

Approaching Male and Female Head Covering Garments

BLOGCAST

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Throughout today's Messianic Jewish movement, many men wear the *kippah* or *yarmulke*, in deference to Jewish tradition. By many, this is thought to be prohibited by Holy Scripture.

In various sectors of the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, there are many women who wear some kind of head garment, in their adherence to statements appearing in 1 Corinthians 11. By many, this is thought to be required by Holy Scripture.

There is perhaps no issue more tense and divisive, when it comes to modesty and dress in the contemporary Messianic movement, than that of male and female headcovering garments. As we prepare to evaluate this issue, first from the array of Jewish traditions one may see practiced in Messianic congregations and fellowships, and then secondly analyzing some of the controversies present over 1 Corinthians 11:4-16, please note how I have made a point to use the terminology **head covering garment**. What makes this important is that terms like "head covering" or "covering" can get easily jumbled up, and then further confusion can erupt from some of the complexities and challenges regarding terms such as "head" or "covering." Most of the quotations that we will be making from outside sources, will just say "head covering," although a garment of some kind is implied by this.

The text of the Torah or Pentateuch is actually relatively silent about the whole issue of head covering garments, and is not actually as big of an issue in the Tanach Scriptures, as some may make it out to be. Those who are actually specified in the Torah, to wear a specific head covering garment, were the Levitical priests. As the Book of Exodus originally directed, "These are the garments which they shall make: a breastpiece and an ephod and a robe and a tunic of checkered work, a turban and a sash, and they shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons, that he may minister as priest to Me...You shall fasten it on a blue cord, and it shall be on the turban; it shall be at the front of the turban...For Aaron's sons you shall make tunics; you shall also make sashes for them, and you shall make caps for them, for glory and for beauty" (Exodus 28:4, 37, 40, NASU).

Aaron as high priest was instructed to wear a *mitznefet*, simply defined by *BDB* as "turban of high priest."¹ Aaron's sons as the Levitical priests were to wear a *migba'ot*, which *BDB* has regarded to be "head-gear, turban, of common priest."² Some might claim that the principle of Believers in Yeshua being a Kingdom of priests (cf. Revelation 1:6; 5:10) might require a similar head piece to be worn—but *directly* transferring the symbols of the Levitical priesthood to individual Believers in Yeshua, with the Levitical priesthood effectively established to be Ancient Israel's "aristocracy," would be most out of place.

Concerning females specifically in Ancient Israel, some have certainly suggested that a head covering garment was normative, per what is stated in Numbers 5:18, here quoted from the KJV: "And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD, **and uncover the woman's head**, and put the offering of memorial in her hands, which is the jealousy offering; and the priest shall have in his hand the bitter water that causeth the curse." An older Hebrew lexicon like *BDB* would define the verb *para*, appearing in the Qal stem (simple action, active voice), with, "let go, let alone...*id. unbind (hair), uncover.*"³ More modern Hebrew lexicography would define *para* with, "to let the hair on the head hang loosely...to let down the hair of a wife accused of infidelity" (*HALOT*).⁴ This is why *u'fara et-rosh ha'ishah* is rendered in more modern English versions with "and let the hair of the woman's head go loose" (NASU), "and unbind the hair of the woman's head" (RSV), or "dishevel

¹ *BDB*, 857.

² *Ibid.*, 149.

³ *Ibid.*, 828.

⁴ *HALOT*, 2:970.

the woman's hair" (NRSV).⁵ Far from speaking of a head covering garment being removed in Numbers 5:18, a female's long hair that was bound up is let loose.

Even with head covering garments not specifically present in Numbers 5:18, this hardly means that head garments were not worn by both men and women in Ancient Israel. The climate of the Ancient Near East for certain would have widely required that people wear some kind of garment protecting their heads from the sun—little different than how hats are worn today. The issue more pertains to head covering garments as a matter involving religious practice, piety, submission, or any other such value judgment as interjected into it by the observant. This is where in ancient Jewish history, particularly over the past millennium, men wearing the skullcap, and women wearing a scarf or other headpiece, has been developed as a custom and tradition, albeit with variance.

One of the most obvious elements, of modern Jewish identity witnessed in the world today, is men wearing the *kippah* (or *yarmulke*.) or skullcap. The idea behind wearing this small skullcap is that it shows submission to God. The term *kippah* is derived from the Hebrew verb *kafar*, meaning "to cover, to forgive, to expiate, to reconcile" (*AMG*).⁶ The *kippah* is believed to be a "covering" which represents a man's submission to God.

It is notable that the headcovering garment of a *kippah* is not an explicit commandment of Scripture. This is a Jewish tradition which has developed over time. Alfred J. Kolatch explains this in *The Jewish Book of Why*:

"A *yarmulke*, called a *kipa* in Hebrew, is a skullcap worn by Jews. Some wear one at all times, others only during prayer and at mealtime.

"...The custom of covering the head received wide acceptance, but not by all. Historian Israel Abrahams points out that in the thirteenth century 'boys in Germany and adults in France were called to the Tora in the synagogue bareheaded.'

"In the Middle Ages, French and Spanish rabbinical authorities regarded the practice of covering the head during prayer and when studying the Tora to be no more than mere custom. Some rabbis were known to pray bareheaded.

"Today, Orthodox Jews and many Conservative Jews believe that covering the head is an expression of *yirat Shama'yim* ('fear of God' or 'reverence for God')...."⁷

Wearing a *kippah* is quite commonplace throughout the diverse social strata of modern Israel. Jews of all types throughout the Diaspora commonly wear them as well, sometimes as a part of their everyday dress. While wearing a *kippah* is more frequently associated with Synagogue worship or personal prayers, wearing a *kippah* at the home dinner table of a Jewish family is also witnessed.

Jewish men wearing a *kippah* or *yarmulke*, and likewise Jewish women being found to wear some kind of a headscarf or other garment, is something which surely developed over time in history. In his resource, *To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life*, Hayim Halevy Donin addresses some of this:

"It is a custom not to walk under the heavens bareheaded' (Orach Hayim 2:6). Though never legislated by the Sages, the custom of not going about bareheaded at any time—at home, in the synagogue and outdoors—extends back several thousand years in time. In many ways, it has today become a mark of Jewish piety.

"To wear a headcovering was the ancient Roman stigma for a servant. Free men went bareheaded. The Jews adopted this practice in the House of God and in prayer and whenever God's name was mentioned in blessings (such as during meals which are preceded and followed in blessings) to emphasize that they were servants of the Lord. Gradually, the practice was extended to wearing a headcovering also under the open skies. It became the Jewish way of showing reverence for God. 'Cover your head, so that the reverence of Heaven be upon you' (Shabbat 156b).

"In our day, especially when living and working in a non-Jewish environment, and where the mark of respect in public buildings or Christian institutions consists in removing one's headcoverings, the liberties taken with this custom can be justified. Nevertheless, the wearing of a headcovering, at least in a Jewish house of worship, in a consecrated area (such as a cemetery), and whenever one says his prayers or recites a blessing is a requirement that should be strictly adhered to, for it has remained the distinctive Jewish way to show reverence for the Lord."⁸

It is quite commonplace to see a majority of men in today's Messianic Jewish congregations wear *kippahs* in *Shabbat* worship. (At the very least, those in the leadership will wear a *kippah* or *yarmulke*.) Various Messianic Jews also wear a *kippah* as a part of their normal, everyday dress—although it is probably safer to say that Messianic Jewish men who wear a *kippah* in *Shabbat* worship or at related functions, will not wear one as a part of their normal, everyday dress.

It is not uncommon in many Messianic congregations to also see non-Jewish men wear *kippahs*. This is largely so that they can respect the protocol of the assembly, as generally all men are expected to wear a *kippah* if they were to attend a service at any non-Messianic synagogue.

The issue of female head covering garments, varies in the Jewish tradition, with some of it based in the above-examined Numbers 5:18 passage. As an historical review of how various female head covering garments developed in Jewish history, Ronald L. Eisenberg describes,

⁵ "and-he-shall-loosen *** hair-of-the-woman" (Kohlenberger, 1:377).

⁶ Baker and Carpenter, 521.

⁷ Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1981), pp 121-122.

Consult Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), pp 374-377 for a summary of how the *kippah* and related headcovering garments, are employed in the mainline Jewish Synagogue.

⁸ Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 180; also Eisenberg, pp 374-376.

"In the Talmud, Rabbi Ishmael cites the Torah's description of the *sotah*⁹ (a woman accused of adultery) as the source for the obligation for women to cover their hair (Ket. 72a). As part of the ceremony to determine the suspected woman's guilt or innocence, the Torah records that 'after he has made the woman stand before the Lord, and the priest shall bare the woman's head' (Num. 5:18). Although there are no explicit biblical references to the tradition of women wearing head coverings, by talmudic times it was accepted practice. A married woman who dared to walk bareheaded in the street could be summarily divorced by her husband without paying her *ketubah* (Ket. 7:6). Explaining why this violation was so serious, the Talmud compared a woman's hair to her private parts ('the hair of a woman is nakedness'; Ber. 24a). Because of this, it was prohibited to recite the *Shema* in the presence of a bareheaded woman. Nevertheless, despite the concept that a woman's hair was sexually exciting, head coverings were required only for married women (Ket. 2:1).

"Talmudic and post-talmudic sources extol the woman who is contentious about covering her hair. The Talmud relates the story of Kimchit, the mother of seven sons, each of whom became a *Kohen Gadol* [high priest]. When asked why she was blessed to have so many eminent sons, she replied: 'Because the beams (posts) of my house never saw my hair' (Yoma 47a). The Zohar says of the woman who is careful in covering her hair: 'Her children will enjoy increased stature over other children; moreover, her husband shall be blessed with all blessings, blessings of above and blessings of below, with wealth, with children and grandchildren.'

"Toward the end of the 18th century, some women began wearing a wig (*sheitel*), a 'radical innovation' that was vehemently opposed by some ultratraditional rabbis. Currently, only strictly Orthodox women cover their hair at all times. Nevertheless, many married women still cover their heads in a synagogue. In egalitarian liberal congregations, some Jewish women—single as well as married—have opted to wear a *kippah* as a manifestation of their religious equality. Moreover, some of these synagogues require that a woman wear a *kippah* (and tallit) when leading services or being called for an *aliyah*."¹⁰

Ultimately, at least in Judaism, females wearing a head covering garment is a tradition and a custom, and is not an explicit Biblical commandment.

The major controversy that tends to exist in the Messianic community, and the issue of head covering garments, pertains to diagnosing what the actual issue of **1 Corinthians 11:4-16** is. Frequently, and most often from non-Jewish Messianics with a more often than not fundamentalist reading of Holy Scripture, some would take 1 Corinthians 11:4-16, in English, as an insistence that Jewish men and Messianic men should not wear a *kippah* or *yarmulke*, but that all females (at least in worship settings) must wear a head covering garment. However, as we will proceed to describe, there are some translation issues present in these verses in various English Bible versions, as well as some ancient background issues germane to First Century Corinth, which need to be seriously considered.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:4, *pas anēr proseuchomenos ē prophēteuōn kata kephalēs*, "Every man praying or prophesying, having *something* down from the head..." (my translation). Many versions add something like "with his head covered" (NIV) or "who has *something* on his head" (NASU), but does this really do justice to the clause *kata kephalēs*? Would it have really been disgraceful for a First Century Jewish man, or even a Greek or Roman man, to wear a garment upon his head during a time of prayer or prophecy? **No**. Paul specifies later in 1 Corinthians 11:14 that there is something which could be down from a man's head that would disgrace him: "if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him" (NASU). Long hair on a man hanging down, could have communicated something in Corinth that might not have been very good for the Believers. At the very least, some males with long hair hanging down, from certain angles, could possibly be confused as being female. Philip B. Payne, in his excellent book *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, further describes,

"Something 'down from' ([*kata*] with the genitive, 'lit. hanging down fr. the head,' BDAG 511 A.1.a) or 'over' the head of men leading in worship was disgraceful. Paul does not in this verse identify what was down from the head, so any explanation, to be convincing, needs to cite evidence from this passage and its cultural context. What hanging down from a man's head would be disgraceful for men leading worship in Corinth, a Greek city and a Roman colony? Many assume it is a toga (*himation*). It was not, however, disgraceful in the cultural context of Corinth or in Jewish culture for a man to drape a garment over his head. The *capite velato* custom of pulling a toga over one's head in Roman religious contexts symbolized devotion and piety, not disgrace. Jewish custom and the Hebrew Scriptures also approved head-covering garments for men leading in worship¹¹...Thankfully, Paul identifies in verse 15 what 'hanging down from the head' causes disgrace: 'If a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him [1 Corinthians 11:14, NIV].'¹²

Continuing in 1 Corinthians 11:5a, Paul issues instruction regarding *pasa de gunē proseuchomenē ē prophēteuōsa akatakalyptō tē kephalē*, "But every woman praying or prophesying, with the head uncovered..." (my translation) is to be regarded as having dishonored her head, being as though her head were shaved (1 Corinthians 11:5b). Having a shaved (Grk. verb *xureō*) head in ancient times, whether in Ancient Israel, Second Temple Judaism, or even Greco-Roman culture, was frequently a sign of mourning and/or humiliation. The challenge for interpreting a "head uncovered," is that it is frequently read from the perspective of it meaning that a woman praying or prophesying must have some kind of a garment present. But is wearing a head covering garment really the issue?

⁹ "faithless wife, a woman suspected of faithlessness, to whom the law, Num. V, 12-31 applies" (Jastrow, 963).

¹⁰ Eisenberg, pp 376-377.

¹¹ E.g., Exodus 28:4, 37, 39; 29:6; 39:28, 31; Leviticus 8:9; 16:4; Ezekiel 24:17; 44:18; Zechariah 3:5.

¹² Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp 141-142.

A significant usage of the adjective *akatakaluptos*, in the Septuagint, is Leviticus 13:45, speaking of “the leper who has the plague in him, his garments shall be torn, and his head shall be **uncovered** [*akatakaluptos*]” (LXE).¹³ *Akatakaluptos* actually renders the before-mentioned Hebrew verb *para*, which as noted means “to let the hair on the head hang loosely” (*HALOT*),¹⁴ as “The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head **hang loose** [*para*]...” (Leviticus 13:45, RSV).¹⁵

If this background is kept in view, than a Corinthian woman who had her head “uncovered,” is one who actually had her long hair hanging loose for all in the assembly to see. It is true that when modern readers encounter a term like “uncovered,” it is more natural for us to think that the Corinthian woman was to probably be wearing some sort of head garment. But wearing or not wearing a head garment would not have been as problematic as a female having loosed hair flowing freely. In a largely progressive and so-called “sexually liberated” city like First Century Corinth, a woman with free-flowing loose hair **was anything but respectable**. In fact, such a hairstyle would be like a prostitute advertising her wares! Payne details,

“Loosed hair was disgraceful (11:5) and symbolized sexual looseness in Roman, Greek, and Jewish culture....Loosed hair fits the cultural influence and specific practice of the Dionysiac cult, which was popular in Corinth and explains why women in Corinth might have let their hair down.”¹⁶

Contrary to women with “uncovered” heads—heads with hair freely flowing down—respectable women would have “covered heads” with their hair arranged in a kind of bun, something attested in the artwork of the broad First Century. Payne also details,

“What about having one’s head ‘uncovered’ would cause shame to a woman leading in worship in the cultural setting of Corinth? The extensive evidence from portraiture, frescoes, sculptures, and vase paintings in Greek and Roman cities of Paul’s day almost universally depicts respectable women with their hair done up. Women in everyday public settings are not depicted with their hair hanging loose over their shoulders.”¹⁷

A Corinthian woman with an “uncovered” head meaning free-flowing long hair, hair that has not been arranged in a proper manner, makes sense of Paul’s prescription that such an “uncovered” woman’s hair be cut or shaved off—which was definitely a sign of dishonor (1 Corinthians 11:6). A proper recognition of the genders is in view here (1 Corinthians 11:7-8), including being aware of how at a previous time in Biblical history (e.g., Genesis 6:4) women may have been able to tempt the angels (1 Corinthians 11:10).

Both man and woman—especially if they are married—are to understand that they are not independent of one another, with all originating from God (1 Corinthians 11:11-12). With the realization that “covered” and “uncovered” probably relates to hairstyles of hair pulled up versus free-flowing long hair, how does this change our reading of Paul’s further direction? When people would attend home gatherings of the Corinthians, *including* any visiting pagans, what impression would it give of the Messiah followers and the Lord Yeshua? As 1 Corinthians 11:13-16 details,

“Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God *with her head* uncovered {**meaning:** with free-flowing long hair}? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering [mantle; Grk. *peribolaion*]. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the [assemblies] of God” (NASU).

It is difficult at first for us to consider covered/uncovered to relate to hairstyles, which either communicated lewdness or promiscuity or just general disrespectfulness to wider society—but it is a much better way for us to understand the issues of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. The actual issue in Ancient Corinth regarding male and female heads that are “covered” and “uncovered” **actually pertained to specific hairstyles**. Men should not have long hair hanging down. Women should have their long hair put up, being “covered,” as being “uncovered” would mean letting the hair go. The association that such hairstyles would have, could not only communicate a degree of prostitution-promotion (female *and* male) to outsiders, but perhaps also associate the Corinthians as participating with local pagan religious activities. The Apostle Paul clearly did not want something like this communicated to outsiders in the gatherings and worship activities of the Messiah followers!

I have never seen the perspective of “covered” and “uncovered” relating to Ancient Corinthian hairstyles ever really considered in any sector of today’s Messianic movement. Many believe that “covered” and “uncovered” relates to head garments like the *kippah/yarmulke*, various uses of the *tallit*, or some kind of female head garment. While not all of these items as we know them were in use in the Biblical period, ultimately the issue of headcovering garments for men and women is one that is **entirely traditional and cultural**. It is something that all Messianic Believers need to be sensitive about in their *halachah* to be certain (like men wearing a *yarmulke* at the Western Wall in Jerusalem), **but head covering garments are not the real issue** of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. The main thrust of this part of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians pertains to how various grooming styles can damage the credibility of the faith community. In First Century Corinth, women who let their hair go “uncovered”—long and loose—were communicating something bad. Today, long hair on a woman (perhaps in

¹³ NETS similarly has: “let his clothes the loosened and his head be uncovered [*akatakaluptos*].”

¹⁴ *HALOT*, 2:970.

¹⁵ Payne, 167 further states,

“The only occurrence in the text Paul cited the most, the LXX [Septuagint], of ‘uncovered’ (11:5; [*akatakaluptos*] in Lev 13:45) translates [*faru’a*], from [*para*], which Hebrew scholars agree means ‘to let the hair on the head hang loosely.’ It is the earliest instance of the word ‘cover’ ([*katakaluptos*]) occurring with ‘head’ in the *TLG* database...‘Uncovered’ is explained twice in verses 5-6, using ‘for’ ([*gar*]). Both reasons explain the uncovering as equivalent to hair being clipped or shaved. This associates the covering as hair and fits most naturally if ‘uncovered’ refers to a woman with her hair let down.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

a pony tail or other style) in some places might instead communicate conservativeness.¹⁸ As far as shorter or longer degrees of hair length on a woman *or* man are concerned: they regard the general evaluation of their (Twenty-First Century [Western]) cultural context, and what may be considered respectable.

I have never been witnessed opposing Messianic men wearing a *kippah/yarmulke* during weekly *Shabbat* services **and most especially** during the high holy days of *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Likewise, all of those who also don a *tallit* for prayer and worship should not do so without a *kippah/yarmulke*. While it is a tradition, the wearing of the skullcap is nonetheless considered to be a sign of a man's reverence for God in mainline Judaism. The protocol observed in a Messianic congregation should be similar to that in the Jewish Synagogue.

At the same time, the wearing of the *kippah* cannot be construed as any kind of Biblically-prescribed commandment, nor something that should be forced upon anyone. I urge sensitivity concerning the Jewish custom of wearing the *kippah*, especially considering how widespread it is. No non-Jewish Believer should ever be caught trying to degrade the role that the *kippah/yarmulke* has played in many centuries of Jewish culture. Yet, unbalanced interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, slurs such as calling the *kippah/yarmulke* some kind of "beanie," and disrespect for the custom in general—has definitely been witnessed by those in the widely independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, and especially in the Two-House sub-movement. Sadly, many such persons cannot respect one of the most basic and widespread traditions of the Jewish people.

¹⁸ Indeed, in our family's experience in the Messianic movement since 1995, most of the average men and women in our faith community have little problems as it concerns our proposed reading of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. They tend to have hairstyles and a mode of dress which communicate a rather conservative demeanor to society at large, consistent with much of respectable Judaism and Christianity, not at all being associated with much popular culture.