

# AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM FOR JEWS

Rabba Dr Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz

## Session 10: Modesty in Judaism and Islam

### A. Jewish concepts of female modesty (*tseiniyut*)

Numbers/Bamidbar 5: 16-19 (NRSV)

<sup>16</sup> Then the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the LORD; <sup>17</sup> the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. <sup>18</sup> **The priest shall set the woman before the LORD, *ufara*‘ the woman’s hair** [...] In his own hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. <sup>19</sup> Then the priest shall make her take an oath [...]

Mishnah, *Ketubot* 7: 6

... these are divorced without being paid their *ketubah*: she who transgresses *dat mosheh* [law of Moses] and *dat yehudit* [Jewish law]. What [cases are] *dat mosheh*? A woman who gives her husband untithed food, a woman who has relations with her husband when she is *nidah*, a woman who does not separate *chalah*, and a woman who swears an oath and does not fulfil it. And what [cases come under] *dat yehudit*? **A woman who goes out with her head *paru’a***, a woman who spins in the marketplace, and a woman who speaks with every man.

BT *Berakhot* 24a

Rabbi Isaac said: A handbreadth [exposed] in a woman constitutes *ervah*. ... Rabbi Sheshet said: A woman’s hair is *ervah*, as it says, ‘... your hair is like a flock of goats’ [Shir Hashirim 4: 1].

Yosef Mashash (Messas) (1892-1974, Haifa), *Mayim chayim*, 2, ‘Orach chayim’, 110

Thus it is stated that the matter depends entirely on practice [*minhag*], thus today when all the women of the world have negated the previous practice, it is simply allowable to uncover their heads, this reflects no lack of modesty.

*Sheitels (wigs): against ....*

Rabbi Moses Sofer (Hatam Sofer, 1762-1839, Germany/Slovakia)

I forbid women to wear a wig, a total prohibition.

Rabbi Israel Abuhatzaira (Baba Sali, 1889-1984, Morocco/Israel)

Any woman wearing even a piece of a wig prepares for herself fuel that will burn her in hell.

Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (1910-2012, Lithuania/Israel)

The wigs that women wear today are a complete and total prohibition.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920-2013, Iraq/Israel)

There are over twenty *poskim* who say it is forbidden, absolutely forbidden ... to wear a wig and go outdoors ... heretics are the ones who allow it.

... and for:

Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneerson (Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1902-94, Ukraine/USA)

Wearing a *sheitel* has a beneficial impact on children and grandchildren, livelihood and health ... it is easy to take off a kerchief, which is not the case with a *sheitel*.

## **B. Islamic concepts of female modesty (*haya*)**

*Sahih Bukhari* (major hadith collection)

Narrated Abdullah ibn Umar: The Prophet passed by a man who was admonishing his brother regarding *haya* and was saying, 'You are very shy, and I am afraid that might harm you.' On that, Allah's Apostle said, 'Leave him, for *haya* is (a part) of Faith.'

Qur'an 24: 30-31 (based on Abdel Haleem translation)

<sup>30</sup>[Prophet], tell believing men to lower their glances and guard their private parts: that is purer for them. God is well aware of everything they do. <sup>31</sup>And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms [*zinah*] beyond what [ordinarily] shows; they should let their headscarves [*khimar*] fall to cover their necklines [*jujub*] and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness [*awra*]; they should not stamp their feet so as to draw attention to any hidden charms. Believers, all of you, turn to God so that you may prosper.

Qur'an 33: 59 (trans. Abdel Haleem)

Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments [*jilbab*] hang low over them<sup>a</sup> so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful.

Footnote <sup>a</sup>: The Arabic idiom *adna al-jilbab* means 'make it hang low', not 'wrap around' as other translators have assumed.

Qur'an 24: 60 (trans. Abdel Haleem)

No blame will be attached to elderly women who are not hoping for sex [others: marriage], if they take off their outer garments without flaunting their charms, but it is preferable for them not to do this: God is all-hearing, all-seeing.

Hadith, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, no. 4095

Abu Dawud has transmitted on the authority of 'Aishah [the Prophet's wife] that Asma the daughter of Abu Bakr [and 'Aishah's sister], once came to the Prophet (peace be on him) wearing transparent clothes. The Prophet (peace be on him) turned his face away from her and told her, 'Asma, when a woman reaches puberty nothing should be seen of her except this and this', and he pointed to his face and hands.

Khaled Abou el-Fadl (b. 1963), Fatwa on *hijab*

[...] in my opinion, *hijab* in this country is clearly not a *fard* [obligation] and no sin is acquired for failing to wear the *hijab*. The reason for this position is that the '*illa* (operative cause) for *hijab* was to protect women from harm and to avoid bringing undue attention to them. In the United States, *hijab* often results in the exact opposite, in other words, bringing undue attention to a Muslim woman and heightening the risk of harm. To say the least, in my opinion, *hijab* is not at the core of the Islamic faith, and not the kind of arguable duty that would be worth risking one's safety for. ... If a woman does wear a *hijab* in the West and harm does come to her, that gives me serious pause (meaning I am troubled by the fact that the very purpose of the possible rule is now completely contravened). ... at the time of the Prophet ... *hijab* was not raised as a topic until a year before the Prophet's death, meaning that many Muslim women worked on their *iman* [faith] and their belief for ten and in some cases fifteen years before they had to even think about the matter of *hijab*. What I'm saying is that, especially when it comes to converts or people who have not been practicing Muslims for most of their lives and then decide to become religious, first, work on *aqida* [creed], your *iman*, your understanding of the wisdom and the purpose of Islam before you start delving into the legalities of *hijab* or no *hijab*. ... My humble opinion is that the matter of *hijab* of a Muslima in this day and age has become of a highly exaggerated importance.

*Western discomfort, Muslim diversity*

Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, p. 2

Unveiling became a central urgency for elites attempting to 'catch up' with the West. Thus the 'veil' became a potent symbol of the progress or regress of a nation. And since it was the upper classes leading 'modernization', the anti-veil discourse was also an attack on those classes that remained attached to the veil and its older symbolic meanings (a symbol of piety/wealth/status). The anti-veil discourse opened a gulf between the people of a nation: the Western-focused elites and others who were adopting the culture of the colonizer as well as benefiting economically and socially from colonialism, versus the rest, lower classes, traditional Muslim teachers, and others who, as well as suffering from colonialism, were not assimilating to Western ways.

Katherine Bullock's list of meanings of *hijab* (*Rethinking*, chapter 3)

1. Revolutionary protest
2. Political protest
3. Religious
  - 3.i – To make society better
4. Continued access to the public sphere
  - 4.i – Continued access to employment (or study)
  - 4.ii – To gain respect
  - 4.iii – To combat male harrassment
5. Expression of personal identity
  - 5.i – To gain social status
6. Custom

## Muslim women's voices

When people ask me if I feel oppressed, I can honestly say no. I made this decision out of my own free will. I like the fact that I am taking control of the way other people perceive me. I enjoy the fact that I don't give anyone anything to look at and that I have released myself from the bondage of the swinging pendulum of the fashion industry and other institutions that exploit females.

Sultana Yusufali (aged 17), 'My Body Is My Own Business', *Globe and Mail* 29.6.1993

I have a friend who dresses really provocatively. She would wear close to nothing ... so she's put this on and if she got a reaction [from a man] she'd say 'Good, I'm looking fine.' She'd really question if these men weren't gawking at her ... that's pathetic, right? That's how you judge your beauty, by the reactions of men? ... What Muslim women, and especially Muslim women who cover ... are automatically saying ... is I don't care what you think of me. You shouldn't make a judgment if I'm attractive or not ... I don't establish my worth or my beauty by your reaction, only by the reaction of Allah.

'Sherifa', interviewed by Katherine Bullock

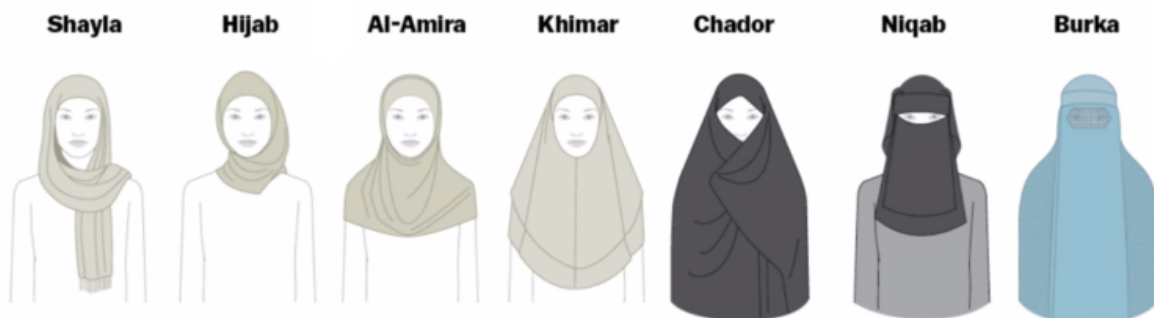
I did have a choice ... if you're not going to wear it for [the sake of] Allah, then what's the point? ... nobody ever forced me to do it. I did it on my own. There was a choice.

'Sadia', interviewed by Katherine Bullock

[When the Shah] ... outlawed the veil ... he let it be known that the heads of old society families like ours risked his serious displeasure if they did not show their wives in public, and in Western garb. When my mother learned she was to lose the age-old modesty of her veil, she was beside herself... [My father], however, realized that he did not dare disobey. ... For a Persian aristocrat to allow strange men to gape at his wives in public was shameful in the extreme. ... He sent to the Avenue Lalezar for hats for all his wives ... and told them that the next day they were to put them on and ride with him in the open drosky. To my mother, it was exactly as if he had insisted that she parade naked in the street.

Sattareh Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia* (New York, 1992), pp. 95-6

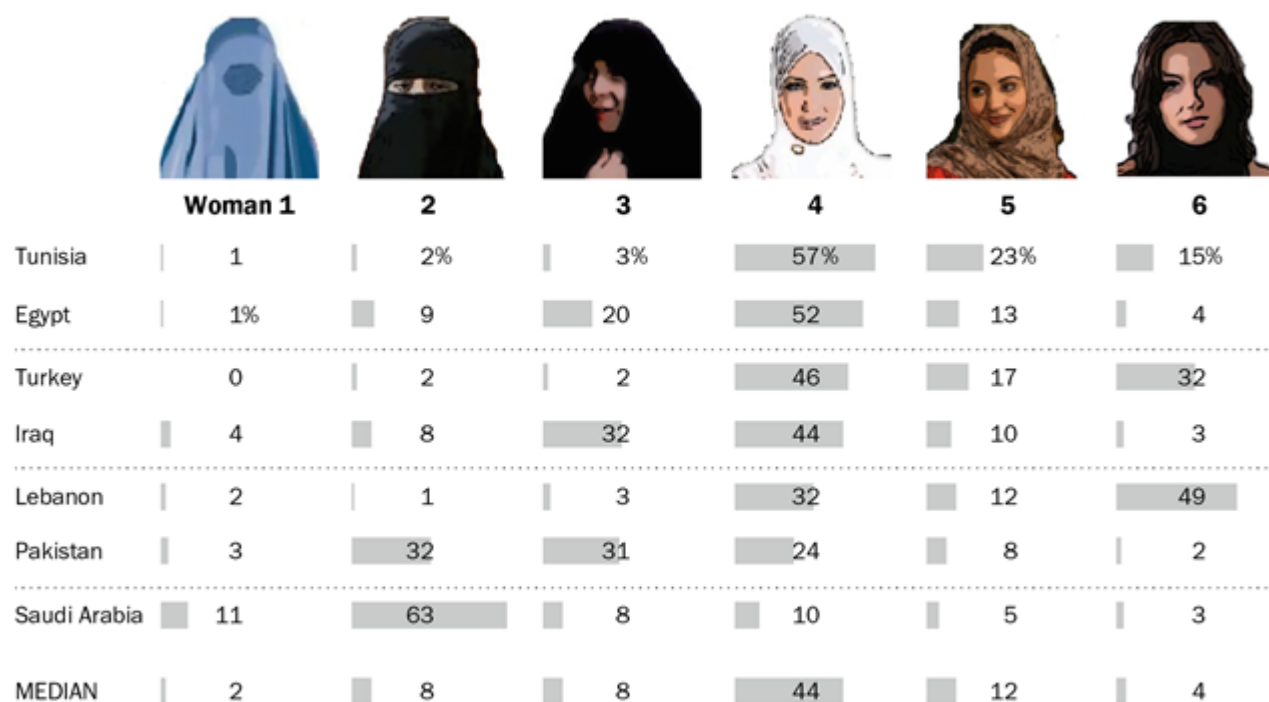
## Types of Islamic veils



(source: Barrington Stage Company)

## What Style of Dress is Appropriate for Women in Public?

% who say woman is dressed most appropriately



Source: The Birthplace Of The Arab Spring: Values And Perceptions Of The Tunisian Public In A Comparative Perspective. From the Middle Eastern Values Study, University of Michigan Population Studies Center.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

### Further Reading

Michael Broyde, 'Hair Covering and Jewish Law: Biblical and Objective (*Dat Moshe*) or Rabbinic and Subjective (*Dat Yehudit*)?', *Tradition* 42:3, Fall 2009

Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002)

Martha Nussbaum, 'Veiled Threats?', *New York Times*, 11 July 2010, available at: [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/veiled-threats/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/veiled-threats/?_r=0)

Lynne Schreiber (ed.), *Hide and Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003)

Raquel Ukeles, 'Modest Dress in Contemporary Judaism and Islam', My Jewish Learning website, < <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/modest-dress-in-contemporary-judaism-and-islam/>>

For an interesting survey in 7 Muslim countries (conducted by the Pew Research Center) on how people think women should dress in public see: <http://t.co/FF4sRH46fK>