

**HAIR TODAY, GONE TOMORROW:
UPSHERIN, ALEF-BET, AND THE CHILDHOOD NAVIGATION OF
JEWISH GENDER IDENTITY SYMBOL SETS**

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But these hairs, all and singular, radiate into four hundred and ten worlds.
(Zohar vii:67)

In my first semester of my doctoral program, Dr. Simon J. Bronner, my academic idol, agreed to do an independent study course with me on hair. Acutely aware that the great folklorist's time was valuable, I selected Charles Berg's *The Unconscious Significance of Hair* (1951) as our first reading. This seemed fitting, as it was one of the earliest comprehensive hair studies texts. At our first meeting, I sat across from Simon in a nervous sweat. What I hadn't realized was that the book was largely about the phallic motivations of men who shave their heads. Simon ran his hand over his shaved head, a twinkle in his eye, and said, "Well, where do you want to start?"

Years later, Simon remains my most trusted and cherished mentor, and I am lucky to also count him as a friend. As I have established myself as a bodylorist working in hairlore, Simon has been an unwavering voice of support and encouragement, reminding me time and again that if the research isn't there that I need to write it. As I worked on this essay for this journal commemorating his retirement from teaching—because we all know that it does not mark his retirement from writing—I emailed Simon to ask if, in his encyclopedic memory, he could recall any studies mentioning *upshein* (a ritual in which an Orthodox Jewish boy's hair is cut for the first time at the age of three) that I might be overlooking, as my research was turning up scant results. His response? He encouraged me to get writing. Truly, a finer mentor has never been. Simon, I continue to learn from and be inspired by you. Thank you for believing in me and my crazy *hair*-brained ideas (and for sharing a mutual love of word play); I can only hope to make you proud and to build my students up as you taught me through your example.

In this essay, I introduce the theoretical framework of hairlore, discussing its challenges when applied to the hair of infants and very young children. I contextualize the ritual of *upshein*, reviewing its history, describing contemporary applications, and discussing variations of the practice. Finally, I offer an analysis of *upshein*, considering its role in the shifting relationship between mother and son, as well as in the maintenance of a gendered Orthodox symbol set, and discuss the possibility of egalitarian parallels for young girls. I ultimately argue that *upshein* is ripe for adaptation by liberal Jewish communities in its celebration of Jewish core values.

Theoretical Basis for Childhood Hair Studies

Bodylorists and hairlorists tend to focus their attention on the adult body (Crane 2000; DeMello 2000; Farrell 2011; Grosz 1994; Hagen and Giuntini 2007; Luciano 2002; Pitts 2003; Thompson 2015; Young 1993). In many ways, this makes sense: adults are able to make choices about their self-presentation and engage autonomously with their bodies in ways in which children are unable. Attention is also given to teens and young adults, who interact with their bodies as they cultivate their identities, often in contrast to parental wishes, but this consideration tends to have a health and medical scope (Montgomery and Parks 2001; Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts, and Myhre 2002; Benjamins, Risser, Cromwell, Feldmann, Bortot, Eissa, and Nguyen 2006; Silver, Silver, Siennick, and Farkas 2011). Other body studies of the pubescent and pre-pubescent body focus on general body image satisfaction (Ballentine and Ogle 2005; Tiggemann and Slater 2014; Malachowski and Myers 2013; Coffey, Budgeon, and Cahill 2016). However, small children and babies also warrant the attention of bodylorists. While their engagement with their bodies is different than that of adults, indeed, it is this very difference that merits consideration. Children's bodies are a canvas for parental or cultural decisions, whereupon they are marked by external factors that exist outside of their control, including body modifications like circumcision, ear piercing, scarification, female genital mutilation, neck or lip expansion, and foot binding (Silvester and Wilson 2009; Rush 2005; Fan 1997; Skaine 2005).

Hairlore, a subset of bodylore, considers specifically the role that hair has in the presentation of self (Berg 1951; Byrd 2002; Leach 1958; McCracken 1995; Obeyesekere 1984; Prince 2010; Simon 2001; Weitz 2004). The analysis of the hair of infants and children poses three significant hurdles not faced when considering the hair of teens or adults. First, as infants and children grow hair, the rates and ways in which it grows are unpredictable. This seems an obvious truth, but not all small children have hair, and when they do, it is of various lengths and thicknesses. Second, baby hair is fine and difficult to style. Texturally, baby hair is not like mature hair. As many caregivers¹ will attest, at best they can simply attempt to wrangle their small child's hair into "looking presentable" by slicking it down or using hair accessories to tame it. Third, when considering the hair of small children, the analysis does not probe the decisions of children. Rather, the hairlore reflects the choices made by caregivers, as they maintain and groom the children's hair. While it is true that after a certain age small children can voice their opinions about their hair, their corporeal decisions still rest with their caregivers.

Hair analysis of youth is limited and has concentrated on pubescent or post-pubescent youth (McCracken 1995). It is, of course, at this age that young people generally start to make their own decisions about their body, whether it be fashion, hair, or other external manifestations of identity. Before puberty, hair is under-analyzed, as it is attributed to marking only young age and, therefore, is not theorized as a conscious manifestation of the self. Although this explanation is tempting in its simplicity, the hair of children is fertile ground for the roots of identity. There are multitudes of ways in which our community, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities are worn on our heads beginning at a young age.

Examples of this include the long, unshorn hair of Old Order Anabaptist girls, often worn in braids until it is pinned up under a prayer covering after baptism (Reynolds 2001; Scott 2008); the uncut and carefully wrapped hair and turban of a Sikh child; twists and braids with bright beads worn by African American girls (Byrd 2002; Leeds Craig 2002; Prince 2010); a Muslim infant's first haircut on the seventh day of his life; or, as discussed in this essay, the creation of *payot* (sidelocks or sidecurls worn by Jewish men, sometimes also referred to as *payos* in Yiddish) for Jewish boys during their upsherin.

The changing of hair to mark a life change finds voice in a variety of ways across cultures. Examples include Amish men growing a beard after marriage (Scott 1998); the donning of head coverings after baptism in Old Order groups (Reynolds 2001; Scott 2008); Orthodox Jewish women covering their hair after marriage (Milligan 2014a); the creation and maintenance of mystical matted locks (Obeyesekere 1984); the shaving of the heads of prisoners (Weitz 2004); military recruits getting particular hairstyles after enlisting; or cancer patients shaving their heads prior to chemotherapy. All of these examples demonstrate how hair and its manipulation represent a way of controlling our appearance, especially in times of transition.

Some hairstyles are attributed especially to young children, including pigtails and bowl-cuts. Thickly cut bangs come in and out of fashion for small girls, as has the spiking of little boys' hair. For babies, the use of large headbands, hats, and even stick-on bows serve as gender identifiers. When young girls do not have long enough hair to put into pigtails or braids, they are marked as female by hair accessories or headwear. Young boys often have haircuts that typify their youth, including slightly longer cuts that do not use hair styling techniques like tapering or blending. In recent years, it has also become fashionable to put male babies in baseball caps, fedoras, and other hats as a gender marker.

There is historic precedence for the creation of "little adults" in the styling of children (DeMause 1974; Fass 2013; Greenleaf 1978). The same can be said for the creation of "little adult" hairstyles. The practical office-friendly bob, for example, has a certain charm on a little girl. Likewise, a military style buzz cut is not only practical for little boys, but it is also considered charmingly impish. Other adult styles, though, like a French twist for girls or slicked and parted hair for boys, are generally considered too mature for small children.

As children transition from infancy to childhood, hair serves as one of the most important signifiers of maturity. Small children's appearances are constantly evolving, whether it is physical growth or eternal signifiers of age like diapers. Along with these changes, hair serves an important role in marking the stages of early childhood. At an age where a child is still being bathed by someone else, the maintenance and care of a child's hair rests with an adult. Many caregivers express that they cannot wait for their little girls to have long enough hair to style, creating a bonding ritual and level of intimacy between child and caregiver that extends beyond the shampooing and drying of hair. Likewise, caregivers also voice sadness when their children have their first haircut, as it marks the transition between baby and child. Similarly, another important rite of passage for children is getting their first school haircut, marking their transition from toddler to school aged

child, often also coinciding with a child's ability and responsibility for bathing and dressing herself.

The first haircut is a celebrated milestone for many families. The event can happen in the intimate setting of the home or in a barbershop or salon. There are even hairstylists and shops that cater exclusively to children, including offering first haircut experience packages. Typically, caregivers will keep a lock of their child's hair in commemoration of the event. This hair, often a curl, is a different texture and often a different color than the hair an individual will have as an adult, representing the short-lived phase of infancy. Likewise, the first haircut also symbolizes independence. Although the child is not yet autonomous, the absolute dependency of an infant is replaced by the stubborn independence of a toddler. A baby enters the hair cutting ritual, and she emerges a child.

The first haircut milestone is particularly striking in the transformation of young boys. More often than not, young girls have their hair grown long. In doing so, the first haircut is delayed and, even when trimmed, does not dramatically change the overall appearance of the little girl. For young boys, however, the first haircut can drastically alter the way they look. In clipping off the wispy baby hair and shaping the remaining hair into a more mature style, he is transformed from a baby to a child, or, as parents will often exclaim, "He looks like a little man!" The impact of this moment is even more profound when the transformation of the young boy also coincides with an externalization of religious affiliation through the creation of payot and the boy beginning to wear a *yarmulke* (the traditionally male skullcap worn by Jews, also known as a kippah in Hebrew) and *tzitzit* (the knotted ritual fringes traditionally worn by observant Jewish men, typically attached to a four-cornered garment), as is experienced during the upsherin ritual.

Contextualizing Upsherin

Upsherin is commonly practiced only among the most religiously observant² Jewish communities, typically among the Hasidic, Haredi, and other Orthodox communities.³ Upsherin, also sometimes transliterated from the Yiddish as upsherin, opsherin, or upsherinish, literally means "to shear off" and includes both a haircutting ritual and, as will be discussed, a school initiation. This section begins by offering a brief history of the practice of upsherin followed by a description of the ritual in contemporary practice. Finally, it concludes by discussing some of the variations of the practice.

Not only has upsherin been underanalyzed by scholars—indeed, Yoram Blau (2003) offers the only other theorized analysis of the ritual—it warrants little mention even in examinations of Jewish Orthodoxy (Diamond 2000; Gurock 2009; Heilman 1999; Heilman 2006; Heilman and Cohen 1999; Landau 1992; Mintz 1998; Poll 1962). Because of this, upsherin is a ritual largely unrecognized outside of the Jewish community, unlike circumcision or bar/bat mitzvahs. Despite this lack of wider recognition, upsherin is familiar to most contemporary Jews, even among more liberal Jewish movements who do not engage with the practice.

It is difficult to trace the exact origins of upsherin, in part because it encompasses two distinct rites of passage: the physical haircut and the education

initiation. The haircut alone also amalgamates two distinct practices: the cutting or shaving of the hair and the creation of payot.⁴ There is historic religious precedence for childhood ritual haircutting, including the Hindu and Muslim customs of shaving the hair of children. In Hindu tradition, the *chudakarana* (when a child receives his or her first haircut) takes place to remove the birth hair which is associated with past lives, and is, when possible, cast into the holy river Ganges. Similarly, many Muslims shave the heads of infants on the seventh day of life to demonstrate submission to God as part of the *aqueeqah* ritual, where a sheep is sacrificed in order to ensure the child's safety from harm (two sheep for a boy and one sheep for a girl). The hair is weighed and an equivalent amount is given to charity. Sometimes this hair shaving ritual takes place in conjunction with *kbitan* (circumcision, which can take place up until puberty and often is performed on the seventh day of life or on the seventh birthday).

Childhood haircutting rituals first were embraced by Palestinian Jews in the Middle Ages. The Musta'arabi Jews were Arabic-speaking Jews living in the Middle East and North Africa prior to the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. After the Ladino-speaking Jews settled in the same area, they would merge together to form what is now referred to as the Sephardic community (referring to Jewish communities with roots in Spain and North Africa, pl. Sephardim) (Barnett and Schwab 1989; Dobrinsky 2002). The practices of the Musta'arabi Jews likely influenced Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (16th Century) in his writings, which ascribe mystical qualities to payot (Blau 2003, 185). Prior to the 1800s, ritual haircutting remained a Sephardic practice. It would not be introduced into Ashkenazic (referring to the Jewish communities with roots in Germany and Eastern Europe, pl. Ashkenazim) practice until the 1800s (*ibid.*).

In contrast, education initiation developed among the Ashkenazic community. School or education initiations became prominent in Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries, particularly in Germany and northern France (*ibid.*, 187). Blau contends that the education initiations of young boys were gradually replaced with the bar mitzvah (*ibid.*), blurring the historical continuity between these medieval school initiations and contemporary. The fact that these two ceremonies evolved independently in different diasporic communities (hair cutting among Sephardim and education initiation among Ashkenazim) and now have converged into one unique blended ritual indicates that it is only in the last two centuries that upsherin, as is practiced today in conjunction with education initiation, has codified into a modern hybrid Jewish ritual. Unlike other practices that find their roots in *halakha* (referring to Jewish law, may also be used to refer to individual Jewish laws or commandments)—for example, keeping kosher—upsherin and education initiations are part of *minbag* (modern Jewish traditions or customs that have evolved into expected community norms). That is to say, there is no Jewish legal imperative for upsherin; rather, it has become an accepted cultural custom such that it has taken on particular significance.

Contemporary upsherin events are comprised of two rituals: the boy's haircut (the upsherin itself) followed by the education initiation ceremony. This second ceremony is an extension of the upsherin and does not have a distinct ritual name; however, many refer to it as the *alef-bet* (the first two letters in the Hebrew

alphabet; the phrase used to refer to the alphabet as a whole) to distinguish this part of the ritual from the hair cutting. This is an important distinction because, although it is common for the two ceremonies to happen together, that is not always the case, as will be discussed later in variations of the practice.

In the United States, the upsherin typically takes place in the family home, although it can also occur in the synagogue. The boy's hair is sometimes adorned with ribbons or pulled into a ponytail, and he enters the ritual space wearing a yarmulke and tzitzit for the first time. Depending on the family, the boy may sit by himself or on his father's lap (or, in rare



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cases, on the mother's lap) for his haircut. The forelock is snipped first by the father, symbolizing where the boy will one day lay *tefillin* (leather boxes holding scripture that are bound to the forehead and left arm). Sometimes the honor of the first snip of hair is afforded to a rabbi or a *koben* (a member of the priestly tribe (direct patrilineal descent from Aaron) who has special duties in the synagogue). This first lock of cut hair is typically preserved, often pressed in a *Siddur* (a Jewish prayer book). The boy's remaining hair is cut, frequently with the mother making the next cut and then by allowing those in attendance to each snip off one lock of hair. In some families, the hair is collected and weighed, and a donation is made in that amount to charity, paralleling the Muslim rituals discussed earlier. Others will make a donation matching the total number of locks trimmed. Some boys are given a *tzedakah* (charitable giving or donations, considered a moral obligation in Jewish practice) box to hold and with each snip will deposit money, usually given to them by each person cutting their hair. Families often will select a charity related to education like a *yeshiva* (an institution of Jewish education that focuses on the study of religious texts) or library. Although less common, some families additionally donate their son's hair to be made into a wig for cancer patients, and others choose to hide or bury the hair (Pinson 2010, 48).

During the upsherin, the hair is carefully cut to ensure that payot remain. At the end of the ritual, some families shave their son's head, making the payot even more prominent. The child is showered in sweets representing sweetness raining down from angels in Heaven. The sweets are distributed to guests in *pekalach* (small bags of sweets). The tradition of throwing sweets has Ashkenazic origins and also appears at other major Orthodox male life cycle events, including *Vach Nacht* (the night before the circumcision); when a groom is called for *aliyah* (reciting a blessing over the Torah) the Sabbath before his wedding; and at bar mitzvahs.

In the United States, it is customary for the alef-bet ritual to immediately follow the upsherin. The boy is wrapped in his father's *tallit* (the prayer shawl traditionally worn by Jewish men, also known as tallis in Yiddish), to symbolize purity and to demonstrate the father's protective role. The boy is carried in his father's embrace to the teacher. The alef-bet usually occurs in the same location as the upsherin, although sometimes the boy is brought to a yeshiva or synagogue. The boy is placed in the lap of the male teacher or rabbi, and a laminated card or tablet of the Hebrew alef-bet is placed in front of him. Mimicking the teacher, the child reads each Hebrew letter aloud, starting from the beginning to the end, and then again in reverse. The alef-bet tablet from which the child reads is sprinkled with honey, and the boy is encouraged to dip his finger in the honey on each letter and to lick his finger or sometimes even the tablet. In doing so, he is given his first taste of the sweetness of learning. The teacher also recites several textual passages, which the child is encouraged to repeat.⁵ In some communities, the child is also given a hard-boiled egg with Torah verses engraved on it. Sometimes a special honey cake, often decorated with a Torah verse, is served to the child or to those in attendance.

As with any ritual, there are variations of upsherin and alef-bet. Each Hasidic court, as well as other Haredi and Orthodox communities, has its own minhag. Those cultural variations are compounded by the variations experienced by a multi-national diasporic religious community. Blau's consideration of upsherin, for example, focuses on the experiences of Israeli Jews (2003). In contrast to American Jews, who hold the upsherin on a boy's third birthday or on Lag Ba'Omer if the boy's birthday falls during the Counting of the Omer,⁶ many Israelis deliberately wait until Lag Ba'Omer to cut their sons' hair so that they can do so in conjunction with a pilgrimage to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yohai⁷ in Meron, or, less commonly, in Jerusalem at the grave of Shimon Hatzaddik (*ibid.*, 183-185). In recent years, it has also become popular to conduct upsherin at the Western Wall.

When upsherin is done in this Israeli context, its maleness is multiplied. Women's roles are further sidelined while they wait in gender-segregated areas, unable to enter into the ritual space. As such, they peer into the area, often with their view blocked by screens, to see the dancing, celebration, and upsherin. The celebrations at Meron are drastically different than the smaller home-based upsherin of the United States because of the large crowds and simultaneous celebration of Lag Ba'Omer. In Meron, boys sit on their fathers' shoulders, swirling

in a milieu of mystic maleness, and clutching alef-bet flags and bags of sweets (*ibid.*, 184).

For the boys who have their first haircuts in Meron, school initiation ceremonies are typically delayed and performed at a different time. Although the boys symbolically clutch alef-bet flags, the two-fold ceremony is split, sometimes with the alef-bet ritual occurring months later on the first day of school with the entire class and their fathers' present (*ibid.*, 185-186). Similarly, some boys will have a private alef-bet ceremony near their birthday or Lag Ba'Omer and then engage with the ritual again on the first day of school. This difference in practice is undergirded, of course, by the fact that Israeli youth engage with Hebrew differently than their English and Yiddish speaking American counterparts.

There are two other ritual variations that are important to note. First, the reason upsherin occurs at the age of three is based on Leviticus 19:23, where it is forbidden to eat the fruit of a tree for the first three years. Hasidic thought has interpreted this metaphorically to mean that a three-year-old child with uncut hair will grow tall and fruitful, growing in knowledge and goodness as a man (Pinson 2010, 3-4). However, some Hasidic groups—including Skver, Chernobyl, and Gur—perform upsherin at the age of two. While they are in the minority, they look instead to Genesis 21:8, where Abraham prepares a great feast for Isaac's birthday.

Second, among some Sephardic communities, upsherin is delayed until the age of five. In this context, the ritual is referred to as *chalaka* (from the Arabic *lakya*, a haircut). Done without a school initiation ritual, the *chalaka* ritual is a reverse parallel to Muslim customs. In this Sephardic context, Jewish boys are circumcised at eight-days-old and have their hair cut at age five, an inverse mirroring of Muslim boys having their hair cut on the seventh day and their circumcision at the age seven. The *chalaka* is done independently of a school initiation, reflecting the practices of Musta'arabi Jews and the Sephardic communities prior to Ashkenazic influence (Blau 2003, 1989; Pinson 2010, 52).

Analysis of Upsherin

This essay contends three primary points of analysis. First, upsherin represents a gendered divide between a young boy and his mother. Second, upsherin finds voice as a unique childhood ritual within the Jewish male life cycle, gaining importance because of its role in teaching gendered performance through the creation of a specifically Orthodox male identity kit. Finally, upsherin is without sufficient egalitarian parallel, which will be addressed through a discussion of candle lighting and Jewish feminist engagement with upsherin.

Upsherin marks an important moment in the life of a young Orthodox boy in terms of his relationship to his mother. As an infant, the boy was reliant on his mother, either through a literal dependence on breast milk or an intimate reliance on the comfort of a mother figure. His upsherin marks a moment when he is figuratively removed from his mother, transitioning into the maleness of the Orthodox Jewish world. Prior to his upsherin, his mother was primarily responsible for his care, but this ritual marks a transfer of power. The boy will

now be educated and raised under male leadership (including his father, rabbi, and teachers) and among male peers.

Blau contends that upsherin functions as a secondary circumcision, whereby the boy is once again physically marked and sanctified as a Jew (Blau 2003, 187-193). Unlike his circumcision, at the conclusion of which he is returned to his mother's care and, as Blau aptly notes, is in direct contact with her postpartum "impurities" (ibid., 180), his upsherin marks a point of purity where a boy departs from his mother and enters the world of Jewish masculinity. In this way, upsherin is not the first marker of maleness for a Jewish boy, as his circumcision represents the first gender affirming ritual in his life, but rather it indicates a new expectation of his navigation of Orthodox gender roles.

Blau's approach to upsherin considers the anthropological and psychological implications of the ritual with a careful rhetorical eye (for example, the move from *milab* (circumcision) to *milab* (the word), offering a compelling rhetorical and anthropological argument for the upsherin representing a secondary circumcision (ibid., 176-183). However, by bringing the tools of folklore to bear on upsherin, the ritual reveals itself to be less about repurification through a secondary circumcision and more about addressing the parental anxieties experienced in the transition of authority from the mother to the father. This is a familiar theme for folklorists, who see ritual often used to ease transition periods and anxieties. Likewise, this folkloric understanding of a ritual easing periods of transition is replicated in the other anthropological examples Blau identifies in Sambia (ibid., 193-198), further strengthening his argument for their parallels.

The transition away from mother and into the gendered world of Orthodoxy is literally reenacted during the upsherin. The boy appears wearing a yarmulke and tzitzit, both traditionally male garments. It is the father who holds the boy on his lap while hair is being cut and the father who is given the honor of cutting the first lock of hair. In Meron, the boys sit on their fathers' shoulders as they dance on Lag Ba'Omer in a space into which only men may enter. It is the father who wraps the son in his (male-encoded) tallit and carries him to a male rabbi or teacher who guides the boy through his alef-bet. In these ways, the sweetness of the mother's milk is replaced when the boy is given his first taste of the sweetness of the Torah and of Orthodox masculinity.

Contemporary gender theory identifies that gender is performative (Leighton 2012; Miller 2010; Askew 1998; Butler 2006). Bodylore undergirds this theoretical framework by demonstrating the cultural malleability of gender, especially in how bodies are used in both common and discursive contexts (Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993; Radler 1993). Blau contends that upsherin represents the repurification of the young male body by physically marking when a boy begins his journey in learning secondary male identity (Blau 2003, 177; see Kimmel 2009; Goldberg 1987; Bronner 2005). In this way, the body of the young boy can be theorized both through gender theory (as he learns the ideals of masculinity within his community) as well as bodylore (as his body is physically modified so that he might engage in this gendered performance).

Learning and maintaining appropriate gendered performance, then, is central in the upsherin experience. In a religious world where gender roles are distinct and

specific, this marks the moment when children are guided clearly down different paths. For the young boy, his physical transformation, coupled with his change in dress, indicates his maleness. He will be sent to yeshiva; he will begin to regularly attend synagogue with his father; he will be responsible for upholding certain laws and commandments; and his body will eventually count toward a *minyan* (the quorum of ten men required for certain religious events or rituals). No longer an infant, he must now learn how to modestly interact with the opposite sex. His upsherin marks the moment when the boy enters the gender-segregated world of Orthodoxy and will begin to learn the particular responsibilities of Orthodox men.

If viewed through a broader lens, upsherin features the performance and maintenance of gender for all participants. The significance of the male body and maleness is highlighted by the centrality of the boy and his father, further underscored by the roles of the male teachers, rabbi, and other men at the scene (including the other fathers, for example, at Meron). As such, the centrality of maleness, both within the family and as leaders in the Jewish community, is strengthened.

The role of women at the upsherin is markedly different. For mothers, as previously mentioned, the ritual signifies the shift of the infant's care. However, the location of female bodies during the ritual underscores several important aspects of Orthodox gender expectations, highlighting the non-central role of women in public religious life. During the upsherin, women are sidelined as observers, particularly when the ritual takes place in locations like Meron where women are literally divided from their son and husband by a physical barrier. Even in the American context, they are secondary voices to the ritual script, as further demonstrated by their place second in line to cut their son's hair. In these spaces, young girls are similarly sidelined, reinforcing their non-central role in public religious life.

In these ways upsherin functions just as much as a ritual to mark a change for the boy as it does a community ritual, affirming the gendered roles and expectations of Orthodox Jewish life for all in attendance. Upsherin fulfills several of the primary functions of folklore as identified by William Bascom (1954). First, it is a pedagogical device to reinforce cultural values, in this case through teaching the young boy. Second, it justifies culture, including the rituals, institutions, and practices ascribed to a particular group. This justification of culture is critical in the maintenance of distinct community identity, and the upsherin reinforces Orthodox identity for all in attendance.

Finally, Bascom also identifies that folklore is a means of applying social control. This theory can be woven into hairlore through an understanding that loss of hair is often congruent with submission. Examples of this include the shaving of gang members' heads as part of initiation; buzz cutting soldiers' hair at their enlistment; the shearing of nuns' hair; the tonsuring of monks' hair; or the forced shaving of prisoner's heads. In each of these cases, the loss of hair indicates a literal or symbolic submission to a greater authority or force. Upsherin, when viewed through this lens, is an extension of the same theme. Not only is the boy literally submitting to his parents' will, but he is also physically marked as submitting to the greater authority of his Orthodox community.

Hair removal, when viewed in this context, is reflective of how hair can be viewed simultaneously as a marker, a symbol, and an object (Milligan 2014a, 7-13). Blau's psychological approach alludes to upsherin's potential symbolic link to Charles Berg's work (1951) and the association of shaved male heads and the phallus (Blau 2003, 190-191); whereby Blau expands on this idea to consider the creation of two phallic payot also to be significant (ibid., 188, 190-191). Using a psychoreligious approach (Milligan 2014a, 117-128) informed by Erich Fromm's distinction between rational and irrational ritual (1950; see Reik 1931), it is pertinent to consider the implications of the symbol set and identity kit (Goffman 1965) given to the boy during upsherin and how the maintenance and cultivation of these symbols will follow him throughout his maturation both as a man and as a Jew.

At his upsherin, the boy is given a symbolic identity kit comprised of tzitzit, a yarmulke, his new short hair, and payot styled and shaped in a way that represent his affiliation within Orthodoxy. Unlike the hidden symbol of his circumcision, this symbol set is carried externally, and his upsherin signifies that he is mature enough to properly engage with the symbols and, as such, begin to navigate both religious and cultural gendered performance. Payot, tzitzit, and yarmulkes are symbols of rational daily ritual, not attached to penis envy or outgrowths of religious crises; rather, in line with Fromm's analysis of rational ritual (1922; 1950), they reflect a human need to feel included and rooted in community. Externally marking himself as a Jewish male creates a space within Orthodox life for the young boy, ensuring that he feels attached and rooted in his community.

In addition to the symbolic inventory of the body afforded to the boy at his upsherin, he is also taught several hallmarks of Jewish practice by engaging with tactile symbols. He learns the sweetness of learning and Torah study by dipping his fingers in honey on the alef-bet. He is taught the importance of halakha and completes his first *mitzvah* (a commandment of divine origin, a good deed) in the creation of payot and by wearing his first tzitzit and yarmulke. Likewise, placing money in a tzedakah box for each lock of hair cut is a physical engagement with the virtue of charity. By using tactile symbols in these ways, the lessons of upsherin are tangible for a child. Much of what we try to teach children is theoretical—for example, why it is good to be truthful and moral. However, upsherin allows a boy to embody the abstract in a multi-sensory context by using a nuanced symbol set, engaging taste, touch, sight, hearing, and speech.

Moreover, in line with Bascom's assertion that folklore grows out of our need to validate culture (1954), upsherin engages those attending to also interact with the same symbols. Whether or not the child himself remembers his upsherin does not diminish the importance that the ritual has in reinforcing the religious cultural identities of those attending. The ritual highlights central tenets of Orthodoxy (gendered roles, learning, charity, family, community) and strengthens community identity by refreshing the boundaries established by Orthodox Jews to negotiate the pressures of assimilation and diasporic dilution.

If upsherin marks one of the ways in which Orthodox Jews use folklore in the maintenance of community boundaries, it is important to also consider how little girls in this same context are also taught to avoid assimilation and engage

with gendered symbol sets. Within Orthodox Judaism, the closest female parallel to upsherin is candle lighting. There are three gender-specific commandments for Jewish women (lighting Sabbath candles [nerot], breaking off a portion of the bread [*challah*], and sexual purity laws [*niddah*]). Within the Orthodox community, it is typically around age three that little girls begin helping to light Sabbath candles. Nerot is an interesting parallel to upsherin because, although it underscores the gendered divide of the Orthodox world, it simultaneously affirms a girl's maturity and ability to perform Jewishness. Likewise, through her preparation of the Sabbath, the young girl is given her own gender-specific symbol set to learn, helping her to navigate her gender both in the home and in the larger Orthodox community. Her childhood domestic education enables the girl to mimic her mother, helping her learn the lessons that she will use as a woman who is expected to cultivate a Jewish home and raise an Orthodox family that will stand strong against pressures of assimilation.

When viewed through this lens, upsherin is linked to the beginning of formal Jewish education for boys the same way that nerot is linked to domestic learning for girls. Despite occurring at roughly the same age, there are several significant differences between upsherin and nerot. Although both rituals can take place in the home, only the upsherin is attended by those outside of the immediate family. Likewise, although coupled with a physical transformation, upsherin is a one-time event, in contrast to nerot, which occurs weekly. Finally, the analogously gendered parent is responsible for the instruction of the ritual and thereafter for the education of that child. In this regard, the little girl never departs from her mother or the home; whereas, the little boy transfers into the care of his father, rabbi, teachers, the yeshiva, and the synagogue.

As discussed in this essay, upsherin has found voice almost exclusively within the Orthodox community. Other gendered lifecycle events, on the other hand, have developed analogous egalitarian rituals and are practiced across Judaism (including within Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements). Examples of these rituals include bar and bat mitzvahs, *pidyon ha-ben* and *pidyon ha-bat* (redemption of the first born), and *bris* and *bris bat* ceremonies (circumcision and baby naming ceremonies). While these egalitarian practices for girls have not gained traction in Orthodox circles, they have resonated with non-Orthodox Jews. Similarly, other historically gendered body practices (wearing yarmulkes, tzitzit, and tallisim, or laying tefillin) as well as worship practice (counting men and women for a minyan or allowing women on the *bimah* [the platform area or altar of a synagogue]), have been adapted by non-Orthodox Jews. Why, then, has upsherin remained largely ignored when other Jewish practices have been made egalitarian and adopted by non-Orthodox Jews?

There are three primary reasons why upsherin has not been reconceptualized and implemented outside of Orthodoxy. First, the ritual itself creates payot, which mark the child as religiously observant. At the same time, the child is given tzitzit and a yarmulke. For more liberal Jews, who themselves do not have payot or wear a yarmulke and tzitzit, the ritual seems decidedly Orthodox. Second, as minhag, upsherin has gradually increased in popularity among the Orthodox community. Because of this, there is no familial precedence set in non-Orthodox communities.

Unlike a circumcision or a bar/bat mitzvah, there is no external familial impetus to engage with the ritual, making it easy to ascribe solely to the Orthodox community, undergirding an “us and them” dynamic. Finally, upsherin has strong ties to religious learning, particularly to the Hebrew alef-bet. For caregivers who themselves may not read Hebrew, this ritual can seem foreign. Likewise, the ritual affirms that a child will engage with Jewish religious education. Because of this, caregivers who intend to send their children to public or non-religious schools may feel like this is an empty promise. Even if they intend for their child to attend Hebrew School and become a bar/bat mitzvah, if they are a family unlikely to send their child to a Jewish day school, this ritual may not resonate with them.

Within feminist Judaism, there are numerous examples of women reclaiming patriarchal practices in rich and meaningful ways, both for themselves and their daughters. Whether it is through the reclamation of yarmulkes, tallisim, tefillin, or tzitzit—or historically, in finding voice on the bimah, inclusion in minyanim, or the bat mitzvah—Jewish women have been innovative in their transformation of Jewish practices (Adler 1972; Alpert 1998; Elper 2003; Fishman 1995; Heschel 1987; Hyman 1995; Levitt 1997; Milligan 2014b; Plaskow 1991; Plaskow 1997; Ruttenberg 2001). Although upsherin has not taken on the same significance for feminist Jews as other practices, it has not been entirely ignored. There have been small movements among non-Orthodox Jewish women to claim upsherin—but in an interesting twist, as a ritual for their daughters. This decision is particularly striking because there has been little non-Orthodox movement to engage with upsherin for boys, begging the question, why, as a feminist Jew, would you claim the upsherin for your daughter?

The practice itself has not been formally well documented, as it remains uncommon and a very grassroots and progressive practice, happening primarily in the home and not in formal Jewish settings. The number of “clarifying” responses found online by Orthodox rabbis explaining that upsherin is only for boys (with the explanation that payot are only for men and that women get their own hair ritual upon marriage) suggests that an increasing number of individuals are at least asking about the practice for girls, even if they are not enacting the ritual. In personal interactions with women and in reviewing some women’s written reflections on this practice (Gechter 2017; Cooper 2014), there seem to be two primary motivations. First, there is a desire to mark the transition from baby to child, especially when it comes from a bodily reliance of a baby on the mother (for example, needing breast milk or soothing physical touch like rocking or cradling) to a child’s reliance on a mother for moral and cognitive development. The mothers describe that, like non-Jewish mothers, the first haircut is symbolic of this transition from infancy to childhood. However, they have opted to claim the first haircut rite of passage and infuse it with Jewishness. As women who are passionate about their own Jewish observance and engagement with Jewish life, it seems only fitting to take this developmental milestone and view it Jewishly.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, by having an upsherin for their daughters, the mothers acknowledge that this is a moment where they commit themselves to raising a Jewish daughter. This is a positive feminist statement, whereby they celebrate the Jewish female potential through affirming their

daughters' access to progressive and spiritual Jewish education. Through their daughters' upsherin, the mothers take on the responsibility for ensuring that their daughters have equal opportunities not only to grow and learn as children and Jews, but also to engage in the full spectrum of Jewish practice. For their daughters, upsherin teaches the same lessons that Orthodox boys glean—a love of learning, the importance of charity, and the embodiment of Jewishness. Moreover, it also teaches them gendered performance—that they, as female Jews, are equal, deserve respect, and can have their voices centered in public Jewish practice.

Upsherin among non-Orthodox Jews is not necessarily exclusionary of Jewish boys, but the feminist application demonstrates a deeply intimate moment between generations of Jewish women. As women who are acutely aware of the patriarchy that exists even in liberal Judaism, they are reclaiming and reinterpreting a practice to reflect their commitment to raising a daughter who will have equal opportunities afforded to her in celebration of—rather than despite—her female body. Although this is as much a political statement as a religious statement, for the mothers, it is reflective of an unwavering commitment to raising their daughters Jewishly.

Conclusion: The Potential Egalitarian Future of Upsherin

As a ritual, upsherin demonstrates the malleability of Jewish folklore and practice. From its blending of Sephardic and Ashkenazic rites of passage to its implementation in two seemingly conflicting religious contexts, upsherin embodies the potential plurality of the contemporary Jewish experience. By taking something as ordinary as a haircut and encoding it with Jewishness, upsherin is a moment of ritual sweetness. Like the literal honey in which the children dip their fingers, upsherin celebrates familial joy, the children's growth, and the hope for their future, as Jewish adults.

Although it is easy for liberal Jews to dismiss upsherin as part of patriarchal Jewish tradition, it is only because the ritual has not yet been reconceptualized in a mainstream egalitarian way. If other life cycle events like circumcisions/baby namings and bar/bat mitzvahs can achieve widespread practice, an egalitarian upsherin has potential for acceptance. Like these other events, an egalitarian upsherin focuses on the family, a critical anchor for the maintenance of childhood Jewish identity. Moreover, upsherin celebrates several central tenets of Jewishness: charity, family, community, and education. Although the gendered performance roles taught in the Orthodox practice of upsherin are unlikely to find voice within more liberal communities, the other commitments are universally shared.

As a diasporic culture, one of the hallmarks of American Jewishness has been its emphasis on both secular and Jewish education. The alef-bet school initiation ceremony could find voice in liberal Jewish contexts, especially if it is tied to a celebration of all forms of education. In this way, the ceremony is broad enough to welcome a variety of Jewish and secular practices, family structures, and differently abled children, celebrating their collective potential and future. In the same way, although liberal Jews are unlikely to create payot for their children or expect them to wear yarmulkes or tzitzit after their upsherin, the practice can be

adapted to mark the milestone of the first hair cut without engaging these other symbols or where, for example, both boys and girls are given yarmulkes.

In a world where much of our focus is external, upsherin reminds us to look inward at what values and principles guide us, especially as we decide the lessons we teach our children. Simultaneously, upsherin reinforces cultural and community connections that extend outside of the family, situating both children and their caregivers in relational contexts with others. As families and communities gather together to commemorate this moment of blossoming childhood, they celebrate the infinite promise of a child's ability to learn, recognizing her as a vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge. Upsherin reminds us of the best of our childhoods – that we are loved, that we have wonder and whimsy, and that we should embark upon the sweetness of learning with joy.

NOTES

1. I recognize that not all children have parents or a parent. Because of this, I have made the rhetorical decision to refer to the caregivers of a child, allowing for various legal and biological relationships. Later, in the discussion of Orthodoxy, I utilize the gendered terms of mother and father, reflecting the community norms of the group and ritual.

2. I use observant here to refer to Modern Orthodox, Orthodox, Hasidic, Ultra-Orthodox, and Haredi Jews. In this colloquial usage, it refers to those who would label themselves as “Torah Observant.” I recognize, though, that this label is problematic for non-Orthodox Jews who view themselves to be observant and religious, albeit in various ways and levels.

3. Throughout this essay I will refer to these groups collectively, either as Orthodox or observant Jews. When their practices diverge, I parse the group labels accordingly.

4. Religious texts offer little historic guidance for when or how payot should be groomed, leaving groups to develop various interpretations of Leviticus 19:27, which instructs “you shall not round off the side-growth of your head or destroy the side-growth of your beard.”

5. These include, but are not limited to, Deuteronomy 33:4, “Moses charged us with the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob,” the Talmudic phrase “May the Torah be my occupation and G-d my aid,” and the Shema.

6. Hair cutting is not permitted between Passover and Lag Ba'Omer, a holiday commemorating the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and the day when the central mystical text, the Zohar, is believed to have been revealed. It is also worth noting that some Orthodox Jews will refrain from hair cutting until Shavuot, extending the prohibition through for the entire Counting of the Omer.

7. Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yohai is reported to have written the Zohar, the central text of Jewish mysticism. Because of this, his tomb has particular meaning and importance to Hasidic Jews.

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