

Sheitel Hair From India and Avodah Zara

INDIAN HAIR: Still a Problem in Our Sheitels

(Source numbers are in parentheses and listed at the end)

Surprisingly, the issue with Indian hair used for idol worship is still a problem in Jewish wigs. Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt”l and Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch shlita have ruled that wearing wigs from idolatrous practices is forbidden for all Jews. This is because it’s benefiting from a product used in avoda zarah, which the Gemara clearly states is forbidden (1).

Religious researchers who recently looked into the topic estimate that 99.99% of natural hair wigs for sale contain Indian hair (13). Additionally, much of the hair that is not Indian comes from deceased people (6). Source of the Hair: India is the largest exporter of human hair in the world. They exported over 1 million kilograms of hair in 2010 (14). Those sales earned about 238 million dollars to India and the Hindu Indian Temples that year(4). 30 to 40 million people per year visit the Indian Hindu temples to sacrifice their hair. The largest of the Hindu temples, Tirumala, have 40,000 visitors each day coming to offer their hair as a thanksgiving offering to one of their Hindu gods (a process called Tonsuring) (3).

It is written in Hindu scriptures that one should sacrifice their hair at least once in their lifetime, and Hindus usually do it much more than that (9). The Hindu worshipers kneel on the ground, bending their heads forward while their hair is shaved, and the hair is then sorted by length before it is bagged and safely stored under lock and key. This “black gold,” as it is called, is very valuable and remains heavily guarded until it is sold by e-auction to wig and hair extension companies (4).

From there, the hair usually gets shipped to China first. It is dyed, bleached, curled, straightened, and otherwise processed in China (4,2). The wigs are often manufactured in Chinese factories commissioned by European wig companies (4). The product is then shipped to Europe where it goes through further processing before it is sold with a label saying “European made” or “European hair.” The European hair companies do not publicize their products as “made in China” since it would be detrimental to the high-end image they strive for (4).

Logically, one can think about it this way: How many bald European women do you see? Hardly any. Women only shave their hair for one of two main reasons: as a religious offering or because they are starving and as a last resort will sell their hair to put food on the table. Europe is not a starving economy, therefore it doesn’t make sense that millions of European woman would shave off their precious hair to make a little money. Yet, countless

wigs are manufactured each year and all of them contain only European hair? How is that possible?

The Tirumala temple alone employs 9,500 full-time workers and 10,000 additional laborers to help process the thousands of pounds of hair they collect (4). 85% of the Indian population are Hindu, so hair donation is not in short supply (11). Indian hair is very similar to Caucasian hair in texture and silkiness, making it a desirable material for European wigs (8). To quote a non-Jewish news source on Indian wigs, “The long and uniformly trimmed hair is called remy hair, which has a big market in Europe and the US, where it is woven into wigs” (8). To quote another article: “India exported \$190 million-worth of hair and related hair products in 2009-10 and could more than double that to \$470 million by 2013-14, the Department for Commerce and Industry says. ...The U.S. imported over \$900 million-worth of wigs, false beards, eyebrows, eyelashes and similar products in 2010, while the U.K. imported \$79 million-worth and China and Hong Kong \$71 million. Indian hair is in high demand for wig making and hair extensions because it is both ‘thin and strong,’ explains Chennai-based CurlsNWaves, one of the country’s largest exporters of hair.

The company also processes hair, stripping it of color and re-dying it”(9). One must remember that avodah zarah is never batel (voided), one hair in a wig containing thousands of hairs will render the whole wig forbidden (12). It is a reality that India is supplying wig companies throughout the world with the raw material they require in the amount they need. No other country in the world shaves off their hair on a regular basis. Only starving countries might opt to do such a thing, but their citizens have to possess hair that is similar to Caucasian hair to be useful.

China used to be a large supplier of hair from live people, but due to improvement in the Chinese economy in the last 20 years, it is less common to find women willing to part with their treasured hair (7). Hair from deceased people, however, is plentiful in China and throughout the world (6). A second common source of hair is from deceased people (6). It is a way for people burying the body to make money on the side. Aside from the repulsive fact that the hair came from a dead person, halachically speaking, using hair from a dead person is assur: “The Shulchan Aruch follows the stringent position of the Rashba, and forbids deriving benefit from hair taken from a human corpse”(6). Deceased people do not object when their hair is shaved before burial, making it a convenient source of wig hair.

How Do You Know the Wig is Kosher?

There is an important point to be made. We don’t rely on non-Jews to reassure us that the meat we are buying is kosher, we personally slaughter and place a seal on the meat ourselves to guarantee its kashrus. In fact, non-sealed meat that was handled by a non-Jew is forbidden to be eaten if a Jew wasn’t present during that handling (10). Why are we relying

on a non-Jew's word that the hair is not Indian hair or corpse hair? It is known in the wig industry that hair traders commonly lie to buyers in order to make sales (4 and 5). Furthermore, it is known through first-person experience that the Chinese manufacturers will say anything to make a sale (2).

They also paste on "rabbinically approved" labels to all types of shaitels, regardless of their origin (2). The hair used in our wigs passes through many hands before it gets to a Lakewood or Brooklyn sheitel store. Anywhere along that line, a non-Jew could easily lie about the origins of the hair. Remember, all the sheitel stores will only want to purchase the hair if the non-Jewish hair seller assures them it doesn't contain even a little Indian hair.

As far as kosher certification of wigs are concerned, the buyers for wig manufacturers have the ability to easily fabricate where they obtained the hair from. Here is a quote from a book written in 2016 about the wig industry: "Of course, rabbis are not hair specialists, and confronted by the disorienting sight of crates of hair of different length, shade and texture, they are reliant on what wig manufacturers tell them" (4). Some of the kosher certifications may indeed be valid, meaning the rabbi traveled to the wig factory and saw all the hair being cut from the heads of living Chinese or Russian people with no other hair being mixed in to supplement the wig. But how is someone to know which kosher certification rabbis actually did that, and which are relying on the claim that it doesn't contain Indian hair?

Remember, only some of the wigs sold in sheitel shops have kosher certification to begin with. Many hold no certification of the hair contents, meaning there is no Jew overseeing any part of the production (4). There is one more point to consider. Hair coming off of a person is not uniform in length (4). In a wig factory, the raw hair is organized in crates by color and length (4). That means that many people's hair ends up in one crate, and even one batch of Indian hair in that crate could end up in many wigs. Synthetic wigs can be a problem because many also contain real hair to make the wig appear more natural (source #1, towards the end of the article). A

Alternatives To Wigs

There are very beautiful styles of scarves and hats available today. These are the traditional head coverings that all Jewish women wore throughout our generations until the last 200 years when sheitels entered the picture.

Sources Listed:

Please see below this list for the actual articles without pictures.

1) "Wigs and Idolatry" by Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman, shlita for Ohr Somayach.

<<https://ohr.edu/1698>>.

2) Interview with a shaitel macher with 18 years of experience.

<https://www.ohelsara.com/women-and-the-home/kisuy-rosh/sheitel-hair-from-india/>

- 3) Culture Unplugged Documentary video called: "Human Hair Trade" Filmed in 2005.
- 4) "Entanglement: The Secret Life of Hair," a non-fiction book by Emma Tarlo about the wig industry. Published in 2016.
- 5) "The Secret World of Black Market Hair Extensions" by Allie Flynn. [Website address link omitted because of immodest pictures].
- 6) "Wigs Made From the Hair of a Deceased Person"
<<http://www.dailyhalacha.com/m/halacha.aspx?id=569>>
- 7) "The Market For Human Hair- Priceconomics" Online Article. Written by Alex Mayyasi. [Website address link omitted because of immodest pictures on it.]
- 8) "Tirumala temple earns nearly Rs200 crore from auctioning human hair in 2011-12"
Online article. Website address link omitted because of immodest pictures on it.
- 9) Wall Street Journal Article excerpt, titled "Religion Journal: The Great Indian Hair Auction" online article. Written by Joanna Sugden. [Website address link omitted because of immodest picture at the end.]
- 10) "Kashrut: Deliveries of Fish" from DailyHalacha.com.
<<http://www.dailyhalacha.com/displayRead.asp?readID=3096>>.
- 11) "Older Population from Indian" By Inderjit Jaipaul, DSW
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- 12) "When It's Null and Void: Understanding Batel BShishim" by Rabbi Dovid Heber from the Star-K. <https://www.star-k.org/articles/kashrus-kurrents/611/when-itsnull-and-void-understanding-batel-bshishim-one-sixtieth/#_ftn31>.
- 13) Video called "Wigs vs. Tichel" by Rabbi Yaron Reuven, shlita. <<http://tznus.tips/wigs-versus-tichel-by-rabbi-yaron-reuven.html>>.
- 14) Article from Journal of Waste Management, called "Human Hair 'Waste' and Its Utilization: Gaps and Possibilities" written by Ankush Gupta. Found at
<<https://www.hindawi.com/archive/2014/498018/>>.