

Jewish Women's *KIPPOT*: Meanings and Motives

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Abstract Considerable literature has examined the meanings associated with gender-normative religious head covering practices such as Muslim women's *hijabs*, Jewish women's *sheitels* and headscarves, and Jewish men's *kippot*. However, very few studies have explored the meanings of Jewish women's *kippot*. This article advances Amy Milligan's ethnographic research on this matter through open-ended survey data from 576 Jewish women who wear *kippot*. Unlike Milligan's lesbian sample, this largely heterosexual sample claims to wear the *kippah* for many of the same reasons that men do: to "do Jewish," "feel Jewish," "look Jewish," and to display their status relative to other Jews. Respondents acknowledge that their *kippah* practice also signifies egalitarianism, but they emphasize that this is but one of the garment's many meanings.

Keywords Feminism · Women · Gender · *Kippah* · *Yarmulke*

Women's religious head covering practices have attracted attention from scholars across the disciplines. The first wave of this literature debated whether such practices signified women's agency or oppression, a duality which critical race feminists later criticized as colonial and overly reductionist (Mernissi 1975, 1987, 1992; Mahmood 2001; Abu-Lughod 2002; Wing and Smith 2005). In response to this criticism, the second wave of this literature has emphasized the multiplicity of meanings that women associate with their garments, taking care to center the women's voices (Mojab 1998; Dwyer 1999; Franks 2000; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Mahmood 2001; Shirazi 2001; Abu-Lughod 2002; Bartkowski and Read 2003; Predelli 2004; Wing and Smith 2005; Ruby 2006; Droogsma 2007;

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Williams and Vashi 2007; Afshar 2008; Scott 2009). Since this initial *hijab* debate, the head covering corpus has expanded to include Jewish women's practices as well (Bronner 1993; Schreiber 2003; Weiss 2009; Zalberg and Almog 2009; Seigelshifer and Hartman 2011; Fuchs 2012; Inbari 2012; Israel-Cohen 2012; Taragin-Zeller 2014). However, with two exceptions¹, this corpus has remained focused on gender-normative¹ practices, while omitting from reference the Jewish women who wear *yarmulkes* or *kippot* (singular, *kippah*): skullcaps that are traditionally worn by Jewish men (Milligan 2012, 2014). The purpose of this study is to destigmatize and demystify this seemingly radical head covering practice, by highlighting the multiplicity of meanings that Jewish women associate with their *kippot*.

The only other large-scale study on women who wear *kippot* focused on a lesbian sample, possibly reinforcing the subversive connotations of this practice (Milligan 2014). This article expands upon this limited focus by analyzing open-ended survey data from 576 international Jewish women who wear *kippot*, most of whom identify as heterosexual or something other than lesbian. Although feminism is one meaning and motivation that the women associate with their practice, this study reveals that for the most part they wear *kippot* for the same reasons that men do: in order to “do Jewish,” “feel Jewish,” and demarcate their status within the Jewish community. In other words, the majority of these women do not wish to radically revolutionize the Jewish tradition; rather, they desire greater inclusion within the tradition that already exists.

The *Kippah*'s Masculinization

Arguably the most recognizable sign of Jewish identity in the public sphere is the *kippah*; however, this garment is traditionally only worn by Jewish men. In contrast to the *kippah*, Jewish women's traditional head covering garments tend to “pass” as secular or even Christian within non-Jewish society (Milligan 2012). The practices that Jewish women assume in order to cover their heads vary widely: some ultra-Orthodox women shave their heads, some wear wigs that resemble real hair called *sheitels*, and many wear *tichels* (headscarves), hats or headbands (Fuchs 2012). The meanings that Jewish women associate with their head covering practices vary just as widely: some women cover their heads in order to signify modesty, or to demonstrate their devotion to G-d, while others acknowledge that their social status is contingent upon their adherence to the practice (Israel-Cohen 2012). Still others reject head covering altogether, considering it to be anachronistic and oppressive to women, given its symbolic meaning vis-a-vis marital status (Weiss 2009). However, regardless of the personal meanings that women associate with their head covering practices, they acknowledge that the practice also signifies their marital status and their adherence to Jewish gender norms (Milligan 2012).

¹ I use the terminology “gender-transgressive” and “gender-normative” in relation to the historical lived tradition.

The notion that *kippot* are for men and not for women may seem non-negotiable, but this *minhag* (custom) is historically recent and without Biblical referent (Grossman 2014). Head covering became popular during the Middle Ages among French and Spanish rabbis as a way to honor the sanctity of prayer and Torah study; thereafter, Jewish men who wanted to convey a heightened status of piety covered their heads constantly, as a reminder of their commitment to Judaism. So long as hats remained fashionable, this Jewish custom of head covering remained inconspicuous; however, where and when hats fell out of fashion, head covering rendered the persecuted Jewish minority dangerously hypervisible (Grossman 2014).

In context of this history, the *kippah* has recently experienced a few revivals as a symbol of resilience and Jewish pride. During the 1960s in the United States, the *kippah* became a popular way for Jewish men to mark their ethnic difference (Gans 1979; Grossman 2014). A decade later the *kippah sruga*, or crocheted *kippah*, experienced a revival in Israel following the Yom Kippur War (1973). At the same time, some American Jewish women began to wear *kippot*, following the ordination of the first female rabbis (Gans 1979; Grossman 2014).

This history of the *kippah* is well documented, but few scholars have explored what the garment means in practice. One major exception is an ethnographic study on an Orthodox Jewish community in Los Angeles by sociologist Tavory (2010). Tavory found that the *kippah* served as a recognizable symbol of the person's Jewish identity, rendering the wearer hypervisible to Jews and non-Jews alike. In effect, those who wore *kippot* became simultaneously more vulnerable to antisemitism, and more accountable to Jewish law because their actions reflected upon the whole Jewish people. Additionally, the *kippah* transformed the individual into a type of authority figure; Tavory noted that coreligionists frequently approached *kippah*-wearers with questions about Jewish law.

The other three ethnographic studies about *kippot* were all produced by Milligan (2012, 2013, 2014). In her dissertation on women's head covering practices within an Orthodox Jewish synagogue, Milligan (2012) devoted an entire chapter to analyzing the experiences of six women who wore *kippot*, acknowledging that none of them identified as Orthodox, so much as "traditional" or Conservative. Milligan observed that although head covering and hair covering practices share many of the same meanings, when women choose to cover their heads with *kippot* they send a particularly egalitarian message about women's roles in Judaism. Unfortunately, Milligan's small sample size problematizes her ability to draw conclusions about women's *kippah* movement on a larger scale. Milligan followed this study with two that focus explicitly on the *kippah* (2013, 2014), but her exclusive sampling from gay and lesbian communities once again limits the generalizability of her findings. Ultimately, she concludes that lesbian women's appropriation of the garment is uniquely subversive due to the garment's masculinization and women's subordinate status within patriarchy. Though compelling, Milligan's queer focus potentially obscures the relatively mundane experiences of other women who wear *kippot*, such as American Conservative Jewish women who are encouraged to wear *kippot* whenever men are obligated to do so; presumably not all women wear *kippot* out of subversive conviction.

Methods

In order to illuminate the range of meanings that Jewish women associate with their *kippot*, I constructed a survey with open-ended questions about the garment's symbolic and practical meanings. I selected survey methods instead of interview methods for this project because I wanted to involve as many voices and perspectives as possible; I included open text boxes for each of the 38 survey items so respondents could clarify their answers in as much detail as they desired. I could not employ ethnographic methods for this project because the population of interest is geographically dispersed; women who wear *kippot* do not convene together in one place, not even in cyberspace. Finally, I made the decision to make the survey anonymous so that women in prominent positions within the Jewish community would not feel compromised.

My positionality is inseparable from this project's methods and results. I am an "outsider" as a Jewish woman who does not wear a *kippah*, but I am also an "insider" in significant ways (Chadderton 2012). Not only am I a Jewish woman, but I have been actively involved in numerous progressive Jewish communities, participate in their listservs, and earned my Master's Degree at a Jewish seminary where many female Conservative rabbis receive ordination. During my time at the seminary I observed that it was normative for female rabbinical students to wear *kippot*, which struck me as curious given that this practice had been extremely rare in my childhood Reform Temple and even in Jewish Renewal communities in which I have participated. Uncertain whether I could access enough Jewish women who wear *kippot* to complete this project, I began by sending out the following advertisement through prominent listservs associated with Conservative and Renewal Jewish communities:

Are you a woman who wears a *kippah/yarmulke*? Email me with the subject line "*kippah*" to participate in the first ever large-scale survey into the meanings associated with this symbol, as reported by the women who wear it. And please help spread the word!

Within two months, I received approximately 400 excited responses. It was evident that women who wear *kippot* were eager to explain the meanings associated with their practice. Numerous respondents emailed me lengthy personal histories about their practice when replying to my advertisement. Several also requested that I share the results with them, since they knew so few other women who wear *kippot*. Yet another contingent expressed their desire to support me on the basis of my email signature, which references my status as an alumna of the seminary; this credential evidently legitimated me as a sympathetic and qualified researcher, an "insider."

I also received emails from people who wanted to verify whether they qualified, either due to my vague use of the word "woman" or my equally vague phrase "wear a *kippah/yarmulke*." Did I mean cisgender women only? What if they only wear a *yarmulke* in synagogue? In order to address these uncertainties, I sent a clarifying automated response to all who replied to my advertisement:

Thank you for volunteering to take my survey about the meanings associated with the *kippah*, according to women who wear it. I purposefully leave undefined the terms “*kippah*” and “woman” because I want to validate individuals’ rights to self-identify. If someone identifies as a woman who wears a *kippah* even if it is only at synagogue, I want to include them.

I was wary of using the term “self-identified woman” in my original advertisement, lest I inadvertently exclude those with ambivalent relationships with the word “woman”; based on Milligan’s research, I anticipated that many of my respondents might identify as LGBTQ or otherwise take issue with the “woman” category. Letting respondents decide whether the prompt pertained to them seemed like the best route towards radical inclusivity. I considered specifying that I wanted respondents who wear the *kippah* in the public sphere, but ultimately I decided that if women were sufficiently self-conscious of their *kippah* practice to identify with my advertisement, I needed to include them within my survey. I correctly assumed that my initial use of the joint *kippah/yarmulke* clarified my topic of interest; only 16 out of 576 survey respondents indicated that they do not wear *yarmulkes* and yet identify as wearing *kippot*.

In addition to several survey questions that asked about the respondents’ level of Jewish education, political leanings, and gender/sexuality, I included an open question asking, “What does your *kippah* practice mean to you, in your own words?” This open-ended question generated lengthy responses from 513 respondents, warranting an article unto itself. It is the purpose of this article to present the main themes and discourses that emerged within the open responses to this survey item, in order to identify the main meanings and motivations women report in association with their *kippah* practices.

My two research assistants and I read through a convenience sample of the first 100 comments and discussed the main meanings and motives that we saw emerging from the data, informed by the basic tenets of grounded theory (Glaser 1978; Strauss and Corbin 1994). Based on this initial round of open reading, we devised a coding schema which we tested on a convenience sample of 20 comments, adjusting as needed on the next round of test comments, which we then adjusted again. We continued this process until we secured intercoder reliability. Ultimately, the coding schema that best accounted for the main meanings and motives includes “doing Jewish,” “feeling Jewish,” “looking Jewish,” “status marker,” and “(un)doing gender.”

Results

In the results section that follows I present descriptive demographic statistics about this sample, though these statistics are not generalizable to the global population of women who wear *kippot* due to my snowball sampling method. In addition, respondents were allowed to skip any questions they were not comfortable answering; as a result, the statistical breakdown of each survey item refers to the total number that answered that question, as opposed to the survey sample as a whole.

Demographics

After removing 47 respondents who were either under 18 or answered “no” to the question “are you a woman who wears a *kippah*,” this survey included 576 respondents. The minimum age is 18 and the maximum age is 82, with an average age of 50.4 (median = 53, mode = 58). As Table 1 shows, the majority of respondents identify as White/Caucasian (71%). The remaining 29% either specified a different race, selected one of the Jewish ethnic identifiers without selecting race, or selected “other.” Respondents selected “other” in order to clarify that they converted into Judaism, had one Ashkenazic parent and one Sephardic parent, or otherwise felt ambivalent about identifying as White because they perceive Jewishness as inherently nonwhite. Future research should examine this ambivalence among Jews with regards to selecting the “White” category on surveys and perhaps examine differences among Jews based on Ashkenazic and Sephardic ethnicity.

Certain demographic questions reveal clear trends among the respondents. For example, the vast majority is from the United States (94%), but have visited Israel (87%) and nearly half have even lived there (46%). The majority (82%) share similar politics, identifying as Democrats (92%), feminists (89%), and LGBTQ allies (87%) who have participated in a protest before (82%). The most common religious denomination is Conservative (61%), followed by Reform (20%), then Reconstructionist (11%), Renewal (7%), and lastly Orthodox (1%); however, a slight majority (57%) clarify that they were raised in a different denomination than that with which they currently identify or that they converted into Judaism (Table 2). Most significantly, only 13% of my respondents identify as lesbian; the majority report that they are attracted exclusively (63%) or usually (11%) to men.

Contrary to my expectation, only a minority of the respondents identify as “professional Jews,” which I defined as rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators, or individuals studying to assume those positions (Table 3). Approximately 30% of respondents are rabbis, 10% are Jewish educators, and 6% are cantors; in contrast, 54% of the respondents work in occupations other than Jewish leadership or serve in multiple positions listed, such as rabbi and Jewish educator. This is important to note due to the mistaken assumption that all Jewish women who wear *kippot* are

Table 1 Race/ethnicity of respondents

Race/ethnicity (select all that apply)	(f)*	%
White/Caucasian	405	70.68
Ashkenazic	401	69.98
Sephardic	21	3.66
Other (please specify)	1	3.14
Hispanic or Latino	8	1.40
Black or African American	4	0.70
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2	0.35
Asian or Pacific Islander	0	0.00
Total respondents	573	

* Frequency

Table 2 Denomination of respondents

What is your denominational affiliation?	(f)*	%
Conservative	303	60.60
Reform	101	20.20
Reconstructionist	53	10.60
Renewal	37	7.40
Orthodox	6	1.20
Total	500	100

* Frequency

Table 3 Occupation of respondents

What is your occupation?	(f)*	%
Other (please specify)	312	54.45
Rabbi/rabbinical student	170	29.67
Jewish educator	58	10.12
Cantor/cantorial student	33	5.76
Total	573	100

* Frequency

rabbis or otherwise dressed in professional uniform. Some respondents work in other occupations related to Jewish leadership, including *rebbetzins* (rabbi's wives), lay leaders, chaplains, synagogue administrators, sisterhood coordinators, and *mikveh* coordinators; however, beyond these Jewish professionals, respondents also work in a diverse range of occupations. Many are engaged in the educational system as students, teachers, school counselors, professors, or librarians. Some work in the visual and performing arts, including writers, singers, actors, musicians, and painters. Several are CEOs, economists, scientists, web page developers, data analysts, or lawyers. Others are social workers, speech therapists, special education professionals, psychotherapists, masseuses, veterinarians, or nurses. Finally, some work for non-profits, volunteer, or are stay at home moms. This wide range of occupations situates women who wear *kippot* within the public sphere as well as the private sphere in their daily lives.

In response to my question about their highest level of formal Jewish education, very few terminated their formal Jewish education upon becoming a Bat Mitzvah (rite of passage at age 12, sometimes delayed to 13 to correspond to the boys' Bar Mitzvah) or upon Confirmation (rite of passage that usually comes after the Bat Mitzvah). Similarly, very few respondents terminated their formal Jewish education at the undergraduate college level (8%); rather, 16% pursued adult education at a synagogue or temple and 24% took graduate college courses in subjects relating to Jewish studies. Nearly half (44%) of the respondents selected "other" in response to this question (Table 4). They either became adult B'nei Mitzvah, earned Master's Degrees in something tangentially related to Jewish studies, or attained rabbinical ordination.

Regarding role models, the majority (69%) of respondents' fathers wore *kippot* during the respondents' childhood (Table 5). Some cited other family members who wore *kippot*, including older brothers (18%), mothers (13%), and older sisters (3%).

Table 4 Jewish education of respondents

What is your highest level of formal Jewish education?	(f)*	%
Other (please specify)	252	43.90
Graduate college courses	137	23.87
Adult education at shul [Comment: Should shul be defined?]	89	15.51
Undergraduate college courses	44	7.67
Bat Mitzvah	23	4.01
Confirmation	23	4.01
None	6	1.05
Total	574	100

* Frequency

Table 5 Role models of respondents

Did any of the following wear a <i>kippah</i> during your childhood (select all that apply)	(f)*	%
Father	277	68.73
Other (please specify)	180	44.67
Older brother	74	18.36
Female leader	72	17.87
Mother	51	12.66
Older sister	11	2.73
Total respondents	403	

* Frequency

Some (18%) also grew up with female leaders who wore *kippot*. Nearly half (45%) of the respondents who answered this question selected “other,” specifying great-grandfathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, younger brothers, stepfathers, or even female childhood peers as their childhood influences regarding the *kippah*. Others explain that they converted into Judaism or grew up Reform and therefore had no role models during their childhood who wore *kippot*. Due to the low percentage of respondents with mothers who wore *kippot* (13%), future studies might examine the possibility of an intergenerational factor related to women’s *kippah* use.

Only a minority of survey respondents (23%) wear a *kippah* on a daily basis, whereas nearly half (44%) restrict their *kippah* practice to synagogue (Table 6). Some further clarify that they wear a *kippah* on the Sabbath (Shabbat) (29%). Ninety-seven respondents (17%) only wear a *kippah* while at work and 11% wear it “occasionally.” Nearly half (43%) of the respondents selected “other,” while clarifying the frequency of their practice in their own words. Of these respondents, some clarified that “daily” means the same as “at work.” Others clarify that they wear the *kippah* in any Jewish setting or during any activity that feels Jewish, beyond the space and time constraints of synagogue and Shabbat. Some explain that they only wear the *kippah* when they are leading a prayer, which means they do not

Table 6 Frequency of *Kippah* use of respondents

How often do you wear your <i>kippah</i> ? (select all that apply)	(f)	%
Only in synagogue	253	44.00
Other (please specify)	249	43.30
On Shabbat	168	29.22
Daily	133	23.13
At work	97	16.87
Occasionally	63	10.96
Total respondents	575	

* Frequency

necessarily wear it the entire time they are in a synagogue. Others say that they wear their *kippah* whenever they want to look Jewish or when they are “doing Jewish.” In the sections that follow, I further discuss the meanings of “doing Jewish” and “looking Jewish” along with the other dominant categories of meaning that emerged in these open text boxes.²

Doing Jewish

Just as sociologists West and Zimmerman (1987) proposed that individuals “do gender” and Avishai (2008) proposed that people “do religion,” my respondents understand the *kippah* as a way that they “do Jewish”; in fact, one respondent explicitly stated, “I wear my *kippah* when I’m ‘doing Jewish.’” Variant examples of this rhetoric include “doing something ‘Godly,’” “doing something in a Jewish context,” “in a ‘Jewish place,’” and when they need a measure of “accountability to act Jewish.” When respondents provide definitions of “doing Jewish,” they cite acts such as studying Jewish texts, leading a service, providing spiritual counsel, leading or participating in seders, and saying blessings, or *brachot* (pl.). All of these ways of “doing Jewish” resonate with how Tavori’s male respondents understood the concept. In both of these cases, “doing Jewish” is motivated by a sense of obligation, associated with key words including *commandment*, *respect*, *custom*, *tradition*, and *should*, as in, “I feel my closest connection to God when I am in synagogue and believe my head should be covered.”

However, not all respondents cite obligation as the primary motivation for wearing the *kippah*; rather, it appears as though the *kippah* also serves a practical function as a garment that delineates boundaries between the sacred and the mundane. Some wear the *kippah* to separate religious moments from others; they intentionally restrict their *kippah* use so it will not lose its spiritual utility. As one respondent said, “One reason I wear a *kippah* is to remind myself that I am constantly meeting the image of God in my fellow humans. However, I’ve gotten so accustomed to wearing a *kippah* that this doesn’t work as intended very often.”

² There were no significant differences among respondents based on denomination, occupation, sexuality, or frequency of *kippah* use.

Others wear the *kippah* on an as-needed basis, to demarcate when a moment transforms from mundane to sacred: for example, one respondent put on her *kippah* in the middle of a conversation in a grocery store when it “became apparent that the conversation was deep and turning into something that (she) considered extraordinary.” In the words of another respondent, “I started this survey without a *kippah*, but now that I’m thinking and writing about Judaism, the top of my head is itching for me to put one on.”

In order to facilitate this transformation of the mundane into the sacred, some respondents have begun to wear their *kippot* full-time:

Maybe 10 or 12 years ago, I decided to start wearing a *kippah* all the time. I don’t go around saying *brachot* [plural of *bracha*, blessing] all the time, but if there’s something for which I want to say a *bracha*, I just go ahead and say it without wondering whether I should find a head covering to put on. In that sense I find the practice liberating; I guess I’m normalizing the practice for myself.

By wearing the *kippah* constantly, such respondents feel empowered to “do Jewish” more spontaneously and more often. A similar motivation was noted by Tavory’s male *kippah* wearers. The implications of this finding for egalitarianism are worth mentioning; if men are encouraged to wear the *kippah* full-time and women are not, men can spontaneously engage in these acts that they consider “doing Jewish” more frequently. By appropriating the masculinized custom of wearing the *kippah* full-time, Jewish women claim their right to “do Jewish” in this way.

Feeling Jewish

Due to a preponderance of feeling rhetoric among the responses, my team decided that a subset of “doing Jewish” should be called “feeling Jewish.” “Feeling Jewish” accounts for responses that extend beyond obligation and tradition to inwardly generated motivational factors. Key words associated with “feeling Jewish” include *feeling*, *connection*, *solidarity*, *separation*, *holiness*, *sense*, *spirituality*, and *relationship*. Both Tavory’s and Milligan’s respondents who engaged in gender-normative head covering practices reported similar desires for connection with Judaism and the Jewish people.

The *kippah* provides these respondents with a comforting sense of being connected to something bigger than themselves. Several women described this comfort with relation to a parent’s affectionate touch:

Sometimes, the comfortable weight of my *kippah* makes me think of a hand on my head—a blessing of sorts. I’m very aware of what I do and say when I’m wearing it, which is, I think, part of the ultimate appeal—by wearing it, I hold myself to a high standard. Yet there’s no feeling of judgment. That hand-on-my-head feeling is one of love and support and compassion, a parent’s hand on a child’s head, guiding certainly, yet always loving.

According to another respondent, this comforting sensation “enhances (their) prayerful mood.” Some respondents describe this sensation as “mindfulness”; as one

respondent explains, “I feel grounded when I wear it, and it’s an internal/external cue to practice mindfulness about my behavior and speech towards myself and others.” This feeling of connection also helps some people when they are engaged in formalized acts of “doing Jewish”: another respondent explains, “My *kippah* makes me feel enveloped in the practice and study of Judaism as well as protected from outside distractions as I pray.” Other respondents emphasize that this desire for connection has little to do with the action at hand, but rather the circumstances of the moment: “If I [am] going through a hard time and need God to be with me I put it on.”

This sense of connection that the *kippah* provides is sometimes to God, but oftentimes it is to the transnational Jewish people. Here mindfulness rhetoric emerges once again, as in “it’s a way of being mindful of being Jewish.” Some describe a feeling of connection to community while praying with a *kippah*; others feel more connected to an ahistorical sense of Jewish peoplehood: “Wearing a *kippah* and *tallit* [a fringed garment with special twined and knotted fringes known as *tzizit* attached to its four corners, traditionally worn by Jewish males; plural, *tallitot*] allow me to make my Judaism more intentional and connected to a communal past, present, and future.” Therefore, the *kippah* simultaneously serves to make the wearer feel separated and connected—separated from non-Jews and connected to Judaism.

Looking Jewish

In addition to these internalized meanings, *kippot* also make the wearer “look Jewish,” for better or for worse. Key words related to this category include *represent*, *look*, *see*, *visible*, and *stare*. Respondents associate this visibility with a range of meanings, including: Jewish pride; a duty to represent Judaism; a conversation-starter; vulnerability towards antisemitism; and accountability to act in accordance with Jewish law. All of these meanings and motivations reflect Tavory’s findings, but they deviate somewhat from Milligan’s findings about Orthodox Jewish women who use *tichels* (Yiddish term for head covering used by many married Orthodox women); whereas the *kippah* functions as a recognizable signifier of Jewish identity, the *tichel* is less recognizably Jewish to non-Jewish neighbors. These findings suggest that if a Jewish woman wants to mark herself as unmistakably Jewish in the public sphere, the *kippah* is the best option; indeed, “the headscarf debate” only truly began when France banned “ostentatious” religious symbols from the public sphere, specifically targeting *hijabs*, *kippot*, and crucifixes (Elver 2012). Significantly, the courts did not include Jewish women’s traditional head covering garments among the list of banned symbols, presumably because they are not as recognizably Jewish.

My respondents agree that the *kippah* carries the unique potential of transforming the wearer into a representative of the Jewish people, enabling them to conspicuously display their difference. In this way the *kippah* functions as a symbol of their ethnicity and religion (Gans 1979). Some take extreme pride in this role, expressing such sentiments as, “It is my way to openly state ‘I LOVE BEING JEWISH!’” and “Wearing a *kippah* on a daily basis is my way of being an out and

proud Jew in the largely non-Jewish society around me.” Others report a sense of duty or obligation to represent the Jewish people by wearing the *kippah*, such as one respondent who explains that she is “helping the community here in helping make religious Jews a more normal sight.” Regardless of whether the individual expresses pride or a sense of obligation, there is a general consensus among all of these respondents that the *kippah* functions as a salient marker of their Jewish identity, one that is easily recognizable by non-Jews and Jews alike.

Not all respondents frame this hypervisibility so positively. Some indicate that the *kippah* can be a burden, reporting, “I do not wear it in secular settings because I want to be able to run my errands without having to explain about it.” Others frame this attention as irritating: “If I forget to take it off before going into Loblaw’s, lots of people who aren’t Jewish come up to me and tell me all sorts of crazy things, mostly about Jesus.” This visibility makes some respondents nervous: as one respondent explains, “I would actually like to wear it all the time but I don’t feel comfortable doing that. I’m not quite sure why. Maybe because I don’t want to risk hearing negative comments or having people stare at me.” At the most extreme, this type of unwanted attention manifests as antisemitism, as in: “I may not have been harassed by coreligionists, but I can recall at least two times having antisemitic comments made from passing cars because I had on a *kippah*.” Due to this looming threat of antisemitism, some respondents do not wear their *kippah* outside of Jewish spaces, even though they would like to: “I’ve toyed with the idea of wearing one all the time but feel it may be dangerous to me and my family which saddens me.” When they wish to “pass” as non-Jewish they either remove the *kippah* or wear a hat over it.

Displaying Status

Some respondents specify that the *kippah* not only marks them as Jewish, but as a “serious” Jew, implying that they wear the *kippah* for the Jewish gaze in addition to the non-Jewish gaze. These references reflect Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction (1984), wherein individuals conspicuously display their status in order to maintain their position in a social hierarchy. For these respondents it seems to be important that fellow Jews recognize their status as a “serious” or a “religious” Jew. For example, some respondents adopted their *kippah* practice as a way to mark a rite of passage in their Jewish journeys, such as B’nei Mitzvah or conversions; according to such respondents, these rituals legitimated them in some way: “Once I had my Adult Bat Mitzvah, I felt it was my responsibility to wear a *kippah* in synagogue. It makes me feel like a ‘real’ Jewish adult.” Another group of respondents wear their *kippot* to commemorate rites of passage that have nothing to do with Jewish status, but rather an existential transformation, such as the death of a loved one or a near-death experience of their own. Sometimes the *kippah* is a requisite garment in order for the woman to properly mourn: “I started wearing *tallit* and *kippah* at daily *minyán* and on Shabbat when I was saying *Kaddish* (mourner’s traditional prayer) for my father.” Then there are some who began to wear a *kippah* when they experienced a feminist epiphany and wanted to signify their equality to men.

Most respondents who describe their *kippot* as a status marker consider it to be part of their uniform as “professional Jews,” whether they work as rabbis, cantors, counselors, or educators. Indeed, many of these women report that the *kippah* helps them to signify their authority as female leaders within a historically patriarchal religious tradition. Wearing the *kippah* during work hours also helps them to transition into their work mode and mark themselves as “on-duty” to fellow Jews. As one respondent explains, “Putting on my *kippah* started to become another part of my pre-service ritual, like putting on lip gloss and my *tallit*, and double-checking that I had my sermon ready to go. It helped me get in the zone and be the best rabbi I could be.”

(Un)doing Gender

In addition to “doing Jewish,” “feeling Jewish,” “looking Jewish,” and “displaying status,” “(un)doing gender” emerged as a dominant category of meaning/motivation associated with women’s *kippot*: respondents made frequent allusions to gender by using words such as *men*, *marriage*, *women*, *egalitarianism*, *equality*, *gender*, and *daughter*. I call this last category “(un)doing gender” in order to capture the range of gendered interpretations that respondents associate with their practice; while some individuals corroborate Milligan’s (2014) findings by discussing their desire to undo gender difference, others interpret the *kippah* as a garment through which they “do femininity.”

I was surprised to find that many respondents justify their *kippah* practice with reference to marriage. For example, some began their head covering practice upon marriage, as another way to fulfill the marital rite of passage: “I started to wear a *kippah* when I got married as my own, more egalitarian way of covering my head.” When Seigelshifer and Hartman (2011) interviewed modern Orthodox Jewish women about their head covering practices, they found a similar finding: many women used alternative head covering options such as headbands to negotiate their status as modern and observant married Jewish women. Other women wear the *kippah* in order to negotiate their desire to cover their heads despite their single status; some of these respondents are queer Jews who never intend to marry.

Regardless of their reason for wearing the *kippah*, most respondents acknowledge the *kippah*’s masculinization and its implications of subversion; however, they do so with varying degrees of ambivalence. Some women reject this association, insisting, “I don’t want to be a man. I don’t have anything to prove.” Such women oftentimes prefer *kippot* that are designed specifically for women. These feminized garments are beaded, made of wire or lace, embroidered, embedded with crystals and other jewels, or vibrantly colored. However, most women in this sample prefer crocheted *kippot* (70%) to wire *kippot*, either for comfort or aesthetic reasons (Table 7). Yet regardless of the woman’s preferred *kippah* style, slightly more than half enjoy the fashionable aspect of *kippot*, often matching them to their outfits (59%). As one respondent explains, “Sometimes it is a fashion statement, as when I have fun matching my many *kippot* to a special occasion outfit. I enjoy the comments and questions from others about my beautiful *kippot*.” Scholars have explored the fashion culture that other religious garments have generated, such as *hijabs* and

Table 7 *Kippah* as fashion

Kippah as fashion (select all that apply)	(f)*	%
I wear crocheted <i>kippot</i>	406	70.49
I own more than 5 <i>kippot</i>	405	70.31
I match my <i>kippah</i> to my outfit	342	59.38
Other (please specify)	161	27.95
I own 1–5 <i>kippot</i>	160	27.78
I wear beaded/wire <i>kippot</i>	126	21.88
I make <i>kippot</i>	117	20.31
I wear buchari-style <i>kippot</i>	107	18.58
I own <i>kippot</i> that were worn by my father or grandfather	54	9.38
Total respondents	576	

* Frequency

sheitels, but similar research has not been produced on women's *kippot* and *tallitot*; future studies might explore these fashion cultures more fully.

Regardless of how “feminine” the wearer might consider her *kippah* to be, the *kippah* remains controversial when worn by women. All of my respondents seem aware that their practice will inevitably upset some coreligionists, though their reactions to this reception vary. As one respondent explains:

Because I recognize that it is understood different when it is a woman wearing a *kippah*, I try to be judicious in choosing when I wear it. I want it to open up conversations rather than close them... It's people who judge me and don't even engage with me who I'm concerned about, that lead me to only wear my *kippah* in particular contexts.

Indeed, many women within my sample explain that they remove their *kippot* when entering non-egalitarian Jewish cultural spaces, such as Orthodox synagogues and the state of Israel. Yet some remain frustrated by the garment's gendering and contingent politicization, insisting, “I am simply a JEWISH PERSON wearing a *kippah*, and don't like to be seen as a ‘woman’ wearing a *kippah*... if that makes sense?” Furthermore, not all respondents are willing to accommodate non-egalitarian *minhags* by removing their *kippot*; these respondents fully embrace the gendered and politicized meanings of their practice: “It is my statement of female equality within our male dominated, non-egalitarian framework.” This finding resonates with Milligan's findings about lesbian women's *kippot*, although these women are not intending to signify lesbianism so much as feminism.

Regardless of whether the respondents frame their practices as gender-neutral or politically transgressive, they convey a longing for the practice to become more normative among women, a shift that would presumably decrease the stigma with which they regularly contend. Some of these respondents work as educators who feel a need to model the behavior for all genders in their classrooms. Others assumed the practice after birthing daughters, or upon their daughter's Bat Mitzvah, out of a desire to be a good role model for their daughter. Another contingent hopes

that if they wear the *kippah* in synagogue more women will consider adopting the practice as well: “When I wear my *kippah* at synagogue, I always hope that I will inspire other females (adults or children) to also wear one, but it hasn’t happened. 99.9% of the time I’m the only female wearing a *kippah* at my synagogue.” This role modeling seems to have made an impression upon the women themselves, as several women attribute their own practice to previous exposure to other women who wore *kippot*, including grandmothers, friends, or women within their synagogues. Milligan similarly noted that her lesbian respondents wore *kippot* to model pride for other lesbians; evidently, beyond the LGBTQ community women wear *kippot* to model egalitarianism for all women.

Conclusion

I collected these data in an effort to demystify and destigmatize a seemingly radical practice, given that women’s *kippot* have become increasingly common within certain Jewish cultural fields in the United States. However, there is still much more work to be done along this same line of research. Future studies might circumvent the limitations of my snowball sampling method by conducting interviews with women who wear *kippot*. It would also be helpful to understand the reasons why more women do not wear *kippot*, even when their congregations encourage them to do so. Additionally, researchers might explore the similarities and differences between women’s experiences wearing *kippot*, *tallitot*, and *tefillin* (phylacteries with inscribed Torah verses, typically worn by observant male Jews during weekday morning prayers). Finally, I recognize that the meanings of these garments are not necessarily the same for practitioners of different nationalities, races, ethnicities, sexualities, and gender identities; hopefully, future scholars will build upon this foundational survey data in order to further clarify how women experience these practices on the forefront of egalitarianism.

This study advanced research into the meanings associated with Jewish women’s *kippot* through survey data from 576 women who wear them. The findings suggest that women do not necessarily wear *kippot* in order to make a statement about gender equality; rather, they wear *kippot* for the same reasons that men do – in order to “do Jewish,” “feel Jewish,” “look Jewish,” and to signify status. Regardless, the practice inevitably becomes a statement about gender equality when they interact with coreligionists because it contravenes tradition. This inevitable meaning is frustrating to those who also derive religious and spiritual benefit from their practice. They do not wear *kippot* in order to protest Judaism or radically change it; rather, they wear *kippot* in order to participate more fully in aspects of the religion from which they have been historically “exempt.” As one respondent concisely explains, “Equal opportunity means equal obligation.”

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