, which have deemed some of the earlier rulings on this topic overly simplistic with respect to halakhic understanding of Hinduism and its legitimacy within Jewish understandings of religion. As noted above, Haredim make up a very small percentage even of those Jews who self-identify as "Orthodox" (Heilman, 1992: 11–12; Baumel, 2006: 4–5). Moreover, halakhic pronouncements about Hinduism are in their relative infancy, and will likely be subject to re-evaluation and change in the coming decades. For a detailed and informed discussion of the reception of Hinduism within Jewish categories, such as the Noachide commandments, see Steinsaltz (2005) and Goshen-Gottstein (forthcoming).
43. Despite the ample anthropological literature on hair (e.g., Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981) and the rich sociological studies of Haredi communities (e.g., Shilhav, 1989; Heilman, 1992; Bilu, 2003; Baumel, 2006; Fader, 2007), there do not seem to have been any published analyses of the 2004 *sheitel* controversy from such perspectives. My discussion here draws on the detailed analysis of the halakhic bases for the decision in Flug (2005), together with the accounts of the rulings and events leading up to them, as well as responses and reactions, published in Orthodox Jewish newsletters; especially helpful are the survey articles by Rabbi Dovid Moshe Fleisch (2004) in *Dei'ah veDibur* and by Horav Yisrooel Belsky (2004) in *Halacha Berurach.*
44. That is, roughly between the conquests of Alexander the Great in the third century BCE and the Christianization of the Roman Empire, beginning in the fourth century CE; see Schwartz (2001) for a recent survey of developments in this period.
45. Compiled ca. 200 CE in Roman Palestine, the Mishnah is the first authoritative document of the rabbinic movement. The Babylonian Talmud is an extensive commentary on the Mishnah which was compiled in late antique Persia (ca. 600 CE) and which has been widely accepted, from the Middle Ages to the present day, as the summa of classical rabbinic Judaism. Due to my narrow aim of speaking to the contemporary redeployment of classical rabbinic traditions in the 2004 *sheitel* controversy, I limit myself to these sources, focusing in particular on the mishnaic tractate *Avodah Zarah* (*m.AZ*) and the commentary to it in the Talmud Bavli (*b.AZ*); on the rich discourse about *avodah zarah* in tannaitic midrashim, the Tosefta, and the Talmud Yerushalmi, see e.g. Hayes (1997), Schäfer (2002), and Yadin (2006). Although the *Poskim* involved in the *sheitel* controversy also drew on medieval Talmudic commentaries, the cited opinions mostly concern the implications of the rules, categories, and criteria laid out in the Mishnah and Talmud; for a description of each position and the specific sources on which it draws, see Flug (2005: 6–31). For examples of the ways in which medieval thinkers redeployed the discourse about *avodah zarah* in the Mishnah and Talmud for their own aims, see, for example, Soloveitchik (1987: 205–21, esp. 207–8) and Blidstein (2004, esp. 180 on *b.AZ* 26b and "heretics").
46. On these communities, see further, Shilhav (1989); Heilman (1992); Baumel (2006). It should be stressed, however, that not all Haredi women wear *sheitels*; indeed, as noted below, there have been attempts to ban them, with varying success, even prior to the 2004 controversy and for reasons unrelated to "Hindu hair"; see further, Heilman (1992: 310–312); Bronner (1993); Brown (2004).

47. Suggestive is the passing reference to tonsuring at Tirupati in relation to the discussion of the globalized hair trade from postcolonial perspectives in Berry (2008, esp. 65).
48. Schwartz (2001: 179), for instance, suggests that the Christianization of Roman Palestine, beginning in the fourth century CE, was a determinative factor in "the emergence of religion as a discrete category of human experience – religion's *disembedding*"; see further, Boyarin (2004).
49. It is perhaps telling that this technical rabbinic term for "idolatry" echoes the reference to improper Israelite sacrifice in Numbers 26 – the biblical story about how the sons of Aaron were swallowed by the earth for offering "strange fire" [Heb. *esh zarah*] on the altar (Num 26:61). Rather than condemning non-Jewish religious practice with reference to biblical precedents such as Israel's idolatrous worship of the Golden Calf (Exod 32) or the command to worship no other gods aside from the God of Israel (e.g., Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7), the tacit parallel with the *esh zarah* of Aaron's sons suggests that *avodah zarah* is perceived as perilous for Jews, not so much because it departs totally from the bounds of their own piety, but rather because such practices can be dangerously similar in appearance and power.
50. The term *eidōlolatreia* is the Greek term from which our English "idolatry" is derived and literally means "worship of images." The Greek *latreia* [i.e., service, worship] is largely equivalent to the Hebrew *avodah*. That the element of practice was downplayed by the Christian contemporaries of the rabbis responsible for the Mishnah, however, is clear from the writings of the Latin "Church Father" Tertullian in the third century CE. Tertullian makes an effort to argue that *eidōlolatreia* (which he renders with the Latin *idolorum famulatus et servitus*) preceded the human invention of images as objects of worship and that, even in his own day, one can thus be "idolatrous" even if one does not use an image (Lat. *idolum*) for worship (*de. Idol.* 3.1; 11.6). For Tertullian, it is not the objects that matter (*de Spec.* 10.10), but rather the worshipper's acceptance of demonic authority as equal to divine – it is not the act or the object that constitutes "idolatry," but rather anything that is directed away from (what he believes to be) true worship of the true God. Accordingly, he even applies the term *idola* to the very words of Christians, whom he considers "heretical" (*adv. Prax.* 18). See further, Van Winden (1982).
51. Schwartz (2001: 165 n. 8) notes, as well, that the Greek term *eidōlolatreia* is found only in Christian sources. In the context, however, it should also be noted that medieval and modern Jewish tradition includes more philosophically-oriented discourses about idolatry, which are more akin to their Christian and Muslim counterparts in their focus on belief (esp. monotheism vs. polytheism). See further, Halbertal and Margalit (1992).
52. There are many biblical traditions related to tonsuring and the Jerusalem Temple, as linked specifically to the vows taken by Nazirites in ancient Israel. In the Mishnah, moreover, the tonsured hair of a Nazirite is placed in the category of the most prohibited substances, which – like idols, mixtures of milk and meat, and non-consecrated animals slaughtered in the Temple court – render forbidden anything with which they mix (*m.AZ* 5.9). In addition, the Mishnah also makes a passing reference to the need to avoid commerce with a non-Jew who has shaved his beard and clipped his hair, presumably in some ritually significant manner (*m.AZ* 1.3; *b.AZ* 11b). On the halakhic discussion surrounding this mishnah and possible Greco-Roman practices related to it, see Hayes (1997: 84–90). Other mishnaic prohibitions related to hair include the injunction not to get one's hair cut by a non-Jew, in *m.AZ* 2.2 (*t.AZ* 3:5; cf. *y.AZ* 2.2/41a). What is interesting is that biblical and rabbinic traditions about

hair do not figure all that heavily in the contemporary debates among Haredi rabbis about the ritual status of the hair shorn at Tirupati as it affects the wigs of Orthodox Jewish women. Flug (2005: 14 n.17) notes one interesting exception in a footnote to his article surveying the halakhic debate and its bases. He notes that "some" have claimed that hair could be counted among offerings in the Jerusalem Temple, precisely because of the case of Nazirites; the source of this suggestion is not identified, and I have been so far unable to find it in the various *responsa*, which seem to focus rather firmly on the issues outlined above. In any case, Flug dismisses the halakhic value of the Nazirite parallel due to the fact that the shorn hair was not offered on the altar of the Jerusalem Temple, citing *b. Nazir* 45a.

53. It is unclear what sparked the first query (i.e., in 1989), although it is attributed in various online forums to questions raised by members of the community who might have been involved in the wig industry and read about Tirupati as a source of Indian wig hair in that context. Although tonsuring at Tirupati has now become a popular topic among Western journalists, I have not been able to find any articles on the topic published around the time, apart from an article in the *New York Times* (Prose, 1988) that makes a passing reference to Tirupati.
54. The 1989 ruling was based, more specifically, on information gathered through a phone conversation between Rabbi Yakov Shapiro of Bayswater, New York, and Anand Mohan, a Hindu priest who teaches at Queens College CUNY, and from mail correspondence between Judy Resnick and Professor Diana Eck. In 2004, in response to the *sheitel* controversy, Rabbi Shapiro circulated the record of his phone conversation with Dr Mohan as well as a copy of the letter that Ms Resnick received from Professor Eck (dated 20 October 1989). According to the accompanying message (undated), his aim was to defend the 1989 ruling and the knowledge of Hinduism on which it was based. For the text of the 1989 ruling, see YS Elyashiv, *Kovetz Teshuvot* 1.77; for an English summary, see Flug (2005: 14–17).
55. According to Rabbi Shapiro's transcript of his conversation with Dr Mohan, the questions included: Is the cutting of the hair a way of worshipping the god? Does the cutting have to be done in the temple? Does the hair get cut off by the priest or by the barber? Are the barbers in the temples? What do they do with the hair?
56. Dr Mohan's description seems to have been given the most weight as an "insider" perspective, to which the independent confirmation by "outsider" Eck was then correlated. See, for example, Fleisch (2004), where the view ascribed to them is of the tonsure "as a fulfillment of an oath made at time of sorrow or joy, where the hair is simply a present to the idol and the cutting off merely a means-to-an-end to obtain the hair." Rabbi Fleisch notes that Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach also ruled leniently on the basis of additional information of the same sort: "similar information was reported to HaRav S. Z. Auerbach *zt"l* especially in the form of a letter written by some Indian experts at the London School of Oriental Studies." Similarly, Flug (2005: 14) states that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Tuvia Goldstein ruled leniently, following R. Elyashiv. An exception was Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch who held to a different understanding of the nature of the tonsuring at Tirupati and thus prohibited the Jewish use of wigs that might contain hair from this temple; he, however, seems to have been unique in believing that devotees burn the tonsured hair (*Teshuvot V'Hanhagot* 2:414).
57. Another case cited in Talmudic commentary on this mishnah (*b. Hullin* 38b) is then used as support for determining the cultic status of the act with reference to its location – in this case, since the hair is not cut in front of the image of Śrī Veṅkaṭeśvara, or even in the temple. See

further, *Kovetz Teshuvot* 1.77; Flug (2005: 15, esp.) on the consideration and rejection of *b. Makkot* 20b as a possible parallel.

58. The impurity of the hair was pointed out by Professor Eck in her letter to Ms Resnick. This point is not included in Rabbi Elyashiv's 1989 ruling but is mentioned in support of leniency in his latter response as well as given, in the 2004 ruling, as a reason for the original decision; see further, Flug (2005: 15).
59. Contrast, for example, early psychological studies of hair-cutting rituals in Western scholarship, which tended to assume that hair holds a single universal meaning across cultures. Edmund Leach (1958) summarizes some of these views – including notions of ritual hair-cutting as symbolic castration and of the act as a substitute for human sacrifice.
60. That is, since from a halakhic perspective *either* condition – the similarity to Jewish worship *or* the perception as worship – is sufficient to categorize an action as *avodah zarah*.
61. So Flug (2005: 18). Fleisch (2004), by contrast, points to the precipitating event as when "a Canadian-born *maggid shiur* who lives in Yerushalayim met a group of 200 Indian tourists in Toronto. From his conversations with them it appeared to him that hair from India posed a serious problem. He then collected many documents and presented this to several rabbonim in Eretz Yisroel." In his account of the debate that follows, however, *ba'alei teshuva* (i.e. Jews who adopt orthodoxy later in life) also figure. One also wonders whether the timing of this renewed concern was linked to a change of the temple's hair-related business policies, beginning in 2002, from selling the hair via a select group of middlemen to inviting international bids through notices in trade papers around the world (see further, for example, "Karmic debt returns as global venture," *South China Morning Post*, 27 July 2002). Note also a widely cited news article about the temple, Angwin (2003). The sale of tonsured hair for wigs may have also gained more international visibility around this time due to Aruna Har Prasad's 2001 documentary "Tirupati – A Karmic Debt." Interestingly, playwright Samantha Ellis (2010) credits a passing comment by Victoria Beckham with sparking the controversy.
62. This phenomenon received popular attention in Kamenetz (1994); note also the collection of case-studies in Linzer (1996), and for an anthropological perspective, see Rothenberg (2006). With regard to these connections, it is perhaps important to note that Jews were long considered an "oriental" people by Europeans (e.g. Kalmar and Penslar, 2005); the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, for instance, famously alludes to the arbitrary character of the current notion of Judaism as a "Western" religion with specific reference to India: "our intellectual position situated as it is between Athens and Jerusalem is not an ultimate one. Providence may some day create a situation which would place us between the river Jordan and the river Ganges" (1956: 15).
63. One might even argue, based on recent studies of medieval Jewish attitudes towards India, that the Jewish romanticization of India may be almost as ancient as some of the halakhic traditions cited by Haredi *Poskim*. See further, Marks (2006); Melamed (2006).
64. For a summary of Rabbi Dunner's report, see Flug (2005: 18–19).
65. Flug (2005: 19). For this, there were two supporting reasons: [1] the fact that some barbers interpreted their actions in ways that also went against the priestly and scholarly explanation, and [2] the possibility that Hindu priests may have misrepresented the practice to put their religion in a better light to Western observers. Although the ritual is not performed before the image or in his temple, he further suggested that the very presence of pictures and statues

of the god in the *Kalyana Katta* might have led worshippers to think that they were in fact sacrificing their hair before an image.

66. This event was widely reported in the international news media; see n. 4 above.
67. On other opinions, see Flug (2005: 23). Some, for example, stressed that the practice could not qualify as *avodah zarah* for the simple reason that the statue of Śrī Veṅkaṭeśvara was not technically an object of worship: the image simply serves as a visual cue, a manifest symbol of the invisible. Neither the hair nor anything else that might appear to be an offering was, by this logic, an offering in the technical sense of the term. This view, interestingly, dovetails with the Talmudic tradition that there is no *avodah zarah* outside of the Land of Israel (*b. Hullin* 13a) and with some modern Jewish views of contemporary image-worship as simply a matter of custom.
68. For example, Weiss (2004); Flug (2005: 20–22). According to Belsky (2004: 4–5), those who responded by affirming the correctness of the information on which the 1989 ruling was based included *ba'alei teshuvah*.
69. Notably, a similar tension is arguably found in the halakhot surrounding *avodah zarah*. Some define it with direct appeal to the individual worshipper. Others, however, place a more stringent standard, qualifying only those acts that are regular and customary. This tension may already be evident, for example, in *m. Sanhedrin* 7.6.
70. A related challenge is noted by Pierre Bourdieu (1997: 19): "Native theories are dangerous not so much because they lead research towards illusory explanations as because they bring quite superfluous reinforcement to the intellectualist tendency inherent in the objectivist approach to practices." Contrast the confident assumption in Leach (1958: 151–152), in the context of hair-cutting symbolism, that "In the kind of rituals which an anthropologist ordinarily observes, the meaning of the performance, in the act of the congregation, is seldom in doubt."
71. Interestingly, this is not solely a result of a gap between elite and popular discourse. That the rulings and *responsa* of prominent *Poskim* in 2004 sparked a surprisingly broad-based discussion of the halakhic issue surrounding *avodah zarah* is clear from the proliferation of discussions of the matter on websites, email discussion-lists, and Internet message boards. The discussions, moreover, largely follow the lead of the rulings and *responsa*, often appealing to further information about Indian belief and practice to support one or another position.
72. That these sources similarly frustrate the task of finding Roman parallels to the practices therein described is noted, for example, by Schäfer (2002: 335–354).
73. One might compare the assumption, in early scholarship on non-Christian religions, that various non-Christian "Others" could be identified with moments in the pre-Christian past.
74. For an anthropological analysis of this practice, see Bilu (2003). Bilu (2003: 185) notes the Sephardic origins of the ritual, but notes that "in the last 200 years it became widespread among East European Hasidim." Specifically, the haircut occurs at the age of three, either at the boy's birthday or during the festival of Lag Ba'Omer; the latter practice is connected with the tradition that this marks the day of the death of R. Shimon Bar-Yohai, the second-century Sage to whom the Zohar is traditionally attributed. Among Hasidic Jews, in particular, the hair-cutting is often paired with pilgrimage to Rabbi Shimon's shrine in the Israeli town of Meron. Bilu describes the ritual at Meron as follows: "The fathers are equipped with scissors, sometimes tied around their neck, a plastic bag to collect the shorn hair, and wine and cake to distribute around. They hold the children in their hands while the scissors are passed over among kin and dignitaries who are granted the honor of cutting one curl

each, starting with the forelock. Many fathers complete the haircut in a special hall in the shrine using electrical shavers to shear their children's heads save for the side curls ... The physical difference between the children after the ritual, with their shaven heads and lengthy ear-locks, and their pre-ceremony countenance, with their long, curly hair, is striking. Often, the collected hair is weighed and then thrown into the bonfire on the top of the sanctuary" (Bilu, 2003: 184–185). Interesting, for our purposes, are the pairing of hair-cutting and pilgrimage, and the practice of burning the cut hair on bonfires.

75. On the origins of this practice and the range of opinions about it (both positive and negative) among late medieval and early modern *Poskim*, see Schiller (1995: 101–102).
76. The problem of assimilation and differentiation is described by Ayala Fader (2007: 4): "While Hasidic Jews claim to be the keepers of 'authentic' Judaism, recent changes have been enacted in the name of rebuilding 'tradition and authenticity' ... Despite increasing religious stringency, Hasidic Jews rarely completely withdraw from the wider communities in which they live. Rather, they 'hyperbolize' community boundaries ... as they participate in a range of economic, political, technological and cultural realms in order to separate themselves ideologically, if not physically, from other Jews and Gentiles." As an example of this type of hyperbolization, she here cites those Haredi women who cover their hair *both* with wigs *and* with visible head-coverings; for the halakhic issues to which this practice responds, see below.
77. From an anthropological perspective, one might also point to the ritual resolution of paradox through the powerfully ambivalent nature of hair – both as part of the body and as external and separable from it. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, one might further ponder this practice as a poignant case of "passing."
78. As Brown (2004) notes, it is the custom of shaving of the head, moreover, that allows for a woman to wear such wigs without the dangers of exposing stray hairs of her own.
79. On the origins of the practice of covering one's hair with a *sheitel*, see Bronner (1993). Although we find injunctions for married women to cover their heads already in the Talmud (*b. Sotah* 7a), the premodern custom was to cover the head with veils. The practice of using wigs as hair-coverings seems only to have arisen around the 16th century, when wigs became stylish in the broader European society (especially in France). To the wearing of wigs by Jewish women, rabbinic authorities at first voiced objections: wigs do cover the hair, but they might also defeat the purpose of the covering, namely, as an expression of modesty and as a marker of married status. For some, it was deemed acceptable to wear a wig, as long as it was clear that it was a wig. For most of the modern period, this was not a problem, as the artificiality of the wig was obvious at first sight. It seems to have been this understanding of the obvious hair-covering – whether veil, wig, or hat – that many Jewish women resisted in modern times. Particularly upon the immigration of European Jews to America, the practice declined. In America, hair-covering only began to gain popularity again in the 1950s, concurrent with the growth of Haredi communities in general. Interestingly, the popularity of the *sheitel* as a hair-covering seems also to have grown, concurrent with the technological improvements in wig-making. Notably, the wigs now made of hair from India are among those wigs that, when worn, do not appear to the viewer as being wigs at all.
80. This resistance is notable. Within the discursive world of Orthodox Judaism, the issue of the *sheitel* is often discussed as an exemplar of the dynamic interplay between law [*halakha*] and custom [*minhag*] – often with the tacit equation of the former as the domain of men, and the

latter as the space created for the assertion of agency by women. See, for example, Shapiro (1990); Broyde, Krakowski, and Shapiro (1991).

81. This act, moreover, was sometimes described in the language of sacrifice – albeit in playful and ironic ways. An essay by an anonymous Haredi woman, who stopped wearing wigs and adopted other hair-coverings after the controversy, thus begins: "The dust from India has settled. The starlight of our sudden self-sacrifice has dimmed and many of us are again those Jewesses who have 'synthesized' the sudden awakening and arousal. Sure, they sacrificed their expensive human hair wigs on the altar, but they have settled for the kosher kind" ("Head-on reflections," *Dei'ah veDibur*, 18 Av 5764/5 August 2004).
82. Interestingly, for instance, the 2004 controversy seems to have served to make hair from Tirupati more lucrative on the global market, precisely due to its religious associations. One news article, for instance, reported two years later: "The demand for temple hair has now spread to New York City hair salons, where clients spend an average of $3,000 on the extensions ... They are attracted by the purity of the hair – Indian women frequently grow it 20 inches long and rub natural oils into each strand to keep it soft and glossy – as well as its spiritual connotations" (R Ridley, "The high price of holy hair: The hottest new extensions come from Indian virgins," *Daily News*, 3 August 2006). See also Berry (2008).

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