

Curly Hair Chug Source Sheet

Liora Bernstein - Cornerstone 2020

I Hate My Jewish Hair, Hey Alma

By Hannah Dylan Pasternak (March 21, 2018)

The most pervasive Jewish stereotype is that of appearance — a Jewish girl has a tush, a nose, and a head full of thick, curly, dark hair. But what if the relationship between “Jewish” and “hair” goes deeper than skin? Wanting a change is fine. Usually, change feels good. But when I hate my hair for what it is, I feel a pang of guilt. The infiltration of on-trend hair into my subconscious has incited a reckoning of what my natural hair actually represents.

The oldest mention of hair in Judaism is that in the story of Samson, whose long, never-been-cut locks are the secret source of his strength. One night, Delilah, Samson’s illicit lover, shaves his head in his sleep. He weakens immediately, and is sent to work in a prison with his eyes gouged out. Parts of the Torah imply that a woman’s hair would not be cut unless it was a means of degradation or a sign of mourning. Many men have told me that they don’t like short hair on women; many women have told me that they would never cut their hair short.

Today, the relationship between Judaism and hair popularly manifests itself in two ways beyond the Jewish hair/Jew-fro stereotype — in the female hair coverings and the male *payot*. Hair coverings, like a hat, scarf, or wig known as a *sheitel*, are used by many Orthodox women. The Bible doesn’t mention the use of wigs, nor does it explicitly state that married women must keep their hair covered. The Talmud, however, waxes more poetic on what a Jewish woman and her hair cannot do: It states that hair covering is a requirement; that exposed hair in public is grounds for divorce; and that female hair is sexually erotic and therefore must not be exposed to men.

Men are encouraged to do the opposite. Leviticus 19:27 states, “You shall not round off the pe’ah [sides, corners] of your head,” which has led to the practice of growing out *payot* — the long, curled sideburns religious men let hang in front of their ears. Some contemporary scholars argue that Orthodox Jews grow *payot* as a means of rebellion against secularization. *Payot* are a distinguishable trait that links a group of people together — it is the physical manifestation of a shared Jewish identity. Sort of like my hair, too.

If my hair holds the weight of where I come from, I hate hating it. First of all, hating anything is a terrible feeling, but secondly, and more importantly, I love being Jewish. It seems unnatural to dislike a part of myself that characterizes me as such.

There's No Such Thing as Jewish Hair, Hey Alma

By Shoshana Kranish (November 28, 2018)

I wanted desperately to look Jewish. Funny as that may sound, considering our history, it was an identity crisis for me. My mother is a convert, so I didn't inherit any particularly Jew-y traits from her; she has the same thin hair and light eyes that I do. Sometimes I wonder if I felt that I had to prove my Jewishness through my looks because I wasn't Jewish in the way everyone else was. But on my father's 100%-Jewish-forever-and-forevermore side of the family, the women had the curly locks I dreamt of. Genetics had simply given my Jewish identity the finger.

Despite the fact that not all Jews look like the incredibly pervasive stereotype I've described above, it was the only one I'd been told about, so it was the one to which I aspired. It seemed that a struggle with one's hair was a defining characteristic of Jewish identity. There are a million and one articles about "Jewish hair": Women accepting their frizzy locks and body hair, giving up going blonde, throwing out their straighteners. Alma even has a whole section of stories dedicated to the perils of Jewish hair. I can relate to nearly none of them.

It's a bit funny, and a bit creepy, to realize that the stereotypes we now predicate our Jewishness upon — curly brown hair and a sizeable schnoz — have, for centuries, been the ones used to set us apart in the most negative ways possible. Perhaps we celebrate them now as a way of owning them, as a way of saying "fuck you" to everyone who has tried to destroy us. And I'm here for that, but not at the cost of splintering our typically tight-knit community.

It goes without saying that the concept of "Jewish hair" is exclusionary. It's based on stereotypes about white Jews, so it doesn't include Jews of color at all, be they Black, Asian, Hispanic, or literally any other ethnicity. And that's a pretty sizable group to leave out, especially when we're living in a time when non-white Jews are more visible, yet still face racism from within the Jewish community. We are so quick and proud to claim the likes of Tiffany Haddish, Zoe Kravitz, Tracee Ellis Ross, and Drake as our own. But how contradictory can we be when we celebrate our diversity while at the same time insist that certain genetic characteristics — that so many in our group lack — are what make us who we are?