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\$4.50 beyond the greater New

HOME FRONT/Daniel J. Wakin

From Top of the Head to the Bottom Line

SOME industries are more recession-resistant than others. Include wig-making among them: vanity, and the hair-loss effects of chemotherapy, are powerful buying incentives.

But not all recession-proof businesses also have God on their side.

More precisely in the case of wigmakers, it is the belief of Orthodox Jewish women that God requires them to conceal their own hair for reasons of modesty upon marriage.

The economic effects of religious law, however, are not foolproof. The wig business fell into turmoil last month when several leading rabbis in Israel and in Brooklyn, where there are large numbers of Orthodox Jews, ruled that wigs made from Indian hair were to be forbidden.

Such hair, the rabbis said, is connected to Hindu temple activities and thus tainted by idolatry, which is a violation of Jewish principles. Much of India's hair exports come from the Tirupati temple, the country's most popular shrine, where pilgrims cut their hair as part of a ritual visit.

Many small Orthodox wigmakers were said to be in financial difficulty.

But several high-end wigmakers, like Raffaele Mollica and the operators of the Joseph Fleischer Company in Manhattan, jumped forward to declare that their wigs were the good stuff — pure European.

Joseph Fleischer reported an increase in business, selling about 25 wigs a week instead of 20. "I have people just walking in and saying, 'Do you sell synthetic wigs?'" Carolyn Scott, the president of Joseph Fleischer, said. But sales are all by appointment, and the prices are high, up to \$5,000 for wigs made from European hair.

"When I tell them the price, they want to have a minor coronary," Ms. Scott said. But even in hard economic times, people pay. "To a woman, there is nothing more important than her hair," Ms. Scott said.

Mr. Mollica reported no boon from the rabbinical rulings.

"It's normal business," said Mr. Mollica, whose wigs are known as "Ralphs." Mr. Mollica has a workshop in Long Island City, Queens, and a retail outlet in Manhattan. Some 40 percent of his customers are Orthodox Jewish women, he said, and they mostly request European hair.

A specially made wig, fitted to a person



Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

Raffaele Mollica adjusting the wig of an Orthodox Jewish bride in his shop of the Upper East Side. Rabbinical rulings recently cast doubt on wigs made of hair from India.

and made from high-quality human hair, costs \$3,000 to \$7,000, Mr. Mollica said. The price of the raw European hair for him is \$30 to \$100 an ounce, depending on the length and texture. Unrefined Indian hair goes for roughly \$100 a pound, Mr. Mollica said.

Chinese hair is even cheaper, \$60 a pound. It is often refined into hair extensions for African-Americans, a trade that Mr. Mollica called a "gigantic market."

Mr. Mollica said he weeded out the broken strands of hair in preparing it for use. Five ounces of what appears to be a 16-inch length of hair may yield 1 ounce of uniformly 16-inch strands, he said.

He said he did a half-million dollars in business last year, and has a staff of four or five, including a hairdresser, seamstress and weavers. He produces two or three wigs a week. Joseph Fleischer employs 30 people, and takes in well over \$1 million a year, Ms. Scott said.

The wait for a wig can be a month or more, although the makers cut the time considerably for chemotherapy patients.

Mr. Mollica's customers choose the hair they want and come back for a first cutting once the basic wig is prepared, and then

styling. First-timers learn how to pin the wig to their head, how to wash it and how to brush it out.

For all human hair wigs, "ventilators" — often dexterous South American women — often double knot each strand of hair to the base. "They must have tiny fingers and loads of patience," Ms. Scott said.

Like other wigmakers, Mr. Mollica also provides side curls for Orthodox men with alopecia. He attaches the hair pieces to a skullcap. The difficulty of the condition becomes more acute when hair growth — like the side curls and beards — are called for by religious custom. Fleischer has even produced beards of hairless Orthodox men. Joseph Fleischer, which sells about a third of its wigs to Orthodox women, will even use a customer's own hair to make a wig.

For Ms. Scott, it is a business fraught with emotions. There is the satisfaction of helping cancer sufferers, particularly children. But painful scenes also play out in her Midtown shop, like the fitting for an Orthodox mother and daughter who is to be wed.

"The girl is crying, doesn't want it cut, the mother's saying you have to have it cut," she said. "We've gone through it all here."

This column about the local economy appears every other week. E-mail address: homefront@nytimes.com