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# CLAIMING THEIR INHERITANCE:

## The Emergence of Religious Activism Among Israeli Women

Susan Lynn Oren

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
1992

Referee: Dr. Michael A. Meyer

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# DIGEST

This thesis examines the emerging modes of religious activism among Israeli Jewish women. Although women's status within Israeli society has been closely studied during this century, the focus has typically been on the role of women in secular Israeli spheres, giving scant attention to religious life. For the most part, the meagre materials on women in the religious sector have emphasized the burdens that the country's Orthodox religious establishment imposes due to strict rabbinical interpretations of *halakhah* (Jewish law). These works are predominantly written by and from the viewpoint of secular feminist Israelis.

The emergence of religious activism among observant Israei women since the early 1970s warrants the consideration of the expanding roles of women within Judaism in Israel. During the past two decades, religious Israeli women have created opportunities for women to assume more active roles in Jewish life (in single-sex and mixed settings). This thesis studies women's increasing involvement in three areas of Jewish life which men have traditionally dominated: *talmud torah* (the study of sacred Jewish texts), regular public worship and rabbinical leadership. In each of these realms, activism among Israeli women reached new levels of intensity and captured the attention of Israel's populace during the second half of the 1980s.

The structure of this thesis is as follows:

As an introduction to the status of women in the secular and religous sectors of Israeli society, this thesis opens with a survey of women's roles in the Yishuv, in the defense forces of Eretz Yisrael in this century and in halakhic laws that govern personal status in Israel. Examinations of women's efforts as

leaders and participants in the study of Jewish texts, in public prayer and as rabbis are then presented, each effort within its Israeli context. In conclusion, these three manifestations of religious activism among Israeli women are analyzed in relation to one another and the possibility of an ultimate emergence of a religious activist movement among Israeli women.

# INTRODUCTION:

## ISSUES OF WOMEN'S STATUS WITHIN JUDAISM AND WITHIN SECULAR ISRAELI SOCIETY

The role of women in Jewish society in Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) from the time of the Yishuv to the present has been examined extensively. Interest in this area stems from the egalitarian ideology inherent in Zionist and socialist rhetoric and the guarantee of equality explicit in Israel's Declaration of Independence. One aim of research which has explored the status of women in Israeli society has been to test the realities against the utopian goals of its founders.

The literature available on sexual equality in Eretz Yisrael tends to focus on women's status in particular sectors of society, especially the kibbutz, the professional and economic sphere, and the military. There is a conspicuous absence of publications examining the role of women in religion in the Jewish state. Books and articles that survey the general status of women in Israeli society typically neglect or give scant attention to the place of women in the religious realm. When information on the relationship between women and Judaism is provided, it is often with respect to women seeking relief from the

burdens which the religious establishment and, by extension, Judaism itself places upon them. Treatment of this material has primarily focused on rigid rabbinical interpretations of religious law on issues of *aginut* (anchored or deserted wives), *chalitzah* (release from the obligation of levirate marriage) and abortion rights.

Recent changes in attitude and behavior among groups of religious Israeli women indicate that the time has arrived for broadening the study of Israeli feminism to include examination of action within the religious sphere. The antagonism between feminism and rabbinic Judaism has become increasingly complex as numbers of religious Israeli women have assumed a more activist approach to women's involvement in Judaism during the past two decades, reaching peak intensity during the latter half of the 1980s. The term feminism is equivocal when applied to the women in this study, as the women pioneering fuller roles within Jewish life have varying levels of identification with, and different working definitions of, that concept. Regardless of the terminology they would individually use to describe their efforts, this population of religious Israeli women shares a commitment to expanding women's participation and leadership within Judaism.

To date, the only record of so-called Israeli feminist religious activism has been in the form of brief articles in the press and in a documentary film covering contemporary Jewish feminism, "Half the Kingdom." This study examines the activities, goals and emerging leadership of religious women working to improve women's status within Judaism in Israel by focusing on three areas in Jewish life: study, public prayer, and rabbinical leadership. This research has depended on primary source materials, specifically: interviews with leaders and participants in the efforts by religious Israeli women, as well

as with American Jewish men and women intimately involved with the activists and their endeavors, and newspaper and magazine articles.

While the emergence of women's talmud torah, women's public prayer and women as rabbis are distinct phenomena, each demanding a unique style of study and analysis, the methodological issues present in examining each of these areas are similar. Due to the limited duration of this author's research in Israel, the majority of interview subjects represent the leadership within one of the three areas of study. Women included as participants in one chapter are often the focus of another chapter (e.g. Bonna Haberman, a catalyst in organizing and carrying out the activities of Israeli Women of the Kotel, also taught Mishnah at the Lena Slom School for the Study of Torah). The absence of interviews with large numbers of participants in each sector of activity, be they students, members of the Women of the Kotel, or congregants affiliated with synagogues that have female rabbis, may unfairly bias this study toward the perspectives of the leadership.

Each chapter in this study presents an independent analysis of one area of religious Jewish women's activities in Israel. Despite the distinct nature of each subject, the three chapters each analyze women's efforts within a facet of Jewish experience intrinsic to Jewish religious life and accessible to men. The chapters examine the origins of each phenomenon including: the context for its inception within Israeli society, the religious orientations and national origins of leadership, and the responses of various sectors of Israeli society.

In order to provide background about religious women's efforts to improve their status within Israeli Judaism, we turn first to a survey of 1) women's roles within the early Zionist context as represented by the writings of

female leaders who came to Eretz Yisrael as pioneers in the Yishuv and contributed to building Israeli society throughout their lives; 2) women's participation in the defense forces of Eretz Yisrael during the twentieth century, defense being a central factor and common experience for the vast majority Jews living in the Land of Israel; and 3) religious issues that have typically constituted the battleground between secular feminists and the Orthodox religious establishment in Israel.

The Role of Women in Zionist Ideology as Illustrated by the Yishuv

Although Zionist thinkers and pioneers to Eretz Yisrael include men and women, the theorists who expressed their Zionist ideals in writing were typically men.[1] Although they did not compose written accounts of their Zionist beliefs as such, female pioneers recorded their aspirations for women's roles in the new Jewish society they would build as well as the help and hindrance they experienced in Yishuv society in the form of memoirs and biographical accounts. The writings of Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi[2] provide rich source material about the theoretical and actual status of women among the Labor Zionists during the second decade of this century. She portrays that era through the lenses of her personal view, the beliefs of her contemporaries and the policies of the settlement and defense organization, Hashomer. While Hashomer

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[1]This point is illustrated by Arthur Hertzberg, ed. *The Zionist Idea, A Historical Analysis and Reader* (reprint, New York, 1986), a standard reader in Zionist thought which contains selections from thirty-seven Zionist writers, all men.

[2]Rachel Yanait, born in Malin, Ukraine in 1888, emigrated to Eretz Yisrael at the age of twenty. Among her activities, she was a member of Poalei Zion and of Hashomer and a co-founder of the Hebrew Gymnasium in Jerusalem and of *Achdut*, the first Hebrew socialist journal in the Yishuv. In 1918, she married Yitzchak Ben-Zvi, who would become the second president of the State of Israel. She died in 1979. [For more on her life see: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Ben-Zvi, [Rachel] Yanait;" and, [Rachel] Yanait Ben-Zvi, *Coming Home*, ed. Shulamith Schwartz Nardi, trans. David Harris and Julian Meltzer (Tel Aviv, 1963).

represents a pioneering elite among the residents of the Yishuv and a tiny minority of the total Jewish population of Eretz Yisrael during the 1910s, an examination of the status of women within this population is relevant in the endeavor to understand the role of women within early Zionism. It is likely that the Hashomer lifestyle informed both the experience of other Jews who made aliyah during that period as well as that of the mass influx known as the Third Aliyah, that began to arrive in 1919.

Ben-Zvi's memoir, *Coming Home*, has the optimistic tone of an utterly enthusiastic pioneer who honestly tries to communicate the hardships involved in settling the land of Israel. While her writing conveys an ever present joy and wonder, even under dangerous and rugged conditions, Ben-Zvi also expresses the ambivalence she and her fellows held toward the desirable role for women in the Jewish society that she and her comrades set out to establish.

Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi's own perceptions indicate a mixture of confidence and naiveté in regard to the status of women within traditional religious societies along with sensitivity to, and acceptance of, conventional gender roles. In religious settings, Ben-Zvi's egalitarian tendencies contrast sharply with then accepted conduct. When she and two male comrades tried to attend services in Jerusalem's Hurva Synagogue, she followed her friends inside until the gatekeeper directed her toward the women's gallery with angry glances and a wave of the hand.[3] In 1911, after several years in Eretz Yisrael, Ben-Zvi decided study agriculture, an area of expertise that was an asset for any pioneer. Combined with her desire to learn Arabic, Ben-Zvi's academic hunger compelled her to journey

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[3]Ben-Zvi, *Coming Home*, 90.

> to the small university in Damascus, headed by a Russian-speaking Moslem [*sic*] scholar from the Caucasus. He stared at me open-mouthed. What was I talking about? How could I imagine that a girl could study in this Moslem institution? And what was this about natural sciences and agriculture? There were no such studies there at all.[4]

This passage imparts her sense of adventure, wide-eyed wonder and assurance that the world was open for her exploration, without self-consciousness regarding her gender.

Other passages in her writings reveal Ben-Zvi's awareness of differing attitudes and expectations toward men and women with respect to issues of work, defense, dress as a social convention and work responsibilities. Upon arriving for the first time in Sejera,[5] Ben-Zvi remarks with pleasure and a note of surprise the sight of male and female pioneers ploughing the fields with teams of oxen.[6]

However, women's roles in agricultural work and defense responsibilities differed sharply. During that visit to Sejera, one of her comrades was attacked by Arabs; the group decided to retaliate immediately. In such circumstances, all egalitarianism faded. Without commentary, Ben-Zvi recounts:

> The boys seized their arms, jumped on their horses and were off, followed by others on foot. We girls stood helplessly by the gate, waiting for them to return.[7]

After seven years as a *chalutzah* she continued to accept the division of labor according to gender with respect to guard duty. In 1915, when leaders of the

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[4]Ibid., 174.

[5]A Jewish agricultural settlement founded with aid from Baron Rothschild's Palestine Colonization Association. In: Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel, From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (reprint, New York, 1989), 77.

[6]Ben-Zvi, *Coming Home*, 118.

[7]Ibid., 119.

Jewish nationalist movement were being expelled by the Turks from the land of Israel, Ben-Zvi recalls:

> Israel and Manya [Shochat][8] urged me to join the leadership of Hashomer. But how could one do that without really standing on guard in the fields?[9]

During the time of Ben-Zvi's aliyah, a woman's decision to dress in the more practical male garb offered a statement of boldness and power. At the time of Ben-Zvi's arrival, Manya Shochat had already been in Eretz Yisrael for four years. It has been written that at twenty-nine, Shochat was "already a notable figure, a woman who dressed like a man and rode in Bedouin garb to defend the settlements..."[10] Ben-Zvi demonstrates her sensitivity to the strong connection between the particular garb worn by men and women and social convention: twice when describing the equipment she and her male comrades brought with them when setting out to travel, she remarks on wearing men's clothing.[11] She emphasizes her break with acceptable custom, noting:

> I wore men's clothing for the first time, a keffiya on my head, and looked like a boy. A girl in boy's clothing in Jerusalem was considered highly improper. We hurried out of town.[12]

In *Coming Home*, Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi shares, within the context of her personal experiences, the attitudes that other *chalutzim* of her generation held toward women and their roles in society. She reports progressive ideas

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[8]Israel and Manya Shochat were immigrants to Eretz Yisrael who preceded Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi; they were members of the Bar Giora defense group and among the founders of Hashomer (the later reincarnation of Bar Giora) and of the Hashomer settlement, Kfar Giladi.

[9]Ibid., 247-248.

[10]Marie Syrkin, introduction to *Before Golda: Manya Shochat* by Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, trans. Sandra Shurin (New York, 1989), *xii*.

[11]Ben-Zvi, *Coming Home*, 130 and 152.

[12]Ibid., 130.

regarding women's status within the Yishuv among her male and female counterparts. Before the first official meeting of Shomrim, a member named Gad assured the visibly nervous Ben-Zvi that Hashomer would "need girls as much as boys."[13] Likewise, Alexander Zeid privately encouraged Ben-Zvi and her comrade Esther when they spontaneously took up guard duty the night after the above-mentioned Arab attack near Sejera[14] and he publicly demanded that Hashomer grant membership to all wives of current members at the organization's 1915 conference.[15]

Not all members of Hashomer offered encouragement to their female comrades. Ben-Zvi recounts an evening in May 1915 when she gave in to her impulses to take guard duty with her fellow members:

> ...Shmulik and Zvi came riding in from the fields. I seized the rein of Shmulik's horse. I felt a strong urge to ride, to wear abaya and keffyia [*sic*], to feel the thrill of a night watch far from the village. Was there any girl of Hashomer who had not been moved by that urge?
>
> Both agreed. I put on a black abaya, and we were off towards Givat Hamoreh. I was overjoyed, the heady scents of the fields in my nostrils and the stars beckoning as we rode into the wonder of the night.
>
> Suddenly Shmulik and Zvi jerked their mounts to a halt. A suspicious movement - thieves, perhaps, trying to steal our wheat. I began to regret having come out with them, lest I impede their action through my inexperience. Shivering, I reined in my horse, too, until both broke into hearty guffaws. It was only a joke.[16]

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[13]Ibid., 124.

[14]Ibid., 120-121

[15]Hashomer held annual conferences for its ranks. Members attended faithfully and would bring their families to the event. However, meetings were closed to non-members, effectively excluding the majority of wives from the proceedings. This policy was a source of bitterness among wives of *shomrim*. Ibid., 265-266.

[16]Ibid., 257.

Ben-Zvi offers no further comment on the experience. Despite the positive attitude that pervades her writing, pain and disappointment call out from between the lines of this aborted chance to share full responsibility for the welfare of a Jewish frontier settlement.

In her biography of Manya Shochat, Ben-Zvi portrays a woman who would not permit men to taunt or disempower their female counterparts. Shochat was the force behind the first collective farm in Eretz Yisrael, an experimental offshoot of Sejera that began operation after Sukkot 1907 with 12 male and 6 female members. Although she officially served as the bookkeeper, Shochat involved herself with all aspects of the collective. She observed for example a female member who held on to her plow as her team of oxen ran wild while a male supervisor laughed aloud at the spectacle. Shochat rebuked him without mercy for giving such a young, feisty team to a girl, and demanded that he try to plow with the same oxen. From that time onward, women plowed with even-tempered oxen.[17]

Relative to the Zionist men of her era outside the ranks of Hashomer, Ben-Zvi held a moderate position regarding the abilities and status of women.

> On one of our walks a heated discussion broke out between [David] Ben-Gurion and myself... Why, he asked, had [women] no talent in science and why were they so seldom outstanding even in their favorite fields of art and music. I felt as if I were responsible for all the women of generations past. I tried to put the blame on men for having kept them within the narrow confines of the household. It was no wonder that after generations of such restricted life women were backward. I was reminded of a debate I had with [Ber] Borochov[18] on the same question... but then the

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[17]Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, *Before Golda: Manya Shochat*, trans. Sandra Shurin (New York, 1989), 58-59.

[18]Ber Borochov, born in 1881 in the Ukraine and raised in Poltava, Russia. Borochov grew up in a socialist and Zionist home atmosphere; his father belonged to Hibbat Zion. After completing high school, Borochov worked for the Social Democratic Party for one year, "until he was

> roles were reversed. Borochov felt that there were no limits to what women could yet accomplish in intellectual and artistic fields...[19]

Ben-Zvi's work presents aspects of *chalutzot* experience that further elucidate the attitudes of Hashomer on a community level. In her biography of Manya Shochat, she describes the gradual deterioration of women's status within Hashomer:

> In the early days of Hashomer, there was a feeling of partnership between the young men and women and the women were accepted as self-standing Hashomer members. However, as the number of couples multiplied and women became accepted into the ranks only because of family ties and without any demonstrated talent, a difference in attitude began to prevail. A wife of a Watchman was discriminated against, by not being included in the discussions and decision-making process that determined the course of their lives.[20]

In the introduction to the English translation of this work, Marie Syrkin asserts that, over time, the position of wives rose within Hashomer. "When they established a permanent collective in Kfar Giladi, women worked as equals and took shifts in guarding the settlements."[21] There is no mention made of single women, however.

Thus, Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi's writings offer a complex corpus of information about the status of women within Zionist ideology and the Hashomer community. Ben-Zvi herself evidently was convinced of women's equality, especially within religious and agricultural settings. Nevertheless, she retains a moderate level of comfort with the role of men as protectors that

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expelled as a Zionist deviationist. From that point on his life's work was Jewish national activity in workers' groups, and the evolution of his Marxist-Zionist thought." Amongst his Zionist efforts, with Yitzchak (Avner) Ben-Zvi, Borochov wrote the platform for the Russian Poalei Zion in 1906. For a fuller sketch of Borochov's life see: Hertzberg, ed. *The Zionist Idea*..., 353-354.

[19]Ben-Zvi, *Coming Home*, 152.

[20]Ben-Zvi, *Before Golda: Manya Shochat*, 99.

[21]Syrkin, introduction to *Before Golda*..., *xii-xiii*.

maintain security and seek vengeance when necessary. As she saw them, Ben-Zvi's peers within Hashomer and Zionist such as Ben-Gurion and Borochov held a range of attitudes toward women and their roles in society. These ran the gamut from amazement at women's inabilities in the arts and sciences to trust in their competence in any area of endeavor. There appear to be two sets of experience within Hashomer for women: for single women who earned their membership, status within the group deteriorated over time as more male members married and their wives held an inferior position; whereas, for the wives of members, greater equality was gained following the transition from nomadic to settlement life. This uneven commitment from men and women of Hashomer to women's equality foreshadows the mixed messages that have characterized attitudes in the Eretz Yisraeli defense forces in this century.

Women's Status in Israeli Society: The Defense Forces as Case Study

Cross-culturally, defense forces are a male dominated sphere of influence.[22] However since Israel is one of four nations in the world that conscripts its female citizens into the armed forces,[23] it is not surprising that many individuals assume that a high level of egalitarianism exists in the Israel Defense Forces [IDF]. But although women are conscripted at age 18 along with men,[24] the similarities end there. In fact, the IDF has been cited as a

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[22]Anne R. Bloom, "Israel: The Longest War," in Nancy L. Goldman, *Female Soldiers - - Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. (Westport, CT, 1982), 138.

[23]Beata Lipman, *Israel: The Embattled Land - Jewish and Palestinian Women Talk About Their Lives*. (London, 1988), 49.

Mandatory conscription applies only to Israel's Jewish citizens.

prime instrument for reinforcing traditional women's roles, rather than helping to liberate Israeli women.[25] After over four decades of statehood, the image of the female Israeli soldier as a combat-ready member of the defense forces has been relegated to the level of a legend. A 1980 IDF pamphlet describing Israel's women's corps begins:

> Sorry to disappoint you if you have been influenced by the Hollywood image of Israeli girl soldiers being amazon-type warriors accoutred in ill-fitting male combat fatigues and toting submachine guns. Today's Israeli female soldiers are trim girls, clothed in uniforms which bring out their youthful femininity. They play a wide variety of non-combatant, though thoroughly essential, roles within the IDF.[26]

The involvement of Jewish women in the defense of Eretz Israel during this century has been characterized by tensions and mixed messages rooted in the co-existence of a variety of societal patterns, ideological and religious beliefs, and visions for the future that members of the Yishuv and citizens of the State of Israel have held. An examination of women's roles in the modern defense forces of Eretz Israel, focusing primarily on the IDF, demonstrates that Jewish defense forces developed within a society struggling both to retain traditional Jewish roles for women and to create a new social reality that includes sexual equality.

## Zionism: Traditional Familism Meets Women's Emancipation

Before exploring the conflicting values represented by varying levels of participation by women in the Jewish defense forces in Eretz Israel during this

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[24]Bloom, "Israel: The Longest War," 152, from the article of the Defense Service Law of 1949, ratified 8 September 1949.

[25]Lesley Hazelton, *Israeli Women: The Reality Behind the Myths*. (New York, 1977), 137.

[26]Reuven Gal, *A Portrait of the Israeli Soldier*. (New York, 1986), 47; originally in: *CHEN translates charm: CHEN - the Israel Defence Forces' Women's Corps*. (1980, February 27). The Israeli Defence Forces Spokesman.

century, it is instructive first to study the beliefs which underpin those defense organizations and the society in which they have operated. As Anne Bloom asserts, although Zionism and women's emancipation both originated in 19th century Europe, sexual equality was not necessarily an intrinsic value in secular Zionism. While women's emancipation was a well articulated concept among the intellectual and revolutionary circles of late 19th century Europe, within Zionist circles Jewish existence was the central value. Women's equality was an assumed feature of Zionism due to the necessities of the pioneering environment.[27]

Lesley Hazelton explains that sexual equality was such an intrinsic component of socialist ideology that early Zionists felt no need to explicitly promote egalitarianism as a value. This led to assumptions that often went unfulfilled, leading to disappointment for female pioneers in Eretz Israel.

> "In Europe we planned and dreamed about our future in Zion; there, there was to be no distinction between men and women," wrote Sarah Malchin, one of the leaders of the early women settlers, in 1913. On reaching Palestine, however, "our beautiful dreams were destroyed by our hostile surroundings... We girls were met with indifference and scorn everywhere."[28]

Despite the varying levels of egalitarianism that existed among Jewish pioneers in Eretz Israel, the traditional Jewish value placed on the separate roles for men and women permeated the Yishuv. The struggle to bridge the separation of responsibilities according to gender embraced by religious Jews and the equality espoused by secular Zionists is captured in Ben-Gurion's dilemma over incorporating women into the newly formed IDF upon the

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[27]Bloom, "Israel: The Longest War," 138.

[28]Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 17; originally published in: Ada Maimon, *Women Build a Land* (Herzl Press, 1962).

founding of the State of Israel. He could empathize with both sides of the issue: as a member of the Second Aliyah, he could offer women an equal role with men, but as a pragmatic politician, he could see the need to compromise with the religious minority that opposed women serving in the military. Former Commanding Officer [CO] of CHEN, Colonel Amira Dotan emphasizes that the tug of war between the cultural past and modern values continues today:

> ...we women in Israel live in two different worlds of values. There are the Jewish values, the tradition that the place of the woman is within her family and home... And as well as this world there is the twentieth century or twenty-first century world of values, in which a woman has to be independent to fulfill herself... it's a clash; all of us, but especially those women who work outside the home, feel this struggle.[29]

Although women's participation in *Zahal* is valued, a familism that is consistent with traditional Jewish values dominates Israeli societal attitudes toward the roles of men and women in contributing to national security and welfare. Feminist scholars studying women in the Israeli military observe that attitudes toward men's and women's contributions to national welfare differ: while the most valued effort a man can provide toward strengthening the Jewish state is service as a soldier, the essential role that a woman can fill to support national security is giving birth, thereby creating new soldiers.[30] Among the national leaders who have emphasized the primacy of child-bearing as a woman's most important contribution to the Israeli national cause are David Ben-Gurion and Geula Cohen.[31]

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[29]Lipman, *Israel: The Embattled Land*, 41.

[30]Eva Isaksson, ed., *Women and the Military System*, (New York, 1988), 4. A similar analysis of male and female contributions to Israeli security is presented in: Nira Yuval-Davis, "Front and Rear: The Sexual Division of Labor in the Israeli Army," in *Feminist Studies*, XI (1985), 669.

[31]Yuval-Davis, "Front and Rear," 670.

Though they represent a minority view, dissenting voices protest against the bifurcation of gender roles that the IDF and Israeli society generally take for granted. Techiah Bat-Oren writes:

> From hyper-anxiety for our daughters, we've turned them into dolls, and imposed a double burden of anxiety on the shoulders of our sons - for their own lives and those of their dolls. I do not want another war, but if it comes, I do not want any son or husband to be killed in my place. I want full equality of rights.[32]

Similarly, General Rafael Eytan has questioned the gender-based division of labor in the IDF. He has doubts about the assumptions that women cannot perform particular tasks in *Zahal* and that it is more difficult to inform parents about the death of a daughter than the death of a son.[33] Such secular opposition to IDF policy has failed to alter perceptibly the rigidity of men's and women's military roles. 'Women can participate as "honorary" men in the army, until they start (and in some strata of women are encouraged, by being excluded from the army, to start even earlier) to be mothers.'[34]

Sexual Equality in the IDF: de jure vs. de facto

The dichotomous trends in Israel to actualize modern notions of egalitarianism while preserving the male and female divisions that characterize traditional Jewish communities are exemplified in the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality in Jewish defense forces in the twentieth century. A survey of women's status in pre-state Jewish defense organizations in Eretz Yisrael and in the IDF reveals that a broader range of military defense jobs

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[32]Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 151, originally published in: Techiyah Bat-Oren, *Whereto with Women's Liberation?* (Tel Aviv, 1975) [In Hebrew].

[33]Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 141.

[34]Yuval-Davis, "Front and Rear," 670.

existed for women in the Yishuv than during the period of Israel's statehood Perhaps women were able to go beyond traditional activities with facility due to the dire need for human resources during the pre-state period The members of the Yishuv involved in defense were predominantly of European origin, so they tended to be familiar with the idea of women's emancipation

The trend to narrow women's options in the military may have been due to the institutionalization of Jewish defense forces The creation of the IDF concentrated control of all units in the hands of a small group of men who could be more deliberate in assigning jobs to soldiers Additionally, voluntarism was no longer a fundamental factor in the Jewish defense forces Men could be sent to fill positions which women formerly attained on the condition that they expressed an interest The effect of the centralized military hierarchy was compounded by the vast influx of Jews from the Oriental Jewish communities of the Middle East Their heritage does not include the ideas of 19th century European liberalism, and their presence may have entrenched the religious tendency to preserve traditional male-female roles in the home, the society, and the military

The following is an overview of women's roles in Eretz Yisraeli defense forces during the twentieth century:

Women in Pre-state Defense Organizations

Bar Giora was a secret Jewish defense organization, founded in 1907, whose members adopted the style of the Bedouin warriors Its several dozen members included at least two women In 1909, Bar Giora was expanded and renamed Hashomer The role of women was hotly debated There were two classes of women connected with Hashomer: full members, like Manya Shochat and Rachel Yanait, who, in the spirit of the Second Aliyah, were

innovators and constantly fought for full participation, and wives of members, whose participation was curtailed so severely that they were denied access to meetings.

> The women [members] of Hashomer infused the concept of role equality into the national psyche, but they also showed the men that they would settle for less than they asked for. They set the precedents for the dichotomy between ideology and behavior, thus creating a confused mythology.[35]

During World War I, a brief possibility existed for women to become peers with men in a Jewish defense force, but to no avail. Following the British capture of Eretz Yisrael from the Turkish in 1917,

> Jabotinsky[36] had persuaded Lord Derby, the [British] war secretary, that Zionist and British interests would equally be served by a Jewish military unit entrenched in Palestine. In August, therefor, Lloyd George and Balfour officially confirmed the decision to establish a special Jewish infantry regiment, which would be assigned for combat exclusively on the Palestine front.[37]

Dr. Chaim Weizmann, represented the Zionist Commission in negotiations with Allenby on the establishment of the Jewish Legion. Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, representing two hundred pioneer girls, pressured Weizmann to include a stipulation permitting female volunteers in the battalion. The Jewish Legion

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[35]Bloom, "Israel: The Longest War," 141

[36]Vladimir Jabotinsky, born in Odessa in 1880, was the principal proponent of the Zionist maximalist approach. "Contemptuous of the limitations of Diaspora existence, he regarded Zionism as the instrument by which Jews would shuck off their qualities of submissiveness and timidity and become instead bold, proud, and militant." He founded Betar (Brit Trumpeldor), a society devoted to carrying out a program of Zionist maximalism. Etzel (National Military Organization), a breakaway group from the Haganah founded in 1931, was based on Jabotinsky's principles. In: Sachar, *A History of Israel, From the Rise of Zionism...*, 184-186, 265.

[37]Ibid., 112.

was created as an all-male force. "Happy and singing, the men climbed into the train en route for Egypt, leaving behind them the sad girl volunteers."[38]

In 1920, when Arab attacks on the Yishuv became more sophisticated Hashomer proved itself inadequate for the changing political climate and the Haganah[39] was established. Even after the formation of the National Command, the Haganah's structure was fairly loose and each woman's level of participation depended on the local environment. Typically, a young woman would join at age 17, either as a logical continuation of youth movement participation or after receiving recommendations from two individuals attesting to her level of reliability and capability. Once in the Haganah, she would learn discipline and organization, and how to clean and use weapons. In addition, she would gain skills in at least one specialty, such as communication or first aid. Mira Ben Zvi, who joined the Haganah in 1933, recalls that women members held a range of attitudes: "We fought against separation and wanted mixed platoons of men and women. There were those who disagreed, and they were sent to prepare sandwiches and do first aid. We wanted to take part in combat and fought for the same training."[40] Ultimately Ben Zvi was one of four women who were sent to Juara for officer training.

On 19 May 1941, the Palmach was formed as the strike force arm of the Haganah which would take on any dangerous assignments ordered by the High Command of the Haganah. Women were excluded from this force until the following winter when Israel Livartovsky, a Palmach commander in

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[38]Ben-Zvi, *Coming Home*, 344, 347; and, Syrkin, introduction to *Before Golda ...*, xii.

[39]The Haganah had three objectives: "to acquire arms, to provide military training to members of agricultural settlements, and to set up self-defense organizations in towns and cities." In: Bloom, "Israel: The Longest War," 142.

[40]Ibid., 143.

Jerusalem, recruited a group of girls. During the spring of 1942, court martial proceedings were held against the group for illegally joining the Palmach. On 3 May 1942 the National Council decided that women could occupy up to ten percent of the positions in the Palmach. There was no mention of their specific roles.

Due to low levels of recruitment, in 1943 the Hachsharot,[41] whose membership was evenly split between men and women, were incorporated into the Palmach with the agreement in 1944 that all female members would be accepted and that the autonomy of the Hachsharot groups would be preserved.[42] These events led to equality for women in the Palmach, as Netiva Ben Yehuda recalls, "Till the war [for Israel's independence] the men and women were 50:50. We were elected to be officers, or sergeants, or privates. Men and women, it depended on your strength and your competence, not your sex."[43]

Women also were members of the underground defense organizations, Etzel and Lehi.[44] At the height of its activity, approximately 20% of Etzel members were women. Their main responsibilities were in the areas of propaganda, information, education, medical aid, transferring ammunition from place to place, maintaining contact with members who were underground.

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[41] *Hachsharot* were youth movement groups which were preparing to settle on kibbutzim. Their members were typically children of Third Aliyah emigrants who embraced their parents' socialist, national service oriented ideology. In: Ibid., 148.

[42] This overview of women's involvement from Bar Giora through the Palmach is from: Ibid., 140-143.

[43] Lipman, *Israel: The Embattled Land*, 33.

[44] Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 20. Geula Cohen is a former member of Lehi, in: Yuval-Davis, "Front and Rear," 670.

They were rarely sent on a mission unless it was to provide medical care in case of emergency deep in Arab territory.

During World War II, the British, under the National Service Act of December, 1941, formed the Auxiliary Territorial Services [ATS] and began conscripting single women in Great Britain between 20-30 years of age. In January, 1942, recruitment began in Palestine. Women between ages 18-50 were eligible; 4,000 joined in total, including 900 in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. The majority of recruits were city dwellers and members of the Haganah and Histadrut. Their task was two-fold: to carry out assignments in a British military framework while retaining their identity as a Jewish group and to fulfill assignments which the Haganah requested. The British were pleased with the ATS recruits and their high level of achievement, yet their position was given lukewarm praise at home. Despite their efforts against the Germans and their assistance to the Haganah, praise for ATS from the Yishuv was dampened by the taint of the British.[45]

CHEN - - The Women's Corps of the IDF

Establishment. After Israel's War of Independence the provisional government, under the guidance of Ben-Gurion, consolidated this melange of defense organizations into a single national military establishment, the IDF. There was much controversy over the extent of influence which the two military models, that of the British and of the Palmach, should have over the IDF. Likewise, there was significant controversy over the level and type of involvement which women should have in the Israeli defense forces. There were three basic positions: the Orthodox-religious bloc continued their

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[45]Bloom, "Israel: The Longest War," 144-146.

opposition to women participating in the military because it violated the traditionally accepted parameters of appropriate behavior for Jewish women. those who advocated the ATS pattern pushed for a separate women's corps, whose members would serve in men's units but would remain under the women's corps' jurisdiction, and, those who supported the Palmach model proposed a program which would integrate women as fully as possible into the military, minimizing separation on the basis of sex. The outcome was that religious women were exempted from military duty and the latter models were merged, "making CHEN the . authority for training and judicial matters, while all work assignments became general army manpower decisions."[46]

Even after the establishment of CHEN, conflicts continued within the women's corps regarding appropriate military conduct. The women who had served under the British in the ATS wanted to integrate the British military decorum into CHEN. The ATS emphasis on formality was anathema to the women who had served in the Palmach. Their training had taught that military competence held the highest priority. Decorum was a luxury in which secure nations could indulge. Ultimately, the level of involvement which veterans of ATS and the Palmach contributed to CHEN determined the outcome of this struggle. Within a year of CHEN's formation, most Palmach women departed for university or kibbutz, leaving the women's corps in the hands of ATS veterans,[47] whose influence has left its mark on the corps.

<u>"Universal Conscription" - - how universal is it?</u> The IDF policy for women's conscription and exemptions has from its inception set a different standard for female soldiers. All Israeli Jews are liable to conscription at age

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[46]Ibid., 153.

[47]This section on the formation of CHEN is from: Ibid., 152-153.

18. The mandatory period for military service has always been shorter for women than for men; currently, service is two years for women and three years for men. The exemption categories for women are broader than they are for men: women may be exempted because they are married, observant, conscientious objectors [a status denied to men],[48] or insufficiently qualified on the basis of education or personality/adjustment problems. The requirements for acceptance into the IDF are considerably stricter for female recruits than for their male counterparts. This is demonstrated by the entrance scores of accepted conscripts: 20% of female soldiers score 55-56 on the KABA,[49] while only 10% male soldiers achieve that score.[50] Of the age-eligible candidates, 90% of men serve in *Zahal*, compared with 60% of age-eligible women. After their initial period of military service, men may be called up for reserve duty up to age 56. Women who are single and without children are liable to be called up for reserve duty as well. They may be called up for reserve duty through the age of 24; if they have had special training, the limit for the reserves is age 34.[51]

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[48]Yuval-Davis, *Front and Rear*, 667. Yuval-Davis continues, "Israeli law does not recognize 'conscientious objection' as legitimate grounds for men to be released from serving in the army. Those very few principled pacifists who have persisted have usually been taken to prison for a while, and then released, mostly on 'psychiatric' grounds." Yuval-Davis describes the treatment of these men, but she does not provide the IDF's reasoning on this decision. The logic behind this military policy may be that since women as a whole are less necessary than men in the IDF and only 60% of them will ultimately be conscripted, that status as a conscientious objector is a luxury which may be granted to women.

[49]This is the acronym for "quality category," and it is the name of the psychometric exam used to test conscripts. There are four areas in which eligible Israelis are tested: intellectual, level of formal education, command of Hebrew language, and motivation to serve. The latter is not included for women, since it is seen as a necessary indicator for behavior in the combat environment, from which women are excluded. The scores range form 41-56. In: Gal, *A Portrait...*, 78-79.

[50]Information on conscription and exemptions from: Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 142-143; and Gal, *A Portrait ...*, 47-48.

During the period following the War of Independence, in negotiations with Ben-Gurion's provisional government, the Orthodox religious faction secured exemption status from military service for religious women.[52] However, the conditions for receiving a religious exemption have varied since the founding of the State. On 15 September 1949 the provisional government passed a law which 'exempted from service married women, mothers, and pregnant women as well as any girl "who has declared that reasons of conscience or religious conviction prevent her from serving."'[53] As a response to suspicions that women might be abusing the opportunity to receive a religious exemption, in 1953 a more rigorous procedure was instituted for Orthodox women seeking religious exemption from military duty. The new process required the petitioner to appear before a board of examiners which would interview her and determine whether her request was valid; this stricter procedure was instituted to ensure that women were not using the option of religious exemption to shirk their national duty.

This exemption process remained in effect for the next quarter century. After the 1977 election, Menachem Begin sought Agudat Israel to join the coalition government which he was forming. To secure the religious party's partnership, Begin agreed to support legislation which would relax the procedure by which religious women become exempt from military service.[54]

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[51]As with the length of time for mandatory conscription, these age limits have changed over the years. For example, in the 1969 conscripting law, eligible women could be required to serve in the reserves through age 26, unless they were dentists or physicians, in which case the limit was at age 38. [Yuval-Davis, *Front and Rear*, 666.] Despite the fluctuations in regulations, the reserve service which could be demanded from women in the IDF has always been significantly shorter than that required of Israeli men.

[52]This exemption applies to Orthodox men as well.

[53]S. Zalman Abramov, *Perpetual Dilemma: Jewish Religion in the Jewish State*, (Rutherford, NJ, 1976), 159; referred to in the Israeli legal code as: *Laws of Israel* (1949), 3:112-18.

On July 20, 1978 the new legislation was passed, "after bitter wrangling and a 12-hour filibuster.... [the law ensured that] Jewish women [would be] exempted automatically if they declare before a civil or religious court judge that they observe the Sabbath and the dietary laws and that military service is against their religious principles."[55] Additionally, women who do not observe the Sabbath and dietary laws can receive exempt status if they demonstrate that "military service is incompatible with the way of life of their families."[56] Despite the fears that this legislation might prompt women to declare themselves religious in order to free themselves from their national security obligation, the percentage of women receiving religious exemptions has not changed significantly since the passage of this legislation.[57]

Public dissatisfaction with the inequity of religious women being exempt from military service has prompted legislative and pragmatic moves toward a national service option for religious women. Popular resentment for the religious exemption for women prompted the cabinet to introduce a national service bill early in 1951, which would require religious girls who had received exemptions from military duty to work in a civilian setting and would allow them to continue living at home. After elections and negotiations between Ben-Gurion and Chief Rabbi Herzog, a version of this bill was passed late in 1952, after Ben-Gurion assured Herzog that if the Mizrachi party would drop their opposition to the proposed legislation, that the law would be carried out with great flexibility. Indeed, the bill was passed but "in practice, large numbers of

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[54]Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 196.

[55]"Israel Exempts Religious Women," *New York Times*, July 21, 1978, 3.

[56]Ibid., 3.

[57]Gal, *A Portrait...*, 48.

Orthodox girls simply were not conscripted for any kind of national service at all "[58]

Despite the 1952 national service legislation, the decision to exempt religious women from military service was in effect unconditional; no apparatus was established even for young religious women who wanted to offer non-military service. Secular opposition to the exemption granted to religious women continued. In 1971, Sherut Leumi was established in response to political opposition to the blanket exemption from military service for religious women. This community service program includes jobs within religious school, health care organizations, and programs for the elderly. At the time of inception, the program had 80 participants; in 1988, there were 3300 18-and 19-year-old women serving at 130 centers throughout Israel. Sherut Leumi is a one year program. Approximately 15% of its participants elect to extend their service for a second year.[59]

"Universal Conscription" - - in what capacity?. With the establishment of the IDF and CHEN, the occupations within *Zahal* which women can hold became limited. The one strict regulation which was set in place is that, since the War of Independence, women have been prohibited from going into battle or even from being with a front line unit during a battle.[60] More generally, the female soldier's freedom to choose her army occupation has eroded, as the IDF establishment holds fuller control over her options during service:

> When *Zahal*... was first established, the State recognized the right of the girls to serve in all jobs on a voluntary basis. As time

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[58]Sachar, *A History of Israel, From the Rise of Zionism*..., 380-381.

[59]Donald Eberly and M. Sherraden, eds, *The Moral Equivalent of War? A Study of Non-Military Service in Nine Countries* (New York, 1990), 79.

[60]Bloom, "Israel: The Longest War," 155.

> elapsed the equality has disappeared. The only considerations are needs of army efficiency and economic ones. On this basis jobs are opened and closed to girls. As a result the IDF is lagging behind other armies which are more resourceful in absorbing women.[61]

This process of offering women opportunities on the basis of *Zahal*'s short term needs rather than using criteria of suitability regardless of a soldier's sex is illustrated in a reform which was implemented in 1976. The maintenance of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip led to a drain on personnel resources; thus, a decision was made to expand the range of women's occupations, which would free up men for more combat-oriented duties. Two categories of work were opened to women: 1) those which are defined as combat duties, but may be filled by women in noncombat conditions [e.g., instructing tank drivers]; and, 2) mechanical and electrical positions related to the increasingly technically sophisticated armaments used by *Zahal*. While these changes represent a small percentage of women serving in *Zahal*, the factor to monitor is whether these changes lead to shifts in attitudes toward the work which women can do and to greater flexibility in long run placement of personnel resources.[62]

From 1982 through the end of 1990 Brigadier General Amira Dotan[63] was the commanding officer [CO] of CHEN. She has introduced women into positions which were previously held only by men. Her instrument for change was the use of sheer pragmatics. For instance, when she saw that women

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[61]Ibid., 154; originally published in "Report on the Status of Women," Prime Minister's Office (Jerusalem, August 1978), 101.

[62]Yuval-Davis, "Front and Rear," 664.

[63]In 1985, she was appointed Israel's first female brigadier general. Up until that time, the highest rank held by a woman had been that of colonel, the rank which previous COs of CHEN had held. In: Susan Gilman, "She's Constantly Proving Women Can Do Anything," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 7 December 1990), 57.

were excluded from repairing tanks because the job involved moving heavy equipment, she suggested an innovation: women could fix tanks if there were men who could move the equipment when necessary. In a similar manner, she brought women into the domain of instructing male recruits by claiming that if a man sees a woman meeting a particular challenge, it will spur him on to meet, if not to surpass, her level of performance. She explains, "Making changes wasn't easy, but the formula I found was to speak about the needs of the organization. We can speak about [women's] abilities from here to eternity, but addressing the needs is what gets results."[64]

In 1977-78, Israeli women were able to fill 210 of the 790 jobs available in *Zahal*. By 1980, that figure had risen to 270.[65] By 1990, when Brigadier General Dotan resigned from her position commanding CHEN, it is safe to conjecture that the number of occupations open to women in the IDF had risen significantly. As women are placed more frequently in military duties on the basis of their abilities, the potential for all conscripts to be utilized to their highest capacity increases significantly.

"Universal Conscription" - how do women view military service?. Examination of women's attitudes toward their period of service in *Zahal* and their jobs in the military reveals that while they generally have a high level of satisfaction from serving in the IDF, they tend to feel inadequately challenged in their work. Not only are most women pleased to be conscripted, but their level of enthusiasm outshines that of the men. In a 1980 study of 17-17 1/2 year-old girls, 90% report positive attitudes toward conscription and over half report that they would volunteer for military service if there were no mandatory

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[64]Ibid.

[65]Yuval-Davis, "Front and Rear," 662.

conscription.[66] In another study, when asked on the day of discharge from *Zahal* if they had fulfilled their initial expectations of making a personal contribution to state defense during their term of service, 92% of the women responded positively as compared with 82% of the men.[67]

The level of fulfillment expressed by women is especially noteworthy considering the mediocre levels of job satisfaction reported in 1982 research which surveyed the attitudes of female soldiers toward their duties. 48% of the respondents felt highly qualified in their positions while 30% felt somewhat overqualified, only 53% reported a high level of satisfaction from their jobs.[68] These women seem to have internalized the dichotomy of societal expectations: they derive satisfaction in the military from their traditional role, their ability to serve and support the dominant male system, while they compromise their desires to have challenging jobs which would fulfill a modernist, egalitarian ideal.

Feminist Reaction to a Change in IDF Protocol

In concert with their Zionist ideology, secular Jews in Eretz Yisrael typically view their military service with pride. For Israelis, resisting military duty as a protest against the religious establishment is an extreme statement. Yet that is exactly what happened in response to a change in the procedure for

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[66]Gal, *A Portrait...*, 48, originally released by Amiad, P., (1981, January) in *Attitude survey among conscripts regarding service in the IDF* (Research Report).

[67]Ibid., 52; originally released by Segal, R., (1980, January). *Attitude survey conducted on the August 1979 cohort of conscripts on their day of discharge*. Unpublished manuscript, Unit of Military Psychology, IDF, Israel. Parts of this report were presented at the 18th Conference of the Israeli Psychological Association, Haifa, Israel.

[68]Ibid., 50; originally reported in: M. Israelashvilli, (1982, April) *The CHEN Survey: attitudes toward conscription, adjustment and satisfaction from service army conscript female soldiers* (unpublished).

obtaining religious exemption enacted during the early years of the Begin government.

In order to bring Agudat Israel into the coalition government that he was forming after Likud's May 1977 electoral victory, Menachem Begin agreed that Likud would introduce legislation to relax the process by which religious women become exempt from military service in the IDF.[69] According to the proposed legislation, instead of appearing before a board of examiners for questioning in order to be declared exempt from military service, a religious woman would simply be required to present a notarized statement to the appropriate authorities.[70] A flurry of grass roots feminist[71] resistance arose during the periods before and after the Knesset's final vote on the bill. While they were not confronting the religious establishment per se, the women engaged in protests before and after the passage of this legislation expressed opposition against discrimination that appeared to favor religious women. The bill, which promoted the religious establishment's interests by relaxing religious women's procedures for obtaining military exemptions, was

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[69] "Begin near Success in Forming Coalition," *The New York Times* (New York 10 June 1977), 11.

[70] Ibid.

[71] It is doubtful whether the women involved in the various protests would identify themselves as feminists. Generally speaking, Israeli women during the 1970s did not receive the terms 'feminism' and 'feminist' with comfort. Alice Shalvi explains that women's liberation was largely seen as an Anglo-Saxon import: 'Those of us who, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, perceived that the women's liberation movement then sweeping the US was as relevant politically and socially to Israel as to other countries were at that time dismissed for "importing (our) Western complexes into the Israeli utopia."' In: Alice Shalvi, "The Illusion of Progress, the Realities of Change," *Lilith* #20 (1988/5748), 14.

During the 1977 election, a Women's Party was organized. It ran political advertisements, gained much attention, and brought feminist issues into the Israeli home. Gradually, the ideas of feminism became less threatening, despite the continuing suspicion of 'feminist' as a label. During the campaign, "'Women told [organizers of the Women's Party] by the hundreds that they clipped our paid political advertisements and hung them on the walls of their kitchens. Soon the word *feministit* entered the language, though by the back door. "I'm not a feminist but..."' In: Marcia Freedman, *Exile in the Promised Land* (Ithaca, 1990), 166.

sanctioned by the Knesset and enacted by the Defense Ministry, both of which are technically secular authorities.

On July 4, 1978, several weeks before the Knesset vote, the Israeli political establishment was shocked when teenage girls from thirty high schools assembled in Jerusalem to express their opposition to the Likud-sponsored legislation. At that time, the Defense Ministry was operating according to the procedures which would be legally sanctioned after the bill was passed. The high school students also called for a two year national service requirement for religious women who receive exemptions from military duty.[72]

"After bitter wrangling and a 12-hour filibuster," on 20 July 1978, the Knesset voted to ease the procedure by which religious women obtain exemption from military service.[73] During the ensuing months, secular women protested the change individually and in groups. They objected on the grounds that the new legislation would enable religious women to offer false declarations in order sidestep their national service requirement and that the exemption policy discriminates against non-Orthodox Jews.

At the end of the summer if 1978, Talma Shiloni, a 26 year old psychology student at Hebrew University, "refused to report for reserve duty because... her conscience did not permit her to serve while the Government encouraged other young women to make false declarations and to shirk their national duty."[74] In February 1979, resistance intensified among women in the

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[72]"High School Women Cause Israeli Furor," *The New York Times* (New York: 4 July 1978), 2.

[73]"Israel Exempts Religious Women," *The New York Times* (New York: 21 July 1978), 3.

[74]Moishe Brilliant, supplementary material from *The New York Times News Service* and *The Associated Press* (New York: 5 September 1978), 87.

reserves and new female conscripts.[75] These women were supported by Dr Zvi Werblowsky, a professor at Hebrew University, who proposed a policy that would bar female students who have not completed their military duty from taking university examinations. "The professor was speaking for women in the army reserve who started a hunger strike outside the Parliament in Jerusalem"[76] protesting the ease with which religious women may obtain exemptions from military duty.

Despite the fears which accompanied the alteration of the exemption procedure, a sharp increase in the number of women requesting religious exemptions from military service did not materialize.[77] However, the significance of the perceptions of discrimination and disproportionate levels of influence exercised by religious factions that triggered the protests detailed above should not be underestimated.

With an Eye Toward the Future

The perpetuation of certain traditional aspects of Jewish culture and the enduring influence of Western social trends within Israel point to a continuation of the struggle over the roles which women may play in national defense. In her analysis of the sexual division of labor in *Zahal*, Nira Yuval-Davis explains that a profound shift in the IDF's attitude toward women and their contributions to personnel resources will be necessary in order for lasting change to occur.

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[75] "Israeli Woman Ends Protest Over Religious Deferments," *The New York Times* (New York: 19 February 1979), 7; "Women Balking at Joining Army Surrender to the Police in Israel," *The New York Times* (New York: 21 February 1979), 8; and, "Dispute Intensifies in Israel Over Women in the Military," *The New York Times* (New York: 25 February 1979).

[76] "Dispute Intensifies . . ." *The New York Times* (25 Feb 1979).

[77] Gal, *A Portrait...*, 48.

> As long as nondifferential gender roles are a product of emergencies, such as revolution or war, the sexual division of labor will reassert itself along traditional lines once the crisis has passed.[78]

Amira Dotan, during her term as CO of CHEN did initiate change in the deliberate manner which Yuval-Davis describes by opening occupational opportunities to female soldiers during times of political calm as well as during the war in Lebanon.

A shift in attitudes toward women in the IDF will ultimately promote change in views of women in Israeli society as a whole. As Dotan observes, "The army is a major socialization tool in Israel. It is more than war and defense. It is such a part of becoming a citizen. It is a major opportunity to effect social change."[79] Thus, when women's roles within the IDF change, the experiences of both male and female conscripts change as well, and over time, Israeli culture as a whole could be touched.

Just as changes within the military affect Israeli society, so do shifts in the general cultural impact the IDF. Anne Bloom predicts that there are three influential factors which will determine the future shifts in the role of the female Israeli conscript: 1) the level of influence which women's movements in other countries have in Israel; 2) the need for women in professions outside stereotypical feminine occupations because of an increased need for personnel; and, 3) the presence of professional military women in Keva, the professional branch of the IDF, who have ranks and power which enable them to be in decision-making roles within the Israeli military structure.[80]

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[78]Yuval-Davis, "Front and Rear," 652.

[79]Gilman, "She's constantly proving . . ," 2.

[80]Bloom, "Israel - The Longest War," 159.

Brigadier General Amira Dotan made a significant mark on the IDF during her leadership of CHEN in the 1980's. In order for her efforts to make a lasting impact on the level of egalitarianism within the IDF, she will need to be followed by other women officers who, like her, have the ability to negotiate a compromise between traditional expectations of Jewish culture and the ambitious goals of twentieth century women. Only the unfolding events of the 1990's and continued study of this aspect of Israeli life will tell the outcomes of the feminist efforts of the past decade on the IDF.

Feminism v. the Religious Establishment: Issues of Personal Status

In contrast with the mixed messages that are communicated about the importance and role of women in the IDF, the place of women according to authority of the religious establishment is clear. In order to understand the feminist struggle to achieve full rights with regard to personal status, e.g. marriage and divorce, it is necessary to survey the legal authorities which provide, protect and restrict the rights of Israeli women.

Israel has two legal codes: the secular law and *halakhah* (rabbinic Jewish law). The secular code views men and women as equal, whereas *halakhah* views men and women as different and not equal before the law.[81] Since both legal codes are valid in separate spheres of the life of each Israeli citizen and Israel has no constitution, neither set of statutes may be viewed in isolation. Therefore, the status of women cannot be understood completely from any single piece of legislation.

The issue of sexual equality in Israel demonstrates this point. While Israel's Declaration of Independence proclaims that the Jewish State "will

[81]Dafna Izraeli, "Status of Women in Israel," *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook 1986-87* (Jerusalem, 1987), 37.

uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex"[82] and the 1949 basic guidelines for Israel's first government state that "complete and absolute equality of women will be upheld - equality in rights and duties, in the life of the country, society and economy and throughout the entire legal system,"[83] these documents do not guarantee equal rights for Israeli women. They are declarative statements that can be overridden by subsequent documents which might contradict them [84] The Rabbinical Courts Jurisdiction (Marriage and Divorce) Law of 1953 exemplifies this principle by granting control over issues of personal status to the rabbinical courts, equating legal authority with *halakhah* in matters regarding marriage and divorce. Since there is no provision for civil marriage and divorce in Israel, this legislation gives the rabbinical establishment absolute power over Jewish Israelis with regard to marriage and divorce, "making mincemeat of Israel's much-vaunted legislation on the equality of women."[85]

Halakhic Restrictions on Women: Marriage and Divorce

While there are numerous points of conflict between the rabbinical establishment and Israeli feminists that are philosophical in nature, such as the inability of a woman to testify in a rabbinical court, some halakhic issues of immediate concern to Israeli women are more concrete. Laws that regulate personal status are the primary focus, including the following:

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[82]Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations 1948 - present* (New York, 1984), 14

[83]Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 22-23.

[84]Ibid., 23; and, Izraeli, "Status of Women in Israel," 37

[85]Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 40.

Restrictions on Divorce

Halakhic divorces require a husband's consent. "While a woman must also give her consent, her refusal may nevertheless be circumvented and the husband permitted to marry another woman, his children with his second wife not being considered bastards. This is not the case for women."[86] Problems may arise if a husband will not consent to a divorce unless his wife grants him particular concessions which may not be to her benefit, or if he refuses to grant her a divorce out of spite

*Yibbum and Agunut* "A *yevamah* is the widow of a man who died childless and was survived by a brother. The widow is bound to the brother; he must either marry her or release her by means of *chalitzah* or by his own death. If the surviving brother, the *yabbam* (levir), neither marries the *yevamah* nor performs the ceremony of chalitzah, she becomes an *agunah*."[87]

"The *agunah* is a woman whose marriage is in fact ended or suspended, but who legally remains a married woman (*eshet ish* ), unable to remarry. The *agunah* is bound (*agunah* means "anchored") to a husband who no longer lives with her but she cannot 'acquire herself' and be free to marry another man."[88]

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[86]Izraeli, "Status of Women in Israel," 39.

[87]Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York, 1984), 113.

[88]Ibid., 102.
Biale enumerates the various circumstances which render a woman an *agunah*
"1. The husband deserts his wife and disappears.
2. The husband dies but there is no valid testimony for his death.
3. The marriage is untenable but the husband refuses to divorce his wife despite the threats and punitive measures of a *Bet Din*.
4. The marriage is untenable but the husband is legally incompetent to grant a divorce (usually on account of insanity).

If he chooses to exercise his power, the position of a *yabbam* is analogous to that of a husband who refuses to grant his wife a divorce. A *yevamah* is considered betrothed to her husband's brother and must receive his release in order to marry again. She is liable to the same types of resistance and potential extortion which are possible in a divorce in which the parties are on bad terms.

*Aginut* can indicate a more general situation of entrapment, where a woman is unable to prove that her husband has died. In such a case, if she remarries and has children and evidence emerges that her husband is still alive, her children will be considered *mamzerim* (bastards). According to *halakhah*, they may only marry other Jews who are *mamzerim*, thus creating an untenable situation for modern Jews.

*Asurah leba'alah u-lebo'alah*. In a case where a woman had a lover while she was still married, after she becomes divorced, she is neither permitted to remarry her husband nor to marry her lover.[89] No analogous restriction applies to Jewish men.

*Moredet*. A *moredet* is "a woman who refuses to have conjugal relations with her husband in order to spite him, or who deserts him." If a rabbinical court rules that a wife is a *moredet*, then her husband may impose a *get* (religious divorce) without her consent.[90]

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5. A woman becomes a *yevamah* and the *levir* refuses to perform either levirate marriage or *chalitzah*, or his whereabouts are not known, or he is an apostate."

[89]Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 41.

[90]Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York, 1979), 473.

Women Confront the Rabbinical Establishment

Women have confronted the rabbinical establishment on matters of personal status within several arenas in Israeli society. A sampling of the contexts in which women and their advocates have challenged rabbinical methods of interpreting and implementing *halakhah* includes:

Seeking solutions within the bounds of *halakhah*

The rulings of the rabbinical courts can create the false impression that there is no mechanism for forcing a divorce upon an intransigent husband. Rather, according to *halakhah*, a rabbinical court can compel a husband to grant his wife a divorce in the event of any of the following situations: "offensive physical conditions, violation of marital obligations, and for some authorities sexual incompatibility, and wife-beating."[91] The flexibility of *halakhah* is dependent upon the approaches of its interpreters. Israeli men and women from a range of academic backgrounds and religious/secular orientations argue for more lenient treatment of *halakhah* by rabbinical court judges as a just means for solving the problems of Israeli women who are trapped by personal status restrictions.

In the 1970s, member of the Knesset Shulamit Aloni, an attorney and member of the Civil Rights Party, and Rabbi Menachem Hacohen, of the Labor Party, advocated a more flexible halakhic approach to solving personal status cases.[92] Through the early 1990s, Israelis representing the secular and religious camps have continued to argue that a more liberal reading of *halakhah* could solve the personal status problems which oppress women. At

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[91]Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, 96.

[92]See: Shulamit Aloni, "Comments on the Marriage Laws in Israel," *Israel Horizons* 27 (January/February 1979), 11-14; and, Hazelton, *Israeli Women*, 49.

a meeting which Rina Shashua-Hasson[93] organized on the issue of women's status in rabbinical courts, Rabbi Pardes, head of the Tel Aviv rabbinical court asserted: "There is no halakhic problem with forcing a bill of divorce on an intransigent husband, and I do not understand the rabbinic court judges who perpetuate the suffering of so many women."[94]

*Nogah*, Israel's feminist magazine, reported during the winter of 1991 on a rabbinical court decision that could lighten the burden of delayed court action on Israeli women. The ruling declared that if a man fails to show up twice to divorce proceedings scheduled in the rabbinical courts, then the court will rule in favor of granting the wife a divorce. The husband's malice, demonstrated by his lack of cooperation, would entitle the court to waive the need for his consent. If it is treated as a precedent, this decision could bring an end to Israeli women waiting in limbo while their husbands drag out divorce proceedings.[95]

Trying to transfer power from religious to secular authorities

In attempts to establish equal standing for women in the realm of personal status, advocates of sexual equality have brought cases before the civil courts and have introduced legislation in the Knesset. Rulings and legislation sanctioned by these secular bodies take precedence over those of the rabbinical courts. Progress was made when, in the spring of 1975, the

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[93]Rina Shashua-Hasson serves chairs the Women's Status Committee of the Israeli Bar Association and sits on the board of the Israel Women's Network.

[94]"Rabbinical Courts: A demand for a more enlightened view of women's rights," *Networking for Women* 3 (Winter 1989), 2.

[95]"A Man Who Fails to Report at the Rabbinical Court Twice Will Lose to His Divorcée," *Nogah* #21 (Winter 1991), 4.

Supreme Court overturned the rabbinic dictate that a divorced woman is *asurah leba'alah u-lebo'alah*. Thus rabbinical courts may no longer prohibit marriages between a woman and her lover, even if she were married when their liaison began.

The push for equal rights legislation that would grant women equality before the law and provide for civil marriage and divorce began in the First Knesset. Rachel Kagan, the sole Knesset member elected from the independent Women's List, sponsored the Equal Rights for Women Act. The bill was passed into law, but not in the form that Kagan endorsed; the final version did not include provisions for civil marriage and divorce.

> On the day of the final vote on her bill, Rachel Kagan received a handwritten note from David Ben-Gurion, then Prime Minister. The note apologized for not supporting her. Maintaining religious control over marriage and divorce was one of the conditions for the support of the National Religious Party. Ben-Gurion... knew that he had sold out women for a coalition with the religious minority.[96]

Shulamit Aloni sponsored "Basic Law: Women's Rights" and a civil marriage bill in 1975 and 1976, respectively. The 1975 legislation stated: "There will be full and absolute equality of women in the life of the state, the society and the economy and throughout the whole legislative system, and women will be entitled to every right and to every legal action. Any law which contradicts or will contradict this law is declared null and void." In the explanatory appendix, she included provisions for civil marriage and divorce. The bill passed the first reading, but died in committee, which was chaired by a member of the National Religious Party [NRP]. The 1976 bill to establish civil

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[96]Freedman, *Exile in the Promised Land*, 99.

marriage didn't make it that far. In reaction to the proposed legislation, the NRP threatened to withdraw from the government coalition. As a result, the bill was never presented for a vote.

Despite the failure of legislative attempts to secure civil rights and civil marriage, feminist groups that formed in Israel during the 1970s drew public attention to women's issues by alternative means. After the death of Aloni's civil rights legislation, the Tel Aviv feminist group held a mock funeral on 21 October 1975 for the Civil Rights Bill in front of Labor Party Headquarters in Tel Aviv. Despite their failure to receive a demonstration license, the women carried out their plan. Approximately 200 women from Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv attended the demonstration, which police forces broke up quickly and with an undue level of violence. "The demonstration, in its unexpected show of militancy, had been very successful and had gained the sympathy of women and of uncommitted feminists."[97] The Tel Aviv rally was followed by a demonstration in Haifa during Chanukkah. Five hundred people, including women from two kibbutzim, attended the demonstration in support of equal rights and abortion rights. The successful event received little attention from the press, therefore little notice from the Israeli public. "There was no violence. There was also no media coverage. Television and radio hardly reported the event."[98]

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[97]Natalie Rein, *Daughters of Rachel: Women in Israel* (Middlesex, England, 1980), 150-151.

[98]Ibid., 151.

# CHAPTER ONE

## WOMEN'S TALMUD TORAH

The study of religious texts has been an intrinsic part of Jewish life for millennia; however, this activity, which is second only to prayer as a means for drawing near to the divine, has historically been the realm of men. This chapter examines the increased activity among women in Israel to establish opportunities for women's Jewish learning during recent years. These activists include women who are residing in Israel in order explore their Jewish heritage and Israelis, immigrants and natives, who are determined to advance their own learning and make women's *talmud torah*[1] more available. Most women who are active in organizing, teaching or learning Jewish texts within the frameworks described below are traditional in their levels of Jewish observance and are members of Orthodox communities.[2]

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[1]Throughout this study, the terms '*talmud torah*,' 'Torah learning/study' and 'Jewish learning' are used interchangeably to indicate the breadth of Jewish text study, including the range of disciplines and texts which that implies: history, Jewish thought, the Torah and its commentaries, Talmud (including Mishnah and Gemara). When more specific language is used, its narrower meaning is implied.

[2]For women who accept halakhah as binding, rabbinical approval for Talmud Torah for women and trying to expand women's roles and potentials within the realm of halakhah is significant. If they want to study Jewish texts for the sake of learning alone, they are limited in the educational offerings available. In contrast, for women who are not halakhic Jews, there are many more options for Torah study (e.g., universities and rabbinical seminaries both in Israel and abroad). It

The women in this study come to Jewish learning for a variety of reasons. One motivating factor which undergirds their efforts is the desire to engage in Torah study as a spiritual pursuit. A shared goal which these women more readily articulate is the desire to achieve an adult level of Jewish education. Leah Shakdiel[3] explains her motivation to learn Talmud in particular:

> I truly believe that if I don't master [Talmud study], that means that I will be mastered by it, that I will continue to be manipulated passively by a system that I do not fully understand. So in order to keep my head above the water and play the game with equal footing, I must master [the study of Talmud].[4]

Dr. Naomi Cohen[5] agrees with Shakdiel in her belief that studying Talmud is an essential element in becoming an mature member of an Orthodox Jewish community:

> In the mainstream of Judaism, you don't really exist as a complete human being if you are not involved in Torah study, and this must include Talmud. You are permitted to serve the members of the 'club' in an ancillary capacity - but you yourself are not a member of it - and this is true of men and women alike. If one wants to be a complete person, one must engage in the study of Torah, both oral and written law.[6]

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seems logical that the women who would work most actively to establish women's Talmud Torah for the sake of study alone would be traditionally oriented individuals who are searching to find the equivalent of the yeshivah which is available to their male counterparts at any time in their lives.

[3]Leah Shakdiel teaches children and adults in the Negev development town, Yerocham. She was the first woman elected to the Yerocham town council and later became the first woman seated on a religious council in Israel.

[4]Leah Shakdiel, interview by author, Tape recording, Yerocham, Israel, 13 July 1991.

[5]Dr. Naomi Goldstein Cohen, an American-born immigrant to Israel, teaches Jewish Philosophy and Jewish Thought at Haifa and Tel Aviv Universities. Cohen served on the Conference Committee for the 1986 First Jerusalem International Conference on Women and Judaism: Halakhah and the Jewish Woman. Her husband, Rabbi Shear-Yashuv Cohen has been the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Haifa since 1975.

[6]Rochelle Furstenberg, "Teaching girls the Talmud," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 16 September 1977), 8.

In his presentation at the First International Conference on Women and Judaism in December 1986,[7] Professor Ze'ev Harvey of the Hebrew University Department of Jewish Thought[8] reiterates this conviction: "A person unable to study Talmud independently is not only excluded from the treasures of the Jewish tradition, but is, Jewishly speaking, an ignoramus."[9] *Talmud torah* is required for anyone who wants to be conversant in Judaic discourse.

Women who want to contribute to Jewish learning through teaching or writing and women who recognize that their careers may prohibit them from living in areas with large Jewish populations for extended periods of time are most likely to include the goal of being able to study independently to their reasons for engaging in *talmud torah*. For example, when she entered full time Torah study at Pardes after a year of study at the American University in Cairo, journalist Linda Gradstein explains, "I wanted learning skills... basically I

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[7]The First Jerusalem International Conference on Women and Judaism: Halakhah and the Jewish Woman was held on 28-31 December 1986 under the auspices of The Israel Ministry of Justice. Penina Peli chaired the steering committee for the conference. In the pamphlet giving information on the conference and calling for papers to be delivered at the event, the purposes of the conference are articulated: "The Conference will assemble experts from all over the world on major issues relating to Halakhah, law and the Jewish woman, in order to: enable a sharing of ideas between leading personalities involved with the status of women in Halakhah; create a forum in which problems relating to women in Halakhah can be freely and adequately addressed; review and evaluate the status of women in Halakhah as interpreted by concerned authorities today; examine the development of rabbinic rulings on the position of Jewish women in society; analyze current difficulties in the Halakhic status of women; study sociological factors reflecting on women's status and role in Judaism; examine current issues relating to Jewish women in the State of Israel according to Jewish law and tradition."

For a summary of the proceedings of the conference, see: Gila Berkowitz, "Lifting the Yoke: Is There Hope for Ending Jewish Legal Discrimination Against Women?," *LILITH* (Spring 1987), 25-26; controversy within the Orthodox community in response to an interview with Peli is covered in: Rami Ne'ori, "The Rabbi's Wife 'Drove Away' Many from the Conference on Women in Halakhah," *Yediot Achronot* (Israel: 30 December 1986) [In Hebrew]; views on the method and pace of change within halakhah are reported in: Leah Abramowitz, "Dreams and realities," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 15 February 1987).

[8]Dr. Harvey served on the conference steering committee; in the informational pamphlet cited in previous footnote.

[9]Marcia Kretzmer, "Presenting a challenge," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 4 January 1987), 5.

said, if I'm ever going to be in an environment with no Jewish community, I want to have the skills that I can learn Mishnah myself and I can read Rashi."[10]

This chapter includes five sections: 1) an overview of the attitudes which Jews have held historically toward women's religious education and of the origins and development of the Bais Yaakov schools, the first modern educational institution to offer text study for female students;[11] 2) an examination of two schools for Torah learning which represent men opening the possibility of *talmud torah* for women and the limits which women experience within these institutions; 3) a presentation of the educational settings which women have devised that address some of the restrictions enumerated in the second section; 4) an analysis of a unique study institute that aims to transcend gender and theological differences: and, 5) a summary of the impact which women's Torah learning during the last two decades has had on views of women's methods of study and acceptance of women teaching and learning Torah.

## Background

### Traditional attitudes toward women's education

The debate over the value of teaching Torah to Jewish women began no later than the early centuries of the common era, when the Babylonian Talmud

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[10]Linda Gradstein, Israel correspondent for National Public Radio and former student at Machon Pardes, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 18 July 1991.

[11]This chapter examines text study for adult women. The Bais Yaakov movement endeavors to educate girls in order that they may become capable of running a halakhic household in their adult lives. However, Bais Yaakov is relevant to the present investigation for several reasons: it is the first modern institution for girls' Torah learning; Sarah Schenirer, a woman, founded Bais Yaakov; and, the combination of women's initiative and men's granting approval is a theme which carries over into the establishment of contemporary institutions for *talmud torah*.

was codified and the debate which became the cornerstone in struggles over women's education was set. Tractate Sotah reports the opinion of Ben Azzai, "A father is obligated to teach his daughter Torah," and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus' retort that "one who teaches his daughter Torah, it is as though he taught her nonsense (*tiflut*)."[12] In her article, "Education of Jewish Women," Deborah Weissman[13] observes that these rabbis articulate theoretical poles between which real attitudes toward educating Jewish women actually lie:

> neither of the two extremes - the obligation as stated by Ben Azzai, and the virulent objection to any study of Torah on the part of women, as formulated by Rabbi Eliezer - became the legislated norm, or customary practice. Two standards emerged - one for the vast majority of women in most communities and in most historical periods, and the other, for certain noteworthy exceptions.[14]

A refined definition of 'education' is necessary to understand the dispute over Jewish women's education and its implications. Every Jew needs knowledge of customs, beliefs and ethical standards. The minimal level of education which proves sufficient depends on the role which the student will hold in society. In "Women and the Study of Talmud," Naomi Cohen offers a framework for evaluating education according to goals. Cohen presents three aims toward which learning can be directed: 1) basic acculturation, 2)

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[12]For more detailed studies of Jewish attitudes toward women's education, see: Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York, 1984), 29-41; Avraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Groups* (Hoboken, NJ, 1990), 43-66; and, Deborah Weissman, "Education of Jewish Women," *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook 1986-87* (Jerusalem, 1987), 29-36.

[13]Deborah Weissman immigrated to Israel from America in 1972. She is a doctoral candidate studying the social history of Jewish women's education at Hebrew University and she is a tutor for the Melton Center Senior Educators Program. For more on Weissman see sections on A Women's Minyan and Kehillat Yedidiah and relevant notes in chapter on Women's Public Prayer.

[14]Deborah Weissman, "Education of...," *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook 1986-87*, 29.

acquisition of practical skills, and, 3) development of higher levels of personality, which could prepare the learner for leadership.[15]

In most of the Jewish world, educating girls has been accepted as a necessity, assuming that its goal was to provide the acculturation and the pragmatic skills needed to run a household and raise a family. The methods which would best achieve these educational ends were the focus of discussions on how best to prepare Jewish girls for their adult responsibilities.

> The important questions that would arise would not be whether or not it would be permissible to teach women at all, but rather: How much should they learn? Should they learn only the laws, or also the reasoning behind them? Should they be taught from the text, or only by example? Who should be permitted to teach them and in what kind of framework?[16]

According to *halakhah*, women are exempt from the sacred duty of *talmud torah*.

> The study of Torah is as central to the religious life of a Jew as prayer, and is in fact understood traditionally as a form of worship, *avodat ha-shem*, perhaps its highest form... This exemption does not imply that women are not required to know the law; since they are bound by most laws they are obligated to know them. Rather, women are not required to engage in the study of Torah as an end in its own right, whether as a form of worship or as a professional pursuit.[17]

The absence of religious obligation and the accepted social structures which emerged throughout the Jewish world perpetuated education as a male realm.

There have been instances when women engaged in Jewish learning because of their outstanding talents or the unusual priority which their communities placed on teaching daughters, but these cases represent

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[15]Naomi G. Cohen, "Women and the Study of Talmud," *Tradition* 24 (Fall 1988), 28.

[16]Weissman, "Education of Jewish Women," 30.

[17]Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York: 1984), 29.

occasional breaks with historic educational norms.[18] Weissman asserts that despite these exceptions and the religious training all girls needed to run a household, the formal education of girls generally lacked anything beyond the essentials. "Study did not in any community fulfill the same function -- 'study as mode of worship' -- in a woman's life as it did in a man's."[19] Throughout most of Jewish history, women's learning has been limited to the practical knowledge considered essential for Jewish living.

Bais Yaakov Schools: Revolutionary Change or Appeasing Modern Demands?

In the context of this study, the origin and development of the Bais Yaakov schools are particularly relevant because they model a pattern for creating institutions for girls' Torah study which has been repeated during recent decades to pioneer *talmud torah* for women in Israel.

In 1917, Sarah Schenirer, a Chasidic woman from Cracow, began an educational movement which was revolutionary in its time. Born in Cracow in 1883, Schenirer "was a simple seamstress who spent every evening poring over the Bible, the Mishnah, and books of Jewish ethical literature. She envied her father and brothers who were permitted to study Talmud." During her residence in Vienna during World War I, Schenirer drew inspiration from a sermon which Dr. Flesch, rabbi at the Stumper Gasse Synagogue, delivered on the role of valiant women in Jewish history. After the war, she returned to

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[18]Ibid., pp 30-31. Weissman cites the case of Beruria, the second century scholar whose husband was Rabbi Meir and evidence from Gaonic and early medieval responsa which indicate that women could be hired as teachers for young children. She also recounts communities which especially valued women's education, including evidence of a women's school for *talmud torah* in Rome dating as early as 1475 and an 18th century school run in Amsterdam by Moses Cohen Belinfante which was for boys and girls.

[19]Ibid., 31.

Cracow determined to "organize study groups for women and try to instill in them the same fervor that she felt."

Upon returning to Cracow in 1917, Schenirer organized a study session for women. She received mixed reactions from the forty participants: older women enjoyed her lecture, but the younger group mocked her traditional ways. In addition to lecturing, she opened a library for the Jewish women of Cracow. Schenirer soon realized that she needed community support for her ambitious plans to succeed. On her brother's advice, she consulted with the Belzer rabbi in Marienbad, who gave her efforts unwavering approval.

> Later, the Chafetz Chaim, the outstanding halakhic authority of his generation, was to answer critics [of women's religious study] on the religious right by saying that in view of changing social conditions -- widespread assimilation and the breakdown of traditional Jewish family life – the historical prohibitions against women's education were to be disregarded and that, on the contrary, it would be a *mitzvah* to teach Jewish girls the fundamentals of the faith."[20]

The founding and flourishing of the Bais Yaakov schools set a precedent in Jewish education. Schenirer's schools gave girls access to texts that were previously forbidden to them. This educational innovation reversed a custom which was based on the halakhic exemption which 'freed' women from Torah study. Within the Bais Yaakov structure, the restriction on girls' Talmud study remained, but a significant corpus of Jewish source material was available to women in an entirely new way.

The halakhic reasoning used by the Chafetz Chaim is significant. He advocated change on account of social conditions in order to strengthen Jewish knowledge and survival.

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[20]Summary of the development of the Bais Yaakov schools drawn from: Deborah Weissman, "Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists," in Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York, 1976), 141-142.

> ...the Chafetz Chaim replied that in the past, there had been no need to teach girls in the tradition institutionally as they could just follow what they saw being practiced in their homes and communities... 'Now, to our great dismay, the tradition of the fathers has been greatly weakened...It is surely a great mitzvah to teach girls the Pentateuch and also the other books of scripture (the Prophets and Writings) and the ethics of the rabbis... so that our holy faith will be verified for them. Because if not, the girls are likely to stray completely from the path of the Lord and transgress the foundations of our religion, God forbid.'[21]

The Bais Yaakov movement introduced a new style of women's education without adjusting the pedagogical goals which typified Jewish education for girls. Naomi Cohen contends that while the Bais Yaakov schools were revolutionary for their time, they continued training girls for the cultural and practical aspects of Jewish life. The program did not attempt to prepare students for leadership in the Jewish community. "Jewish women's intellects had been aroused by the increase in the general cultural level of the times. The new institutions set themselves to meeting this challenge by offering an educational menu with enriched Jewish content. They did not seek to prepare girls for spiritual or communal leadership."[22] Thus, the Bais Yaakov schools competed with opportunities for intellectual growth in the secular milieu by offering a text-based approach to Jewish studies without trying to expand women's roles in Jewish society.

The process by which Sarah Schenirer founded the Bais Yaakov schools is as noteworthy as the curriculum that she established. Her project started off on a grass roots level. As a member of a religious family, Schenirer was firmly committed to Judaism and had a voracious appetite for Jewish study. On her own, she offered classes in Judaica and discovered a group of

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[21]Weissman, "Education... ," 33.

[22]Cohen, "Women and the Study of Talmud," 33.

women who were interested in what she had to offer. Noticing the skeptical attitude of the younger participants, she recognized the need for a formal institution to educate Jewish girls. She also understood she could only implement her design with the authorization and resources which men could provide.

Schenirer's vision combined with her ability to win the support and energies of community leadership yielded extraordinary success. The school, founded in Cracow in 1917, was widely copied. By 1937, her efforts had turned into a movement with 250 schools in seven countries with a combined enrollment of 38,000 pupils, a teachers' seminary, two youth organizations, three centers publishing educational materials, and a monthly magazine. While she remained the spiritual head of the school until her death in 1935, both succeeding directors of the school (before World War II) were men.[23]

The development of the Bais Yaakov schools in Europe is a significant precursor of recent efforts to advance women's Torah study in Israel by: expanding the curriculum available to female students; exploring areas of potential flexibility within *halakhah* ; and establishing institutions by uniting women's plans with men's resources, sanctions and guidance.

## Men Invite Women to Enter the World of *Talmud Torah*

During the last two decades, numerous programs for women's learning have opened, especially in Jerusalem. Two of them, Michlelet Beruria (now Michlelet Lindenbaum) and Machon Pardes represent the two dominant models for establishing institutes of Jewish learning for women.

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[23]Weissman, "Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model . . ." 142-143.

Two Modern Models of Women's *Talmud Torah*

Michlelet Beruria

In 1973, a group of women approached Rabbi Chaim Brovender, an ordinee from Yeshiva University who was then teaching at Shappel's yeshivah. The group informed him that "they wanted an intensive Jewish studies program."[24] Three years later, when he had left Shappel's and was about to establish Yeshivat Hamivtar, the group asked him to open a women's school as well. Brovender remembers:

> I felt I couldn't do it, I had no economical base. But they kept annoying me. So we reached an arrangement which I thought would excuse me from setting up a school. I told them if they could find a place to learn and to live and make arrangements for food, I'd arrange the teaching. They found it. So Beruria was established by these seven women, college graduates, first in an apartment in Rechavia. Once the school existed, others joined them.[25]

One of the members of that original group, Malke Bina,[26] was a co-founder with Brovender and served as Beruria's education director for ten years.[27] Brovender explains that the women interested in founding Beruria approached

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[24]Greer Fay Cashman, "Breaking the barriers," *The Jerusalem Post International Edition* (Jerusalem: 10-17 June 1984), 23.

[25]Vanessa L. Ochs, *Words on Fire: One Woman's Journey into the Sacred* (New York, 1990), 47.

[26]Malke Bina was raised in a rabbinical family in Baltimore, Maryland. Her father, Rabbi Boruch Milikowsky was the rabbinical supervisor who monitored and motivated the intellectual and spiritual growth of students at the Talmudical Academy. [Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 248]. Upon graduating from high school, she went to Jerusalem to study at the *Michlalah*. After completing her studies there, Bina earned an M.A. in Bible Studies at Yeshiva University. In 1976 she co-founded Michlelet Beruria with Rabbi Chaim Brovender. She was co-director of Beruria and its *kollel* until the *kollel* was closed in 1986. In 1988 she co-founded the Women's Institute for Torah Study (Matan). [In: Toby Klein Greenwald, "Wise women," *Kol Emunah* (Jerusalem: winter/spring 1991), 13.] Over the years, she has taught at institutions including the Michlalah [Ibid.], Machon Gold, and Shappel's. [Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 250.] Her husband, Rabbi Aharon Bina, is dean of foreign students at Yeshivat Hakotel in Jerusalem's Old City. [Ibid., 246.]

[27]Greenwald, "Wise women," 13.

him because "they knew I would be willing to let them study, to open the books to wherever they wanted. They could study Talmud, whatever struck their interest."[28] Brovender and Bina founded the first women's *kollel* as a program within Michlelet Beruria.[29] Beruria was

> a two-fold pioneer, being the first Torah institution for women to introduce Talmud studies as an integral part of its course, and establishing the first women's *kollel* in Jerusalem. (A *kollel* is a comprehensive study center in which many students receive a stipend which allows them to concentrate on learning instead of having to go out to work.)[30]

Brovender holds a view of women's Torah study which was pioneering in the yeshivah world of the 1970's and remains liberal when compared with most of his peers. "Brovender's formulation of Torah study as the primary 'religious experience' of Judaism has led him... [to believe that] if there is a spiritual dimension to studying Torah, then it must be open to both men and women... 'Men and women both received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Why should women be excluded now?'"[31]

Brovender believes that women have greater creative potential than men in the realm of Torah study because of their status in society. Religious obligation and community standards demand that men learn Talmud to be considered members of Orthodox society. While there are many *yeshivot* from which men may choose, the methods of learning do not vary greatly. In contrast, *talmud torah* is optional for women; women's learning is not generally

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[28]Ibid.

[29]Greenwald, "Wise women," 25.

[30]Cashman, "Breaking the barriers," 23. (italics added)

[31]Rochelle Furstenberg, "Marriage of two worlds," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 3 July 1981), reprint.

respected in traditional religious circles. Brovender sees an ironic advantage in this: "Because women are not taken seriously, [women] can do creative things. I'd like women with backgrounds in music, art, and literature to establish an integrative position between their competence in these fields and Torah in order to create new Torah enterprises... women have an advantage, because they're not under pressure to think like seventeenth-century rabbis."[32]

A comparison between the Bais Yaakov schools and Michlelet Beruria reveals similar organizational roots. Both institutions were conceived of by women. In order to bring their hopes to fruition, these foresighted women sought rabbinical counsel to gain support and the creation of an institutional framework. In terms of content, Bais Yaakov introduced a text-based curriculum for Jewish girls and Michlelet Beruria extended that model to more mature women, included Talmud study, and pioneered a *kollel* program. At Beruria, all three levels of learning in Dr. Naomi Cohen's scheme were fostered: acculturation, practical skills and the more sophisticated personal enrichment which can prepare students for community leadership (within the bounds of the woman's role within *halakhah*).

Unlike Bais Yaakov, Michlelet Beruria did not expand into a network of schools which grew into a movement with ancillary organizations and publications. Although it sustained a student body of 100-120 students in 1984 and provided day care and kindergarten on the premises for students' children,[33] the future was not secure. In 1986, the *kollel* closed[34] and the level

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[32]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 48-49.

[33]Cashman, "Breaking the barriers," 23.

[34]Greenwald, "Wise Women," 13. The closing of the *kollel* and Bina's departure from Michlelet Beruria coincided.

of study at Beruria declined.[35] As the result of an infusion of funding, Michlelet Beruria was rededicated as Midreshet Lindenbaum in 1988. During that ceremony, Rabbi Brovender expressed his continued commitment to women's *talmud torah*: "The aim . . . is to equip women to make both decisions in their own daily lives and executive decisions that affect others in the greater context of Torah, and 'this means learning more and not less.'"[36]

Machon Pardes

Machon Pardes was founded in 1972 by a group of men "who wanted a place where people could study Jewish texts without all the subtle cues [regarding proper observance] that you're given if you go to a regular yeshivah." Pardes is the only Israeli institution for Torah study which is committed both to *halakhah* and to men and women learning together.[37] Brochures about Pardes reveal the institute's self-conscious identity as a place where *halakhah* and mixed study, tradition and free inquiry, meet.[38]

Rabbi Levi Lauer, an ordinee of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and Director of Pardes, explains the reasoning which underpins the institute's commitment to coeducational learning:

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[35]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 61.

[36]Beth Uval, "Biblical Women as Spiritual Models," *The Jerusalem Post*, (Jerusalem: 5 June 1988), 5.

[37]Gail Resnick, assistant director at Machon Pardes, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 29 July 1991.

[38] The following description of Pardes is included in a brochure advertising the institute's course offerings during the summer of 1991: "The Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies is a school which teaches adults how to learn Torah, how to read those texts which are the source of Jewish beliefs and values. Since its establishment in Jerusalem in 1972, Pardes has maintained its independence and remains unaffiliated with any religious or political organization. At Pardes, men and women study together. While committed to Halakhah (Jewish Law), Pardes does not expect its students to adhere to any particular standard of traditional observance."

> If there is a place in the Jewish tradition for hard justice -- male -- and mercy -- female -- then the outlook of the two genders can temper each other. The informing of the text by this dialectic brings a texture to the learning not there in single-sex learning. That is a prime justification for men and women learning together Women have been denied access to learning. The only way women will be taken seriously is if men give them the keys to the kingdom of learning.[39]

Lauer seems to believe that women and men have different tendencies and can better understand their own limitations and one another's perspectives by learning together. He recognizes the educational opportunity that institutions like Pardes hold for women. Men hold the power to allow women into the halls of Jewish learning. With this attitude in mind, the founders of Pardes were men who decided to welcome women into the study environment that they created.

Equality in the classroom at Pardes is in the eye of the beholder to a certain extent. Linda Gradstein, a former Pardes student, remarks:

> I don't think [instructors] saw any difference between men's learning and women's learning. I think the point was that there should be as much good learning as there could be... for men and women. If anything, I think they try to encourage women's learning only because they know that there aren't that many other places [where] women can go.[40]

Lauer is not as confident. He believes that at Pardes, women are respected for their intellectual abilities; however, he believes that some teachers are easier on female students. In his view, it is healthy for the faculty to admit and work on such discrepancies, but it isn't good for education.[41]

Machon Pardes is a unique melange of university, seminary and yeshivah approaches to Jewish learning. It shares its commitment to

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[39]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 79.

[40]Linda Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1991.

[41]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 85 & 89-90.

coeducational learning with Judaic studies programs at universities and rabbinical seminaries outside the Orthodox community. Like Bais Yaakov and Michlelet Beruria, Pardes provides an atmosphere where students learn *talmud torah* for the its own sake. Together with Beruria, Pardes is a halakhic institution that educates women on all three levels delineated by Dr. Naomi Cohen. It represents an effort by men to welcome women into Torah learning that acknowledges women's potential to contribute to the corpus of Jewish knowledge. Learning is the primary agenda for all students at Pardes, but adopting a more observant lifestyle is subtly encouraged.[42]

Who studies at Beruria and Pardes?

While Michlelet Beruria and Machon Pardes primarily offer instruction in English, Beruria is aimed at women who are traditionally observant or who are becoming *baalot teshuvah*. In contrast, with it's coeducational format, Pardes appeals to few Orthodox students while attracting women and men who are looking for an introduction to Torah learning and a greater understanding of halakhic observance.

Variations on a traditional theme:

The pedagogical styles at Pardes and Beruria combine *chevruta* preparation in a *beit midrash*[43] with subsequent classroom study. The daily regimen of class and *beit midrash* study which has typified yeshivah study for centuries is an innovation for women's learning.

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[42]Ibid., 85: Lauer is quoted: "Unlike at some other yeshivot, at Pardes, women are measured by their intellect, not by the length of their sleeves. Our priority is not to get them married, although I hope they will."

[43]Students study the texts for a given course, typically Gemara, ideally in pairs or possibly in groups of three, working out the translation, major themes and difficulties of the text in preparation for classroom learning.

Within this educational format, female *chevruta* pairs experiment with alternative modes within traditional Torah study. At Pardes, Linda Gradstein had male teachers and her first *chevruta* was a man. The process which evolved with Gradstein and her partner engendered a sharp-edged competitiveness:

> I think the system and the way it's learned... encourages competition... one person says something and the other person says: "No, that's not right because of this..." The first person says "No, you're wrong because of this..." and they insult each other.

Her teacher encouraged this method which she found harsh. He had been educated in a traditional Orthodox yeshivah and considered that style of engaging with a study partner normal and productive.[44]

During her second year at Pardes, Gradstein had a female *chevruta*, and their learning yielded a completely different style of study:

> When I was with my *chevruta*, Susan... we would talk about something or we would argue about it, but if I saw that she was right, I would say: "You know what, you're right," or I'd say, "That's a good point." ... Maybe because I wasn't that invested in it, but there wasn't that competitiveness about "I have to be right nine times out of ten."[45]

Gradstein's experience is not unique. Women seem to bring different backgrounds and expectations to *chevruta* study than do men; this may be due to the general lack of exposure to *talmud torah* which women have in their backgrounds. For example when a pair of male students engage in Talmud study, they typically sit across from one another,[46] in a confrontational physical posture that complements the argumentative attitude considered appropriate in

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[44]Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1991.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 88.

much of the yeshivah world. After all, the interaction between talmud study partners is known as a *milchamta*,[47] Aramaic for 'battle.' When Deborah Weissman studied at the Shalom Hartman Institute,

> ...she and her [female] partner decided to sit next to each other. They would go off on tangents, and even chat, but their conversations remained related to the text. The rabbis believe you can study Oral and Written Torah with a genuine friend, [Weissman] said, someone with whom you can eat, drink, sleep, reveal life and Torah secrets... [Weissman] called paired learning "learning mediated by relationship." She wondered if mixed *chevruta* was possible.[48]

As newcomers to the process of *milchamta*, Weissman and her partner created a new mode of *chevruta* by doing what felt natural for them without trying to conform to traditional postures or modes of interaction.

What prompts women to make adjustments in an age-old system of learning? Does this behavior support Rabbi Lauer's assertion that women have a tendency toward mercy and that men are more disposed to hard justice? Or does Rabbi Brovender's view, that the marginal position of women within traditional communities frees them from the expectations and experiential rigidity which is imposed upon men, explain the variations which women insert in the *milchamta* process?

As in all nature versus nurture questions, the factors involved are complex and interdependent and there is little evidence which would support either tendency fully. Leah Shakdiel and her husband Moshe Landsman's early attempts to study Torah together bring out the depth of feeling and tradition which men learn and the lack of previous assumptions that frees women to question subtle aspects of *chevruta* learning. During a talk, Leah

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[47]Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1991.

[48]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 87-88.

recounted that when she began studying Talmud with Landsman, he would constantly yell at her. When she asked him why, he explained that you have to yell when you learn Gemara. She concluded her story saying, "When women start learning Gemara, they're not going to have to yell to learn it."[49]

Within the framework developed in a world of learning directed and dominated by men for centuries, members of the first generation of women engaging in *chevruta* learning in a *beit midrash* setting are discovering new possibilities within the parameters of the traditional system.

Limitations and frustrations

Despite the innovations which Machon Pardes and Michlelet Beruria provide, the values of the Jewish society within which these educational bodies operate limit the scope of the changes they have achieved. Pardes, Beruria and similar institutions fall short in two major areas: setting women's studies as a priority and offering advanced levels of study for female students.

One litmus test for the value of a program is to check the level to which its funding is maintained during economic hardship. When institutions face financial strain, marginal programs are eliminated. The mid-1980's found Michlelet Beruria-Yeshivat Hamivtar in fiscal straits, the larger and more lucrative *michlalah* that catered to young women, especially from the United States, remained; but the *kollel*, a unique opportunity for mature women to engage in full-time learning on an advanced level and receive a stipend was eliminated. The uniqueness of the *kollel* at Michlelet Beruria intensified the vacuum which was left in its absence.

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[49]Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1991.

For women seeking to engage in Jewish learning on a high level, institutions like Michlelet Beruria and Machon Pardes are a beginning. For a woman who has achieved a basic or intermediate level of text study and wants to continue, the options are limited. Despite the progress which these institutions symbolize, the feeling that women are fortunate guests is difficult to shake. Recalling her studies at Pardes, Vanessa Ochs admires the institute and its opportunities for women, but with reservations:

> Pardes was an institution that welcomed women. It was sensitive to women... But Pardes was kind men opening up their doors to women. We were guests on male turf.[50]

In a world with limited choices, Machon Pardes and Michlelet Beruria have been among the most viable options for women who want to learn.

For higher levels of learning, the options narrow dramatically. With the exception of the *kollel* at Michlelet Beruria, until 1988[51] the only options open to a woman who wanted to immerse herself in advanced *talmud torah* were study at a university, at a rabbinical seminary in the Conservative, Reconstructionist or Reform movements, or on her own with teachers or rabbis who would consent to tutor her. This can be a deceivingly limited array of choices. For a woman who wants to learn in a traditional milieu for the sake of study alone, programs which put her on a track toward an advanced degree or rabbinical ordination are inappropriate. In the event that a candidate's understanding of *halakhah* or her level of religious observance preclude coeducational learning, only private study will meet her criteria - - if there are

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[50]Ochs, Words on Fire, 100.

[51]During the fall of 1988, Matan, the Women's Institute for Torah Studies, opened with a scholar's program which provides a stipend, so highly qualified advanced students can learn full time.

teachers willing to learn with her. These same issues apply to women who want to engage in advanced levels of *talmud torah* on a part time basis.

In sum, institutions like Michlelet Beruria and Machon Pardes represent men's efforts to welcome women into the realm of *talmud torah*. However, the programs which such schools offer are of limited scope and depth, proving insufficient for the student who has thoroughly explored the threshold and is ready to enter the palace.

## Filling the Gaps: Women Create Opportunities for *Talmud Torah*

While educational institutions like Machon Pardes and Michlelet Beruria, rabbinical seminaries which accept female students and university programs in Talmud have expanded the opportunities for women's studies during the past decades, women who seek Jewish learning in a more religiously traditional atmosphere on an advanced level have been left unsatisfied. These women have used their creativity, available resources and ingenuity as they pursue alternative ways to continue their studies. Their efforts fall into three categories: learning alone, group study, and founding educational institutions run by women for women.

### Private learning

The process of becoming capable of learning Jewish texts autonomously is arduous even for bright, motivated students. Linda Gradstein, who came to Pardes after completing two degrees in Arab studies at Georgetown and who is now fluent in Hebrew and Arabic, relates that: "After two years of studying Gemara fairly intensively, I can't really learn on my own. With the help of Steinsalz[52] to a degree, but then what you're really learning is

Steinsalz, you're not learning Gemara."[53] Opting to learn alone is a viable choice for few women.

Women who choose to learn on their own tend to be equipped with experience in Jewish study (often taught by their fathers) from an early age, with advanced study of Jewish texts within an academic setting, or with willing teachers who act as guides when needed. Chana Safrai,[54] Director of the Judith Lieberman Institute[55] in Israel and an itinerant professor at Amsterdam University, in Holland,[56] is such a woman. Chana and her brother Ze'ev

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[52]Rabbi Adin Steinsalz is a contemporary Israeli talmudist whose annotated translations of the Gemara into Hebrew aids students of Talmud throughout the world. Several tractates are available in English as well.

[53]Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1990.

[54]Chana Safrai is a native Israeli and an Orthodox talmudist. She has served as Director of the Judith Lieberman Institute since she was selected as its first director in 1981. Safrai has taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Amsterdam University in Holland, and to informal study groups for women in addition to teaching at the Judith Lieberman Institute. She served on the steering committee for the First Jerusalem International Conference on Women and Judaism: Halakhah and the Jewish Woman. She has been recognized by the Israeli Ministry of Education for her work in women's education. In: Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 291,303-304.

[55]Machon Judith Lieberman is located at the Ramot Shapira Education Centre at Moshav Beit Meir, the Judean Hills. [In: Carol Ungar, "There Are Courses by the Dozens," *In Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: 2 September 1988), 17.] This institute for women's *talmud torah* is named after Judith Lieberman, the first Hebrew principal and later dean of Hebrew studies in the first North American Jewish day school for girls, the Shulamit School for Girls in New York. Leiberman was the daughter of Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan (Berlin) and wife of Talmudic scholar, Saul Lieberman. In: Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 302-303; Molly Myerowitz, "The Taste of Tiflut: Opening the Talmud to Women," *Radcliffe Quarterly* 75 (December 1989), 23; and, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Saul Lieberman."

The Judith Lieberman Institute offers courses in Hebrew for native Israeli women. [In: Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 304.] The institute's students range in age from their late teens through their 40s. There are 30-40 women who study 22 hours per week, learning topics including *Mishnah*, *Gemara*, *Midrash*, Biblical commentaries and rabbinic responsa. Additionally, "several hundred women come into contact with the institute each year through short seminars, courses, and correspondence courses... Most of the women who come [to the Lieberman Institute] attend short seminars, 'seed courses,' that teach women in Jewish sacred writings, literature, law and history." Of the 16 faculty members listed in the Institute's catalogue, four are women. Chana Safrai and Professor Nechama Leibowitz are the two full time female faculty members. Safrai teaches *Midrash* and *Mishnah*; Leibowitz instructs students in Biblical and exegetical literature. In: Myerowitz, "The Taste of Tiflut," 22-23.

[56]According to Ochs, Chana Safrai had been brought to Amsterdam University, a Catholic institution, for at least four fall terms during the 1980's "to give seminars on the Jewish origins of

learned Torah together from their father, Samuel Safrai, professor of Jewish History at Hebrew University. Safrai dedicated himself to teaching his two children. When Chana was thirteen, her father nearly cancelled his travels abroad during a sabbatical year when it seemed that he wouldn't find a tutor who would train both his children. He went only after finding a teacher for Chana and Ze'ev.[57]

Among Israelis, Chana Safrai is outstanding in her dedication to Jewish feminism[58] and seeking to improve the status of women within the framework of *halakhah*;[59] she also stands among the ranks of the Talmudic elite, having gone through the *daf yomi* cycle.[60] Completion of the *daf yomi* cycle indicates a devoted and knowledgeable talmudist. Safrai explains the process of private study and interchange with her father which constituted her *daf yomi* study:

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Christianity. At the Catholic university, she could teach from the perspective of faith, something she felt she could not do when she had taught at the Hebrew University." In Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 309.

[57]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 293 and 299.

[58]In *Words on Fire* (291), Ochs offers a summary of Chana Safrai's opinions which are contrary to the norms of her Israeli Orthodox community:

> She thinks that there must be some way of both keeping Jewish tradition and recognizing present realities, for a tradition that ignores reality will be the death of the Jewish people. She thinks we need tradition to sustain us, and reality, too. She thinks her role is to ask questions, even when male Talmud scholars chide her, saying that one doesn't ask such questions.

Ochs (293-294) writes that Safrai helped organize a conference on Jewish feminist theology at Hebrew University during the spring semester, 1988. Among the eighty conference participants, Chana Safrai represented an educated, aware religious and feminist position. She told Ochs after the conference:

> I'm waiting for the time when a day like this will give *me* something. I see this as a part of a long term campaign to make people aware. To create a crowd that can talk about these issues. To open the window a crack. There were good people there. Women from Haifa and Be'er Sheva made the effort to come. (p 294)

[59]Ibid., 302.

[60]*Daf yomi*, Hebrew for 'a daily page' refers to a cycle of talmud study for students throughout the world who learn one page of Talmud each day for seven years, the amount of time required to read the entire Talmud at that rate. There is a calendar which accompanies the cycle, producing a feeling of community as the talmudist knows that there are Jews throughout the world who are learning the same page on the same day for the sake of devotion to Judaism and study.

> I'd finish my [daily page of Talmud] learning and then call my father by breakfast time and we'd discuss it. I think this study of mine was what earned me the right to inherit my grandfather's Talmud... the boys got their own for their bar mitzvah. This, undertaking the *daf yomi*, was the 'in' sign. I managed to convince them I was 'in' on the game. Now, I'm studying it all again. I wasn't well enough acquainted with the lingo the first time.[61]

Undertaking the *daf yomi* cycle is a means toward gaining recognition as a serious Jewish learner for women engaged in Talmud study. This endeavor gives credence to both the individual talmudist and to the stature of women's learning within her community. Safrai believes that the only way to effect change is to study the *halakhah*.[62]

For Leah Shakdiel, the *daf yomi* cycle is a singular ambition for herself as a Jew and as a woman who believes she may have the potential of contributing to the corpus of Jewish learning after engaging in *talmud torah* by this traditional route.

> One of the few ambitions I do have in life is to complete the whole Talmud on the *daf yomi* cycle, which I'm going to start on the next cycle... Finally, I can do it, I can play the game. I can do it the way [men] do. And then, once I do it the way they do... I can also do it my way, which maybe is different. But first, it has to be the way that they do it.[63]

The individual approach to advanced Torah study is available to a select group of Jewish women and the *daf yomi* cycle is the ultimate learning experience for the Talmudic scholar. Few outstanding women are able to seriously contemplate this option.

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[61]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 301.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Shakdiel, interview, 13 July 1991.

Creating an environment for a study group

An alternative method for pursuing Torah study, accessible to women with less sophisticated backgrounds or less time for Jewish learning, is finding a teacher and enlisting a group of interested participants to form a study group. The nature of such groups varies widely, from an occasional Talmud study session[64] to a weekly *parashat hashavua* class. Likewise, the motivations for starting a study group vary.

The way Dr. Aviva Zornberg's[65] *parashat hashavua* class started typifies one mechanism by which women create informal opportunities for Jewish learning. In 1981, after Zornberg left her position teaching English literature at Hebrew University to care for her children, a neighbor asked if she would offer a *parashat hashavua* class one evening each week for women in the area. Zornberg explains, "She knew me as an academic... and she just assumed that having been a rabbi's daughter and a student at Gateshead, I would have enough knowledge to do a little *shiur*." After considerable hesitation because she doubted whether she was qualified, Zornberg agreed to teach and immersed herself in this new project.[66] At Hebrew University, Zornberg inserted Torah learning into the study of English literature. Instructing

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[64]During Shabbat afternoon, 13 July 1991, Leah Shakdiel led a Talmud study at her synagogue in Yerocham for members of that shul's a Rosh Chodesh group and guests who had come as that small group of women honored the birth of two baby girls into their community.

[65]Aviva Zornberg is a George Eliot scholar who taught English literature at Hebrew University until she left teaching to care for her children. The elder daughter of Rabbi Doctor Ze'ev Gottlieb, Zornberg's childhood in Glasgow was occupied with Jewish learning at her father's side from age three. During her last years of secondary school she studied and boarded at Gateshead, an Orthodox school; throughout her years at Cambridge, where she did her post-secondary studies, Zornberg studied Jewish texts on her own. [Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 114-120.]

[66]Ibid., 121-122.

a *parashat hashavua* class was the first step in Zornberg's transition to teaching Torah with an infusion of literary disciplines.[67]

Zornberg taught *parashat hashavua* weekly in her students' apartments, but her wisdom flowed beyond the confines of her 'classroom.' Aviva had a cadre of followers:

> ...women who caught her lectures and spent the rest of the week quoting them, teaching them to children at the Sabbath table, sharing them with friends at work, with husbands in bed. For busy women, Aviva's lectures had great advantage: even if you had not time to prepare the material, the lectures were still accessible. The only commitment you had to make was to show up each week.[68]

The structure of the *parashat hashavua* class suited students and instructor alike. Women who were interested in Torah study were able to prioritize one evening each week for their own edification. The more time they spent preparing, the greater their learning, but every lesson was accessible to anyone who attended. The class impacted Zornberg's life as well. Her reputation as a scholar with a unique approach[69] to learning Torah spread. Over time she was hired to teach courses at the Jerusalem College for Adults, the Jerusalem branch of Touro College,[70] Machon Pardes[71] and Matan (see below).[72]

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[67]Greenwald, "Wise women," 11.

[68]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 109.

[69]In "Wise Women...," Greenwald relates that Zornberg utilizes the literary methods she has learned in studying Torah. In recent years, she has begun developing her own synthesis, drawing on her own discipline as well as from psychology, anthropology and others. Zornberg explains, "I'm interested in universal concerns, what every human being cares about in his personal experience. *Hafoch ba vehafoch ba* - 'Turn it over and over.' I want to find it, and it is there." In: Greenwald, "Wise women," 11.

[70]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 122-123.

[71]Ibid., 327.

[72]Greenwald, "Wise women," 11.

Another model for starting a study group is provided by women seeking to supplement their work or study routines by developing a new mode of learning within an existing educational institution or by creating a new setting for study. During the 1980's, female students at Machon Pardes have taken each of these routes.

After her first year of studying Gemara, Linda Gradstein and a handful of other women who were learning at Pardes wanted to continue at a more advanced level. There were no suitable courses for them among the selection offered at Pardes. In response to their request:

> One of the teachers at Pardes had a class for us... Two afternoons a week for 2 1/2 hours each time, there were maybe five or six women and it was really serious learning. It's something that [the instructors at Pardes] were so committed to that somebody found time to do it...[73]

The advanced Talmud class continued meeting until the students' divergent commitments and conflicting schedules led to its disintegration.[74]

Sue Kahn, who studied at Pardes from Fall 1987 through Spring 1989 felt limited by the perspective that her instructors offered.[75] She perceived a limit in the responsiveness from faculty members to certain lines of inquiry, especially questions from a feminist perspective. She was benefiting from her classes and felt able to learn skills from men, but she wanted female instructors for their brand of wisdom and as role models. In response to her need, Kahn founded the Lena Slom School for the Study of Torah.[76]

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[73]Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1991.

[74]Ibid.

[75]At that time, all instructors at Pardes were male.

[76]Sue Kahn, currently a graduate student in Anthropology/Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, former student at Machon Pardes and founder and former director of the Lena Slom School for the Study of Torah , interview by author, Tape recording, 22 July 1991. [Kahn named

The statement of purpose expressed in a flier with information about Kahn's school expresses her aims:

> The Lena Slom School for the Study of Torah offers women the opportunity to seriously examine Jewish traditional texts in an atmosphere of free and open inquiry. Based on the conviction that Torah should be accessible to all, the School aims to create a rich learning environment where students are encouraged to approach the texts with both the keenness of their intellects and the fullness of their life experiences.
>
> While all the teachers have extensive Torah backgrounds, they do not claim to be Halakhic authorities, nor do they see themselves in opposition to existing frameworks for Torah study. On the contrary, the School is designed to act as a supplement to existing programs or as an additional means to deepen Torah knowledge.
>
> Run collectively by women for women, the Lena Slom School provides an unique, non-hierarchical environment for women to pursue the study of Torah.[77]

Kahn established and directed the school. Classes were held in her home. At least three courses were held each semester; each class met one evening per week for at least two hours over ten successive weeks. Class size varied: the Chumash class which ran for the first two semesters had 10-12 students; a Mishnah class had twenty. Courses at the Slom School incorporated *chevruta* study with lecture/discussion. Kahn charged a nominal fee (50 shekels) per course with all monies paying for teachers' salaries and supplies.

Kahn hired only Orthodox instructors. She was interested in learning from a traditional perspective and she wanted to create a program which was accessible to all women. The students represented a variety of backgrounds

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the school after her grandmother, who was committed to education. It existed for three semesters, until Kahn returned to the U.S.]

[77]Informational flier about the Lena Slom School and its program.

and levels of observance. The majority of students were from America along with a couple of women each from France, England and South Africa, and one native Israeli. Kahn explains the perspective which unified the women who taught and learned at her school:

> I think what made it different than a regular women's yeshivah was that ... people were basically self-proclaimed feminists in a Western style, but they were all into learning... there were certain assumptions that people took for granted at the Lena Slom School: that people like to learn, any question is a valid question, and the answer that you heard is not necessarily the only answer, and that we [each] really have to put these things together in our own way.[78]

The Lena Slom School thrived during the three semesters of its existence. Because of the limited of course offerings compared with the number of women who wanted to teach, Kahn had to turn some instructors away, and there was no shortage of women who were bright, motivated, and willing to devote evenings to *talmud torah*.[79] When she returned to the United States for graduate studies, the school folded.[80]

Like Zornberg's *parashat hashavua* class, the success of the Lena Slom School indicates that there are women eager to engage in Torah study for women by women. In contrast with the advanced Talmud course provided as an exception under the auspices of Pardes, the Lena Slom School remained viable because of its variety of courses and critical mass of participants. The success and dissolution of the Slom School attests to a desire to teach and learn in a female, religious environment that is ready to be

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[78]Summary of the Lena Slom School and its operation derived from: Kahn, interview, 22 July 1991.

[79]Ibid.

[80]In her interview with this author, Kahn gave no indication that any of the women teaching or learning in her school expressed interest in continuing the institution in her absence.

tapped and to a dearth of individuals who are willing to initiate and organize talented instructors to establish informal ventures like Kahn's school

Transformation from a Study Group to a Women's Institute for Torah Study

Matan, the Women's Institute for Torah Study, began in much the same way as Aviva Zornberg's *parashat hashavua* class. Again, a woman with an interest in learning Torah approached another woman with the background and ability to teach, and it proceeded from there. During the early 1980's, Lili Weil,[81] an Orthodox Jew who had studied Judaism by reading on her own for years, wanted to learn more and to do it in English. She started taking courses at the Jerusalem College for Women (also known as the Michlalah). Weil took a course with Malke Bina on the halakhic sources about whether or not women could engage in learning Talmud.

When the course ended, Lili approached her teacher. "Now that we can learn, why don't we start tomorrow?" Bina taught several *sugiot*, then went abroad for a year. Upon her return, Weil asked if Bina would teach Talmud for her and a few friends in Hebrew. Bina said she didn't have much time but she took Weil's phone number. Two years later, during the summer of 1986, Bina contacted Lili Weil to see if she were still interested in learning Talmud. Lili Weil immediately contacted some of her friends and the class of four or five women began meeting on Sunday and Thursday mornings around the dining

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[81]Lili Weil, a native of Paris, emigrated to Israel with her husband and children in 1970. Weil grew up in a secular Zionist family; her parents emigrated to France from Poland. From the time of her marriage in 1960, Weil became increasingly observant (she gradually became Orthodox), learning about Judaism from her in-laws and reading on her own. She was trying to understand her emotional attachment to Judaism and to Israel through intellectual exploration. When Weil's children were ready to enter school, the only Jewish day school in Paris was on the other side of the city, so Weil and another mother with a school-age child co-founded a Jewish school which still exists in Paris.

room table in Weil's home.[82] Instructor and students alike took their learning seriously

> Line by line, Malke explained the material. The women, busily annotating the margins of their texts with translations of unfamiliar Aramaic terms, asked the same questions about the passage that students of Talmud have always puzzled over. If the students were clear about the text, certain of the issues, and how they hung together, Malke was satisfied and moved on. The students were sharp, wide awake, hungry to gather information, and committed to getting a knack for the methodology.[83]

During that year of Talmud study, Lili Weil met Fruma Gurfinkle, a Soviet immigrant who was studying with Nechama Leibowitz.[84] Weil asked if she would be interested in teaching a *parashat hashavua* class and Gurfinkle said she was. Weil then approached the Talmud study group, which had grown to about ten women, to check if they wouldn't mind spending an additional hour to study the weekly Torah portion since they were meeting twice a week anyway. They agreed. During the summer of 1987, Gurfinkle began teaching in Weil's dining room as well.

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[82]Lili Weil, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 1 August 1991. Weil explained that the group studied sections of tractates Pesachim and Sanhedrin; she did not indicate whether the group requested special sections relating to women's issues or if Bina directed them that way. Presumably they were not picking and choosing according to topic, but rather going through the Gemara.

[83]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 242-243.

[84]Nechama Leibowitz is the Golda Meir of Torah study, one of this century's outstanding teachers who has no female peers. Vanessa Ochs writes: "She is the source, the real thing while all consider it an honor to have studied with her, being her student has never been a privilege limited to a scholarly elite. Anyone at all could study with her. Over the years from 1953 to 1971 her mimeographed self-instruction sheets on the weekly Torah portion, *Gilyonot Le-iyyun Befarashat Ha-shavua*, were distributed around the world... For years she gave a weekly radio lesson. Her studies, placing Bible in the context of ancient and modern Jewish Bible commentary, have been edited into the best-selling and widely translated six-volume *Studies in the Weekly Sidra*, complete with questions for self-instruction to spur on further learning. For beginners and for rabbis preparing their weekly sermons, Nechama's books are a major source." In: Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 268.

As the second year of their studies together progressed, the women began to discuss creating an institution which they would call Matan,[85] the Hebrew acronym for Women's Institute for Torah Study (WITS). The need for such a school was apparent, there was no religious institution which offered traditional study on an advanced level for women since the demise of the *kollel* at Michlelet Beruria. Their ingenuity and enthusiasm was spurred on by Malke Bina's plan. Weil recalls:

> This is something Malke must have had in her head for years. She came immediately with a rebbe[86] and said, "the program is ready". We had a lot of chutzpah because we had no money, but someone promised us money, and we started.

In the fall of 1988, two years after starting Talmud study together, Matan opened.[87]

Briefly they considered opening under the auspices of Rabbi Riskin's yeshivah and school for women, the former Beruria on the verge of becoming Midreshet Lindenbaum, which no longer offered a program for mature women. The founders of Matan approached Riskin, offering to create a women's section which would be an autonomous program within the school and to handle their own fundraising. Disagreement arose when the representatives of Riskin's Ohr Torah-Ohr Rivka wanted the monies raised by the women's section to go into the general fund. Knowing the fate of the *kollel* at Beruria which lacked an independent source of funds, Weil and her friends rejected the terms being offered and decided to found their own school. As a result, Matan was

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[85] מכון תורתי לנשים = מת"ן

[86] The rabbinical authority behind Matan is Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, the American-born head of the Gush Etzion Yeshivah. He heads Matan's rabbinical board.

[87] Description of the study group and the establishment of Matan drawn from: Weil, interview, 1 August 1990.

established as an independent institution run by women for women's Torah learning.

In the 1990-91 Matan newsletter, Malke Bina describes the dramatic success of her school:

> Three years ago, a group of women personally involved in serious Jewish study... and I, felt the need for an institution devoted to intellectually stimulating Jewish learning for women and established Matan. From a study group of ten women around a dining room table, Matan has grown into an educational center where over 250 women learn in its various programs.[88]

In its first semester, Matan had a total enrollment of 112 students and 75 in its second semester. The women range in age from 20-75. At Matan, classes are taught in Hebrew. Of the student body, 95% live in Israel and 20% are native Israelis.[89]

Matan offers a variety of programs. The scholars' program is for outstanding students who have earned a bachelor's degree and have had at least two years of post-secondary Judaic studies. Matan provides a stipend for women in this program so they can engage in study for at least 25 hours each week without needing to work. One quarter of Matan's budget in its first year went to stipends for the scholars.[90] For women who are gifted, but don't qualify for the scholar's program, there is a *beit midrash* program. Women accepted as *beit midrash* students may learn three days a week with no tuition fee, an arrangement that enables them to engage in *talmud torah* and to work.

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[88]Malke Bina, "The Quiet Revolution," *MATAN* מתן *NEWS* (Jerusalem: 1990-91/5751), 1.

[89]Randi Jo Land, "Wits about them," *Jerusalem Post Pesach Magazine* (Jerusalem: 19 April 1989), 16.

[90]Ibid.

Sometimes a woman can gain acceptence into the Scholar's Program after studying as a *beit midrash* student for a year.[91]

Matan also offers classes for women interested in taking a course or two, like the founders who learned with Bina in Weil's home. The women who take advantage of this program, like their counterparts in the scholars' program and the *beit midrash*, are highly motivated and come equipped with previous Jewish learning. "Most women studying at WITS part-time are accomplished in other fields. The level of the class is directed at more educated, advanced women."[92]

In its third year, Matan introduced a program for Soviet immigrants which is taught by two women who emigrated to Israel from the Soviet Union and are now comfortable with Hebrew and learned in Judaica. Because of their experiences as Jews in the USSR and as immigrants to Israel, Emma Slava and Yehudit Levine, were asked to create and implement Matan's Russian Program. In its present form, the Russian Program is a three month course in Jewish history and culture which meets two evenings per week.[93] The first time it was offered, women were recruited from local *ulpanim* ; since then, they come in increasing numbers by word of mouth. Participants receive a stipend of 75 shekels per month "which is nothing [for the average Israeli], but for the Russians, it's a lot of money."[94]

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[91]Weil, interview, 1 August 1991

[92]Land, "Wits about them," 16.

[93]"Matan Launches its Russian Program," *MATAN* מתן *NEWS* (Jerusalem: 1990-91/5751), 1. the first time it was offered as a six month course. in Weil, interview, 1 August 1991

[94]Weil, interview, 1 August 1991

While Hebrew is the primary language of instruction throughout the year, there are occasional course offerings in English and French.[95] A three week summer program in English combines classroom and *beit midrash* learning. During the month of Elul and the intermediate days of Sukkot and Pesach, Matan holds intensive study sessions which are conducted in English. These special courses are aimed at tourists and visitors in particular.[96]

Matan offers programming which contributes to the fulfillment of its singular goal, "to provide women with the opportunity to pursue Torah study on a mature and intellectual level."[97] As educational director, Bina aims to create "a learning community." There are no worship services at Matan,[98] nor any requirements for ritual observance. Instructors do not indoctrinate students in the course of learning, which causes some consternation to women seeking a right view. Lili Weil observes:

> Some of the women, the Americans, were a little bit disappointed because there was this course on *halakhah* and all the sources were [explored], but that was it. They wanted *hashkafah*,[99] but we don't have *hashkafah*. The women should decide what is their own *hashkafah*.[100]

Matan provides an atmosphere where students from a variety of backgrounds can comfortably learn. Weil continues: "I think we're accepted all over

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[95]1990-91 course listings.

[96]WITS מתן informational brochure, 5.

[97]Ibid., 1.

[98]Malke Bina, interview with author. Hand-written notes, Jerusalem, Israel, 8 August 1991.

[99]*Hashkafah* is literally a 'view,' and it implies here a particular religious perspective which would provide a single lens for understanding the text's meaning.

[100]Weil, interview, 1 August 1991.

because I can see we have women who are coming who are *harediot* (ultra-orthodox)."[101]

Malke Bina has a clear plan for her younger, full-time students' futures. She predicts that as increasing numbers of women seek Jewish learning, the need for female instructors will also rise.

> We want to create a cadre of knowledgeable women in all realms of Jewish studies who are able to communicate their understanding of Torah to other women... That's just as important - if not more important - than a rabbi. It's time for women to write, not necessarily responsa, but articles on topics, even halakhic issues, in Jewish studies.[102]

## Transcending Gender Issues: Beit Midrash Elul

There is an institute for *talmud torah* where an even mix of men and women, secular and religious Jews learn together and share the knowledge that results from their *beit midrash* with the rest of Israeli society though their outreach programing. Beit Midrash Elul's name is derived from the quotation in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Eruvin: Both these and those are words of a living god.[103] Elul's informational and fundraising literature clearly states the institute's goals and approaches to study.

> The Elul Center was founded in Jerusalem in 1989 in an effort to create a pluralistic Jewish educational framework composed of secular and religious Jews. Elul operates out of fundamental recognition that religious and secular Jews have been jointly

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[101]Ibid.

[102]Land, "Wits about them," 16.

[103]"Their name is a contraction of the words *elu ve-elu* (italics added), which begin a Talmudic passage culminating in the description of a rabbinical dispute by saying that a heavenly voice was heard saying 'both these [words] and those are the words of the living God.'" In: Haim Shapiro, "Learning Together," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 10 October 1990).

The translation of the Hebrew phrase "אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים" included in the body of this chapter appears on the cover of one of Elul's pamphlets.

> entrusted with the legacy of the Jewish past and are equal partners in the Jewish future. At the core of Elul's programs is a learning center devoted to examining the concept of Talmud Torah (Jewish studies) and the creation of dialogue and understanding between religious and secular Jews in Israel
>
> Elul's programs include the study of the principal texts of the Jewish religious and cultural tradition, including Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, Philosophy, Zionist Texts, and Modern Hebrew Literature. Through a passionate engagement with the sources from which ideas and values spring, Elul's members develop a sense of shared destiny deeper than their religious and ideological differences. Elul views diversity within learning as well as the variety of approaches possible to creativity and action as a right and privilege of our generation rather than as a 'problem' which must be overcome.[104]

Beit Midrash Elul began as an informal study group. During the late 1980's, while Ruth Calderon,[105] a secular Israeli, was studying at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem,[106] representatives from the Gesher program[107] approached a group of Hartman students (that included Calderon) to invite them to work together. Calderon expressed interest in working with the religiously oriented people from Gesher, but only after the two groups had studied together. She believed they had to study together with mutual respect and freedom to disagree before they could cooperate in a program for teaching others.[108]

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[104]Elul English language informational/fundraising brochure which focuses primarily on the *beit midrash* program (not dated)

[105]Calderon, co-director of Beit Midrash Elul, was born and raised in Tel Aviv. She earned a BA in Talmud and Jewish Thought and Philosophy from Oranim Institute and her MA in Talmud from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She is currently working on her doctoral studies.

[106]Carol Ungar, "Women of the Book," *In Jerusalem*, (Jerusalem: 2 September 1988), 16-17; and, Ruth Calderon, Co-director Beit Midrash Elul and doctoral candidate at Hebrew University, interview by author, Hand-written notes, Jerusalem, Israel, 18 July 1991.

[107]Gesher is a program that develops and conducts opportunities for dialogues between secular and religious youth.

[108]Calderon, interview, 18 August 1991

Founded in 1989, Beit Midrash Elul, is the educational center in Jerusalem that emerged from the Hartman-Gesher study group. The institute is co-directed by Calderon and Moti Bar-Or, former programming coordinator for "Gesher." The core group of students and instructors at Elul are the members of the *beit midrash*. They are a self-selected group of individuals that learn for 20 hours per week with men and women who are quite different from themselves. Because none of Elul's members are at their first stage of Jewish studies, they all take responsibility for teaching as well as studying.[109] Each member of Elul must be willing to go on an educational journey to a place that is totally new, being led by other members of the group.[110]

> Such willingness does not always come easily. Some would-be participants are unwilling to study with secular Jews who do not don kippot when they study sacred texts. Others refuse to study together with women. Still others are unwilling to engage in a joint learning process with committed religious Jews.[111]

Members of Elul represent the full range of Israel's political spectrum from Peace Now to Gush Emunim. Religiously, although no *charedim* would join, a range of Orthodoxy is represented.[112]

Learning at Elul can be divided into two components: the *beit midrash* and outreach programs. The *beit midrash* curriculum includes both interdisciplinary study and *chevruta* learning.[113] Responsibility for teaching

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[109]Shapiro, "Learning Together," *The Jerusalem Post* (10 Oct 1990).

[110]Calderon, interview, 18 August 1991.

[111]Shapiro, "Learning Together."

[112]Ibid. It is unclear whether or not any individuals from the Conservative/ Masorti, Reconstructionist or Reform/Progressive movements have been members of Beit Midrash Elul during its three-year history.

[113]Elul English language brochure – *beit midrash* program; Calderon, interview, 18 August 1991.

rotates among the members of the *beit midrash*[114] and the members learn as a group.[115] The individual(s) who teach a particular study unit typically gives a presentation for the whole group and then distributes texts which are studied by each *chevruta*.[116] The study pairs work as "private microcosms within the Beit Midrash,"[117] they explore the texts together, bringing their backgrounds and areas of expertise to their learning. The group then reconvenes for further discussion of the texts and their relationship to the topic at hand.[118]

Members of the *beit midrash* conduct outreach programs in order to bring "the transforming insights of [Elul's] learning programs into the mainstream of Israeli society."[119] Elul's programing for the community includes: a post-military workshop whose 20 recently discharged participants meet weekly for a year to explore issues including "gender roles in Jewish text, religious coercion in Israeli society and theological and ethical issues within Jewish tradition," seminars for religious and secular educators to study texts and and compare how Jewish values are transmitted through text-study in Jerusalem's school systems; half-day officers' training seminars that introduce principles of secular and Jewish pluralism;[120] ulpan workshops for new immigrants;[121] and, workshops for secular and religious high school students

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[114]Calderon, interview, 18 August 1991

[115]Elul English language brochure -- *beit midrash* program

[116]Calderon, interview, 18 August 1991

[117]Elul English language brochure -- *beit midrash* program

[118]Calderon, interview, 18 August 1991

[119]Elul English language brochure -- *beit midrash* program

[120]Elul English language informational/fundraising brochure which focuses primarily on outreach programs in Israeli society (not dated).

(run separately for each group) sponsored by the Municipality of Jerusalem.[122] Two types of programming are open to the general public on a regular basis: workshops based on the *beit midrash* model (they meet for up to three months on a weekly basis) and scholarly lectures.[123] The workshops tend to attract more secular participation whereas the lectures draw a more religious crowd.[124]

In contrast with the other educational institutions studied above, the members of Beit Midrash Elul are Israelis: long-time residents, emigrants and native Israelis. Of the thirty-one participants in the 1990-91 *beit midrash*, at least 15 are native Israelis and 9 came to Israel as adults.[125] Since the ability to teach and to learn (in Hebrew) on an advanced level is required for acceptance to the *beit midrash*, the participants' levels of Judaic knowledge prior to entering Elul is significantly higher than those at the institutions studied above.[126]

Elul's outreach programming and its sources of funding further distinguish it from the institutions for religious women's *talmud torah* on which examined above. Like Matan, Elul offers an ulpan program for new Soviet

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[121]Elul's October 1990/Tishri 5751 letter to donors/interested individuals (in the diaspora presumably, since it is in English)

[122]Letter presenting information on Elul's Outreach Programs 1991-92.

[123]Elul's October 1990/Tishri 5751 letter.

[124]Calderon, interview, 18 July 1991. This is a logical tendency, since religious individuals whose understanding of *halakhah* and level of observance would preclude studying in a mixed male-female, religious-secular *beit midrash* could feel quite comfortable attending a formal lecture.

[125]The countries represented include: the United States, England, France, Canada and Germany. In Elul's October 1990/Tishri 5751 letter, which included brief biographical statements on all members of the beit midrash for that year - - 7 participants did not include information on their country of origin.

[126]Eighteen of the thirty-one members of the 1990-91 *beit midrash* have studied at a yeshivah, at the Hartman institute, and/or in university programs in Jewish thought or Bible.

immigrants, but it is unique among institutes for *talmud torah* in offering programs which use Jewish texts to teach about pluralism for audiences such as educators in the Jerusalem schools and IDF officers.

Israel's political establishment, secular and religious, supports Elul by inviting members of its *beit midrash* to work with military officers and public school teachers and by offering financial backing. Financial support domestically comes from agencies such as the Ministries of Religions and of Education, the Jewish Agency, and the Municipality of Jerusalem. Contributions from abroad include monies from the Meyerhoff Foundation, the New Israel Fund and from private donors.[127]

The level of participation by the general public in Elul's programming attests to the effectiveness of the members of the *beit midrash* in their roles as students and as educators, and as Israelis who understand the needs of their peers. Looking forward to their second year of operation, Calderon and Bar-Or anticipated that during the 1990-91 academic year approximately 120 individuals would participate in some dimension of Elul's ongoing programs plus 1000 people would attend various open lectures and special events (in addition to the 31 members of the *beit midrash*).[128]

## The Impact of Women's *Talmud Torah*

The dramatic increase in women's learning in Israel is evident. As Toby Klein Greenwald admits in the opening of her article, "Wise Women" in *Kol Emunah*, the magazine published by Emunah (the World Religious Zionist

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[127]Elul's October 1990/Tishri 5751 letter.

[128]Average attendance at evening lectures is 100 persons and 15-20 people participate in the weekly workshops based on the *beit midrash* model. In Ibid.

Women's Organization), women's learning is growing so dramatically that the crucial question in planning her article on women who teach Torah was whom to leave out, more than whom to interview.[129]

Now that women's *talmud torah* has emerged to the extent that there is a critical mass of women engaged in teaching and learning in a variety of settings, the impact of this phenomenon may be examined. Three central issues emerge. To what extent is this an indigenous Israeli phenomenon and to what extent is it an Anglo-European import? Is there a women's method of Torah study? Are attitudes toward women's learning changing within the Orthodox communities to which many of these teachers and students belong?

The majority of educational institutes offering women the opportunity to engage in *talmud torah* in Israel have been founded by immigrants from America and Europe (e.g. Michlelet Beruria/Lindenbaum, Machon Pardes, the Lena Slom School, and Matan). With the exception of Matan, the primary language of instruction at these institutes is English. By definition, such centers of learning attract residents from abroad and new Israelis as students. However, this does not necessarily indicate that their endeavors represent an imported brand of learning that exists in isolation from Israeli society. An investigation of the immigration, professional and learning patterns of students who have engaged in intensive *talmud torah* would be necessary in order to assess precisely the implications and influences women's *talmud torah* has had in Israel.

General observations, however, can be made on the basis of institutional successes. Matan, while founded by Anglo-European Israelis, has Hebrew as its primary language of instruction and is focused on the Israeli

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[129]Greenwald, "Wise Women," 10.

student, regardless of her country of origin. Matan's growth, coupled with the success of institutes such as Machon Judith Lieberman and Beit Midrash Elul, directed by native Israelis with programming aimed at Hebrew speakers, indicates that women's *talmud torah* is valued within the Israeli milieu. The viability of expanding programs[130] and new schools for talmud torah[131] support the hypothesis that interest among Hebrew and English speakers in Israel for Torah study continues to grow.

On the emergence of a women's approach to *talmud torah*, women who teach Torah to women generally support the hypothesis that a different approach to learning occurs in their classes. However, these Judaic scholars differ on their willingness to admit that there is a women's approach and on the reasons behind their reluctance to acknowledge such a trend.

Aviva Zornberg admits: "Every feminist fiber in me wants to deny it, yet I do feel that many women bring a humanistic interest to their learning. This does not, of course, mean that there are no men with a similar interest. But perhaps the experiential and the relational focus is stronger in women."[132] Zornberg holds a vision which motivates many women who engage in *talmud torah*: she believes the greatest potential lies in women learning the existing approach and the going beyond it to contribute their own method.[133]

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[130]During the 1990-91 academic year, members of Beit Midrash Elul conducted a workshop in Tel Aviv based on the Jerusalem model, which was well received.

[131]Rabbanit Chana Henkin established a text-based Torah study program for women, using a *beit midrash* model. The program is directed toward professional women in their mid-20's and older who became traditionally observant as adults. She is trying to create a *charedi-leumi* (observant and Israeli-nationalist) atmosphere for English speakers. In: Surie Ackerman, "Women Study Texts Yeshiva-Style," *In Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: 8 June 1990), 7.

[132]Greenwald, "Wise Women," 11.

[133]Ibid.

Fruma Gurfinkle agrees that there is something special about women's Torah study

> My class is entirely different. It's not a men's *yeshivah*, it's not a university, it's not a school for young girls. It's studying that is close to life, studying that has a relationship to daily life... The idea of women's Torah education is altogether very new. No one has a complete notion of how it should be done. You can't create an approach on paper and then realize it.[134]

While she sees a distinction between her classes and the more typical settings for Torah learning, Gurfinkle asserts that it is too early in the history of women's learning to evaluate whether there is a definitive women's approach. That will be evident only after there are many more institutes for women's *talmud torah* and many more women engaged in learning.[135]

In contrast, Malke Bina bristles at the suggestion of a women's method to teaching and learning Jewish sacred texts. Just as some men are more bright and capable than others, so it is with women. She says, "Maybe there is a difference in the way women teach, but there shouldn't be."[136] She bluntly claims that there is no essential difference between men's and women's approaches, but then illustrates differences in learning between the sexes. Bina explains, "I don't go for this idea that men learn Talmud totally different from the way that women learn."[137] But she also claims that women are more concerned with pragmatic implications of the texts:

> [Women are] not only interested in conceptional analysis. They want to know when push comes to shove, what is the law? And men may be able to put that out of their minds. They can be

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[134]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 273.

[135]Ibid.

[136]Greenwald, "Wise women," 11.

[137]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 243.

> satisfied dealing only with the higher ideas. Women grapple and deal with the higher ideas just as well as men, but then all right, they'd like to translate it into something practical.[138]

Like Rabbi Chaim Brovender, Dr. Tamar Ross[139] believes that women hold both an advantage and a disadvantage in *talmud torah*. "On the one hand, we have no tradition of higher learning. But it is an advantage in that we have more freedom."[140] According to Brovender, the measure of the legitimacy in women's Torah study is the degree of change in men's attitudes toward women's learning.

> The test is not if women can learn like men, but if men will say, "I wish we could learn like women."[141]

According to Ross, that is already happening. She has female students who bring tape recorders to class with them -- for their brothers. She offers a type of learning that the yeshivot don't offer.[142]

The evidence that attitudes toward women's *talmud torah* are changing goes significantly beyond Ross' lecture halls. There are subtle signs that women's learning is becoming legitimate, even among groups for whom such activity formerly bordered on heresy. While the popular attitude among the ultra-Orthodox still opposes women's Talmud study, small shifts of opinion are evident.

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[138]Ibid., 243-244

[139]Dr. Tamar Ross grew up in the US in a rabbinical family that spoke Hebrew at home. After graduating from high school, she made *aliyah* and studied Hebrew literature and Jewish history at Hebrew University, where she wrote her dissertation on the Mussar Movement in Eastern Europe during the late 19th century. Ross embraces both traditional belief and the intellectual rigors of modern approaches to text study. She lectures at Michlelet Beruria [Lindenbaum] and to classes of men and women at Bar Ilan University and Touro College. [In Greenwald, "Wise Women," *Kol Emunah*, 12.]

[140]Greenwald, "Wise women," 11

[141]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 50

[142]Greenwald, "Wise women," 11

Linda Gradstein recalls experiences from her years studying Gemara at Pardes:

> There's been a whole revolution in women's learning. If you look at forty years ago, women weren't learning seriously and now it's very accepted even within the ultra-Orthodox community for women to learn. And it's encouraged... maybe not Gemara, although even at Neve [Yerushalayim],[143] there's a teacher named Mrs. Heller... When I was learning Gemara, when I was having difficulties, I remember I was at their house one Shabbat and I asked her to help me. Her daughters got upset and said, "Don't tell anyone that she's learning Gemara with you, because in the Orthodox community, women aren't supposed to..." She said to her daughters, "You're being ridiculous. There's no reason for women not to learn Gemara. Come, Linda, let's sit down."[144]

In a similar episode, Malke Bina was strolling through her Jewish Quarter neighborhood with her husband, Rabbi Aharon Bina, Dean of Foreign Students at Yeshivat Hakotel. During the walk, they

> met one of Rabbi Bina's students with his father, who was visiting. The father asked Malke what she did, and the son proudly answered for her, "Don't you know, Daddy? I always come in late at night and Mrs. Bina is sitting at the dining room table and learning. She teaches Talmud."[145]

Evidence of greater acceptance of women's learning is not limited to occasional anecdotes. In July, 1990, the Israeli Rabbinate authorized the establishment of a program at Midreshet Lindenbaum for training women as advocates in marital cases in rabbinical courts. Rabbi Riskin, head of the Ohr Torah-Ohr Rivka educational institute in Efrat and the rabbi of the city, has designed a two-year academic program which includes *halakhot* and Israeli

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[143]Neve Yerushalayim is an ultra-Orthodox school for Torah learning primarily for *baalot teshuvah*.

[144]Gradstein, interview, 18 August 1991.

[145]Ochs, *Words on Fire*, 246.

law related to divorce, psychology and social work. All candidates for the program must have a bachelor's degree. The selected instructors are senior lecturers from Hebrew University, Bar Ilan University, judges and rabbis. At the end of their course work, students will sit qualifying examinations in order to receive authorization as court advocates from the Ministry of Religion and the Rabbinate.

Once certified, the female court advocates will have the authority to represent women in rabbinical courts, work as advisors in marital cases, and serve on mediation committees of the rabbinical courts.[146] The effectiveness of women as court advocates is still theoretical;[147] the attitudes of the rabbinical judges involved in any particular case will be an influential factor.[148] However, the Rabbinate's decision to open the position to women does represent an institutional acknowledgement of the legitimacy of women's learning for the sake of a religious purpose.

While personal anecdotes and a loosening of restrictions in one area of rabbinical court procedure do not amount to a radical shift in the overall perception of women's learning, these accounts may signify deeper changes to come. If these subtle shifts indicate that this is a time of transition, then internal and external ideas and events which affect the Orthodox communities in Israel

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[146]Nili Mandler, "For the first time, the Rabbinate permits women to use female advocates in marital cases in the rabbinical courts," *Ha'aretz* (Israel: 30 July 1990). For another description of the training program, see: "Israel's religious authorities approve women as rabbinical court advocates: first course is given at Midreshet Lindenbaum," *Newsbriefs from Ohr Torah-Ohr Rivka* (Efrat, Israel: Fall 1990/5751), 1-2.

[147]Since the program was authorized by the Chief Rabbinate in July 1990 and the program was due to commence during the fall of that year, the first women in the two-year training program for court advocates should complete their studies in 1992.

[148]Shakdiel, interview, 13 July 1991.

will influence the degree of change and its endurance. The possibility of a reactionary shift is high during transitional periods.

As women's Torah learning becomes more typical, a central issue for gauging the perception of women as Talmudists and teachers of Judaica is the reasoning behind men's acceptance of women's *talmud torah*. Is women's *talmud torah* accepted because of the intrinsic value of women's learning or as a concession to societal pressures?[149] Are women viewed as inheritors of Jewish texts as men are or is it simply a necessity in an era when all secular avenues of study are open to women to make Torah learning available so they don't reject Jewish tradition all together?

The evidence offered during both halves of this century, from Sarah Schenirer and the establishment of the Bais Yaakov schools to Michlelet Beruria and Machon Pardes, is that for many men pragmatism may have been the primary reason for giving women access to Torah learning. However, as women become more capable of independent study in Jewish texts, their voices will become more authoritative and their demands more precise as they pursue changes within *halakhah* that go beyond the classroom. It will be important to observe the attitudes of men who hold authority within traditional communities as women's demands come from positions of increasing understanding of Jewish texts and religious precedents.

However, Marcia Kretzmer wrote after the First International Conference on Women and Judaism, "If the path to parity in scholarship with males is thorny, the path to greater ritual role is thornier still."[150]

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[149]In: Weissman, "Education of Jewish Women," 35. Weissman raises this as one of the issues which remain open in the field of studying Jewish women's education.

[150]Kretzmer, "Presenting a challenge," 5.

## CHAPTER TWO

## WOMEN AS A PRAYER GROUP: WOMEN OF THE KOTEL

Regular prayer, like *talmud torah*, is an essential and sacred aspect of Jewish life which has primarily been in the male domain throughout Jewish history. As increasing numbers of Orthodox women engage in *talmud torah* and learn the patterns and intricacies of *halakhah*, many are pressing for ritual change within the boundaries of Jewish legal and ethical codes. Rivka Haut[1] believes that among Orthodox women in America, education -- not feminism -- has been the most influential factor related to the erosion of women's tolerance of praying behind a *mechitzah*.[2] When women implement ritual change, they shock and challenge many Orthodox authorities even when the modifications are within the bounds of *halakhah*.

In Israel, the struggle by religious women to expand the roles of women in Jewish ritual life captured public attention when delegates from the First

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[1]Rivka Haut is an Orthodox Jewish resident of Brooklyn who pioneered women's prayer groups in North America and ultimately in Israel. She was a co-founder of the Flatbush Women's Davening Group in 1982 and of the Women's Tefillah Network in 1984. Bringing delegates from the 1988 First International Jewish Feminist conference to the Kotel to worship as a prayer group was her idea. Early in 1989, she co-founded the International Committee for Women of the Kotel, a diaspora support group for the Israel group, Women of the Kotel.

[2]Rivka Haut, interview by author, Handwritten notes, Brooklyn, New York, 13 August 1991.

International Jewish Feminist Conference[3] held morning worship at the Kotel, complete with Torah reading, on Thursday, 1 December 1988. This service marked the first exposure that ultra-Orthodox worshipers had to women who daven (worship) as a prayer group. The women's prayer group known as Women of the Kotel originates from the group who davened together on 1 December. The women have continued praying at the Kotel as a group since that time despite opposition from much of Israel's Orthodox community. As Bonna Haberman describes it, the religious establishment in Israel views women's changing roles in prayer as a threat:

> Until now, the distribution of power in the public realm, including Jewish prayer has been the exclusive domain of men. Now they are faced with strong-willed, knowledgeable women who are challenging the status quo, challenging the traditional religious understanding of the role of women, and challenging the ultra-Orthodox monopoly over expressions of Judaism in Israel.[4]

This chapter considers the Women of the Kotel by: 1) presenting background in terms of the status of women's prayer groups, of the Kotel in Jewish tradition and in the modern state of Israel, and of the antecedent innovations in women's prayer in America and Israel; 2) examining the motivations and religious identities of the women who daven as a prayer group at the Kotel; 3) giving an overview of the history of the Women of the Kotel; 4) analyzing the Israeli responses to the Women of the Kotel by the media and by

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[3]The conference was co-sponsored by the the American Jewish Congress, the World Jewish Congress and the Israel Women's Network. Panelists from 21 countries gave presentations on topics regarding Jewish women: in a non-Jewish world, in the work place, in the changing Jewish family, as single individuals in a coupled world, in Jewish tradition, and in the political world. In Program from "The Empowerment of Jewish Women: An International Conference," 28 November - 1 December 1988. 350 delegates gathered in Jerusalem from twenty-three countries for the event. In: Laurence Agron, "A Landmark Gathering," *Midstream* 35 (May 1989): 26.

[4]Deborah Budner, "Facing the Wall: The Politics of Women and Prayer," *New Outlook* 32 (June/July 1989): 26.

women with similar religious and feminist profiles; and, 5) examining the relevance of Women of the Kotel to diaspora Jewry and to Israeli society.

## Background

The conflict over the right of the Women of the Kotel to worship as a group at the last remnant of the Second Temple compound combines two unresolved issues: the status of women's public prayer within *halakhah* and the status of the Kotel in the modern State of Israel. Technically these are legal issues which fall under the authority of religious and secular law respectively. However, since religion and the state are not separate in Israel, that categorization is not as clear cut. The fact that issues of women's roles in public worship and of the role of the Kotel in Israeli society evoke powerful emotions from all involved further complicates the status questions involved.

### The Status of Women in Public Worship

Judaism treats women's prayer with ambivalence. Selected aggadic and halakhic passages value women's worship, as expressed in the *aggadah* where Rabbi Chelkia's wife ends a drought:

> The story goes that over 1500 years ago, a group of well-known rabbis pleaded with the great Rabbi Aba Chelkia to pray for the end of a drought. He agreed, and he and his wife went up to the roof to pray for rain. Eventually, the rain clouds came - but only to the side of the roof where his wife stood. When queried about this, Rabbi Chelkia replied: "The prayers of women have more merit than the prayers of men."[5]

In addition, the Talmud traces certain halakhic prescriptions for proper modes of worship to Hannah's model of personal prayer in I Samuel.[6]

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[5]Budner, "Facing the Wall...," *New Outlook* (June/July 1989).

[6]*Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Berachot, 31a.

Despite the high regard for women's prayer that these texts express, according to *halakhah* women are not obligated to participate in public worship.[7] In practice, women in Orthodox communities are typically excluded from public ritual life:

> Women are exempt from the duty of set daily prayers, so they rarely participate in synagogue services during the week. They are also exempt from the *mitzvah* of wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries), which is the focal point of the morning prayers. The reading of the Torah is the climax of the weekly cycle of worship. Women are exempted by many halakhic authorities even from hearing the reading of the Torah, and are barred from active participation in Torah reading through *aliyot*. Therefore it seems that women are exempt from most *mitzvot* which comprise public prayer. In actual practice exemption is hardly distinguished from exclusion; public ritual life is the province of men. Women are second-class participants in public ritual and, conversely, public ritual is secondary in the lives of traditional Jewish women.[8]

While *halakhah* limits women's participation in mixed worship, the halakhic status of a group of women who join together to daven is not clear cut. In *Women and Jewish Law*, Rachel Biale presents two arguments against counting women in a *minyan*[9] with men and applies them to the question of whether a group of women can constitute a *minyan*. She writes that contemporary authorities reason against including women in a *minyan*

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[7]While women are exempt from daily and (according to some authorities) Shabbat worship on the fixed schedule which is incumbent on Jewish adult males, women are obligated to participate in public worship on occasions when public prayer is the duty of every Jew (e.g., reading/hearing the book of Esther on Purim). In: Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York: 1984), 17-25.

[8]Biale, *Women and Jewish Law...*, 28-29.

[9]"The number (minyan) of ten Jews above the age of thirteen is the minimum required for congregational worship, public Torah reading, the recitation of *Kedushah* and *Kaddish* [prayer rubrics]... From Numbers 14:27, where the ten spies (exclusive of Joshua and Caleb) are referred to as an *edah* (congregation), it has been traditionally deduced that a congregation for prayer must consist at least of ten adult males." In: Philip Birnbaum, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts* (New York, 1988), 370.

because: 1) they are not obligated to pray publicly like male members of the community, thus counting men and women in a *minyan* is problematic since it would involve grouping individuals with differing levels of obligation within a single category; and, 2) men are public figures and can therefore form a public unit, but women are inherently private figures who remain individuals even when praying as a group.[10] Applying these arguments to the question of whether a group of women can form a *minyan*, Biale reasons that the former opinion would support recognition of a women's *minyan* since it would be composed of ten individuals with equivalent levels of obligation. The latter view would deny the validity of a women's *minyan* since the private nature of women in a community rules out the legitimacy of such a group.[11]

The halakhic acceptability of women davening together as a prayer group, omitting any prayers that require the presence of a *minyan*, is likewise debated among Orthodox authorities.

The worshipers known as Women of the Kotel constitute themselves as a prayer group and daven within a halakhic framework. They do not consider themselves a *minyan*.

Status of the Kotel

The Kotel is the only remnant of the Second Temple complex which survived the Romans' destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.[12] It has been a Jewish symbol of piety and hope since that time. For centuries, Jerusalem's Jewish and Muslim pietists lived in cooperation, worshipping at their adjacent

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[10]Ibid., 22.

[11]Ibid., 22-23.

[12]Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History* (New York, 1980), 189.

holy sites: the Kotel and the Haram es-Sharif mosques. The Kotel technically belonged to the Muslim community, but "by tradition extending back at least to the Middle Ages... the Jews enjoyed an easement to the strip of pavement facing the historic buttress and the right of prayer at the Wall itself."[13] In the twentieth century, the Kotel has become a cause célèbre of controversy over a mixture of political and religious issues.

During the tense period of the late 1920's, a religious action upset the political status quo that existed under the British mandate. Days before Yom Kippur in 1928 (which fell on 24 September), "the Jewish sexton at the Wall placed a screen on the flagstones to separate men and women, according to Orthodox Jewish practice."[14] This set off a controversy in which religious and political purposes were indistinguishable. In response to the newly erected *mechitzah* (a partition separating the men's and women's prayer areas), Arabs protested Jewish violation of the status quo. British forces then ordered the Jews to remove the screen, which sparked opposition from religious and secular factions of the Yishuv against British interference with Jewish worship. Despite British attempts to mediate, the conflict escalated until the Arab rioting of August 1929 erupted, resulting in deaths and casualties among Arabs and Jews.[15]

Despite the tension and conflict of the Mandate period, the Jewish community's ability to daven at the Kotel continued without interruption[16] until

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[13]Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (New York, 1979), 173.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., 173-174.

[16]No incidents interfering with worship is recorded in: Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought...*, or in: Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel*.

the Arab Legion captured the Old City during Israel's War of Independence.[17] The Kotel area, like the rest of Jordanian-controlled Jerusalem, was inaccessible to Jews until 7 June 1967, the third day of the Six-Day War, when the Israelis captured the Old City. The Israeli victory was a mingling of religious rejoicing and national triumph.

> The firing had not yet stopped around the Western Wall before Rabbi Shlomo Goren, chief chaplain of the Israeli army, rushed to the holy site to loose a triumphant blast on his ram's horn... Touching the flagstones of the ancient wall even hardened veterans wept.[18]

It was a national spiritual experience.[19]

Since 1967, Israel's Orthodox religious establishment has overseen the management of the Kotel. Hours after paratroopers won Israeli control of the Old City and its religious sites,

> Prime Minister Eshkol assured heads of all religious communities that they would retain control of their holy places, the chief rabbis being in charge of the Western Wall of the Temple Court.[20]

When the war ended, the Ministry of Religious Affairs began planning the metamorphosis which they would direct in the area of the Kotel. During 1968, the Arab neighborhood in front of the Kotel was demolished so a plaza for

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[17]H.H. Ben-Sasson, ed. *A History of the Jewish People*, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., (Cambridge, MA, 1976), 1058.

[18]Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel*... , 654-655.

[19]"The recovery of the ancient Temple Mount, seismic as it was in its impact upon every level of the Jewish population, opened yet another dimension in the quest for spiritual alternatives. In a famous collection of taped interviews with kibbutz members who had fought in the 1967 war, *Siach Lochamim* (Warriors' Dialogue), two themes emerged. Repeatedly these young secularists insisted that they had not been drawn to religion, but they admitted, too, that they had suddenly realized that they were Jews... a year later in a HaShomer HaZair kibbutz... the participants described their leftist faith even more outspokenly." In: Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel*... , 614.

[20]*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Israel, State of" (Historical Survey).

Jewish worshipers and visitors could be built.[21] In 1970, a *mechitzah* separating the area of the plaza adjoining the Kotel into men's and women's sections for prayer was erected.[22]

A year after the Israeli military victory, the right of all Jews to pray at the Kotel came into question. The World Union for Progressive Judaism [WUPJ] planned to hold its fifteenth international conference in Jerusalem in July 1968, complete with a service at the Kotel. Three weeks before the scheduled service, the Ministry of Religious Affairs denied permission for the WUPJ to hold worship at the Kotel. According to the ministry,

> ...the regulations of the Chief Rabbinate did not permit the holding of services where men and women could worship together, the section directly in front of the Western Wall being considered as a synagogue.[23]

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[21]Judith Green, an archaeologist, is a member of Kehillat Yedidiah and one of the litigants in the Women of the Kotel suit being considered by Israel's High Court of Justice. Interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 6 August 1991, and, S. Zalman Abramov, *Perpetual Dilemma Jewish Religion in the Jewish State* (Rutherford, NJ, 1976), 371.

[22]Dan Margalit, "The Kotel Is Also for Others," *Ha'aretz* (Israel, 30 August 1989). [In Hebrew]

Documentation on prayer practices and construction of the courtyard and *mechitzah* at the Kotel after the Six-Day War is meagre at best. Standard histories (e.g. Sachar, Ben-Sasson and Seltzer) provide no details of the administration of the Kotel by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Alice Shalvi recalls that during Shavuot 1967, Israelis flocked to the Kotel. She says that it wasn't like a synagogue, everybody prayed together. [In: Alice Shalvi, interview by author, Tape-recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 28 July 1991] Shalvi is Orthodox in her belief and practice, so separate men's and women's sections would be the norm for her; it is unclear whether this practice was in place at the Kotel during that Shavuot observance in 1967 at the Kotel.

The period between the 1967 War and the erection of the *mechitzah* roughly coincides with the term of the first National Unity government coalition: June 1967 - August 1970. [In: Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, *Israel in the Middle East, Documents and Readings on Society, Politics and Foreign Relations, 1948 - Present* (New York, 1984), 5.] If the *mechitzah* were erected after the fall of that coalition that would support speculation that the National Religious Party's lower level of control prevented the construction of a *mechitzah* during the coalition period. Unfortunately, this author has not found such evidence.

[23]Abramov, *Perpetual Dilemma*..., 372. Presumably, the modus operandi was for men and women to pray separately, but as noted above, the precise logistics for this arrangement are not evident.

The Kotel became the bargaining chip in the ensuing political-religious struggle that involved Orthodox, Reform and secular groups. The uproar climaxed with a debate in the Knesset on 19 June 1968. The situation was difficult for the Israeli government, which worried that its image as a body capable of protecting the rights of Jews and non-Jews at religious sites in newly united Jerusalem might become tarnished, and for the WUPJ leadership which was divided over how much pressure to apply in demanding the right to pray at the Kotel. The conflict abruptly ended when the WUPJ cancelled the service.[24] The WUPJ incident made evident that Ministry of Religious Affairs control of the Kotel was a threat to Jewish pluralism at that holy site.

Conflict over the use of the Kotel has not been restricted to the 1968 struggle over the WUPJ service. Whenever an unprecedented ceremony is planned for or takes place at the Kotel, questions regarding the nature of the site arise. Is it a national or a religious site? Should the ceremonies held there should be restricted? If so, by whom and according to what standards? During the late 1980's and early 1990's, the Kotel provided a backdrop for events that include the Bar Mitzvah celebration of the Maccabiah Games,[25] women's public worship with a *sefer torah*, and a variety of military ceremonies. These events prompt Israelis and diaspora Jews to review their opinions of the Kotel and its status as an ancient symbol in a modern society.[26]

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[24] The WUPJ leadership chose to cancel under the advisement of UAHC president Maurice Eisendrath. Ibid., 373. A more complete account of the struggle over the WUPJ service is found in: Ibid., 370-373.

[25] On 13 July 1989, the celebration of the Maccabiah anniversary was held in the Kotel plaza complete with laser lights and fireworks. Starting with the swearing-in of paratroopers, groups such as high school Gadna units have marked the completion of their training with a ceremony at the Kotel plaza. In: Moshe Kohn, "Whose Wall?," *The Jerusalem Post* (21 July 1989).

[26] See Ibid. for a selection of opinions on appropriate use of the Kotel area from religious leaders in Israel and America.

Unique, But Not Without Antecedents

The phenomenon of holding women's *tefillah* at the Kotel represents a unique combination of conditions for women's worship. No single aspect of the Women of the Wall's worship is unprecedented; rather, the group's *tefillah* combines elements of existing women's prayer settings in the United States and Israel in the world's most public Jewish prayer site.

The Emergence of Women's Prayer Groups and Vehement Opposition to Their Worship - - an American Experience

During Fall 1982 (early in the Jewish year 5743), five Orthodox women in Brooklyn formed The Flatbush Women's Davening Group.[27] Opposition emerged immediately: denunciations were issued from rabbis on the pulpit and in journal articles and editorials.[28] Within three years the group had 50 regular participants but was still meeting in members' homes because no synagogue would rent them space. According to co-founder Rivka Haut, the women were not trying to separate themselves from their community: "We would love to rent space (in our own *shuls*) and walk in and out with our husbands."[29] Leaders in the Orthodox community objected to the prayer group even though their worship was halakhic and the women did not consider themselves a *minyan*.[30]

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[27]At the time, similar groups already existed in Baltimore (constituted as a *minyan*), Manhattan and another was forming in Teaneck, NJ. In: Fran Snyder, "Jewish Prayer Group Incites Rabbis' Ire," *New Directions for Women* 15 (November/December 1986): 13.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Because their prayer group separates them from their husbands, the women worship together one Shabbat each month. "Orthodox Women's Prayer Groups," *Lilith* (Fall/Winter 1985-86/5746), 6.

[30]Ibid., 5-6; and Fran Snyder, "Jewish Prayer Group...," *New Directions for Women* (Nov/Dec 1986), 13.

In response to the growing phenomenon of Orthodox women's prayer groups, Rabbi Louis Bernstein, then president of the (Orthodox) Rabbinical Council of America [RCA], asked five members of the Yeshiva University faculty[31] to address the issue of women's *tefillah* groups in responsa. In December 1984 documents, the scholars declared women's prayer groups "halakhically prohibited"[32] and a "total and very apparent deviation from tradition."[33] The rabbis judged the women's *tefillah* invalid without interviewing members of women's prayer groups about their worship or motivations.[34]

The responsa elicited reactions from women's prayer groups, former leaders of the RCA and rabbis who support the halakhic legitimacy of women's prayer groups. Leaders of various women's prayer groups (including Rivka Haut) formed the Women's Tefillah Network, which first met on 30 December 1984. According to Haut, the Network exists to

> reach out to other women and let those in far-off corners know that if they want to start a group, we can help them get started lend them Torahs and offer them advice.[35]

Haut interprets the responsa as an expression of fear from Bernstein and other Orthodox rabbis of discontent within the mainstream community which Orthodox women's prayer groups represent.

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[31]The authors of the responsa on the question of women's prayer groups were Rabbis Herschel Schacter, Abraham Bronspigel, Yehuda Parnes, Nissim Alpert and Mordechai Willig. In "Orthodox Women's...," *Lilith* (5746); and, Larry Cohler, "Orthodox Rabbis' Responsa Condemns [*sic*]Women's Prayer Groups." *The Jewish World* (15-21 February 1985) 2.

[32]Larry Cohler, "Orthodox Rabbis' Responsa...," *The Jewish World* (15-21 Feb 1985).

[33]Fran Snyder, "Jewish Prayer Group...," *New Directions for Women* (Nov/Dec 1986), 13.

[34]Ibid., 14; Fran Snyder, "Jewish Prayer Group...," *New Directions for Women* (Nov/Dec 1986), 13; and, "Orthodox Women's...," *Lilith* (5746).

[35]Larry Cohler, "Orthodox Rabbis' Responsa...," *The Jewish World* (15-21 Feb 1985).

> If they'd thought we were far out, they'd have ignored us... Imagine women like us being dissatisfied? We were hitting very close to home.[36]

Former RCA president, Rabbi Gilbert Klaperman criticized Bernstein for going outside the RCA's own halakhic commission and *beit din* for responsa; he recommended that the RCA form a commission to study women's prayer groups and other issues relating to women and synagogue life.[37] Rabbis who support the halakhic legitimacy of women's prayer groups wrote articles opposing the responsa.[38]

The Women of the Kotel follow the halakhic liturgical guidelines that the Women's Tefillah Network developed during the 1980's for women's prayer groups in North America. Like the Women of the Kotel, the women's davening groups in North America have been condemned by numerous Orthodox rabbinical authorities. Unlike their counterparts in Israel, the diaspora groups are openly supported by some Orthodox thinkers.

Not Only in America...

Observant Jews in Jerusalem have developed two models for halakhic women's worship during the past two decades: a group of women constituted

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[36]Fran Snyder, "Jewish Prayer Group...," *New Directions for Women* (Nov/Dec 1986), 13; Since its establishment, the Women's Tefillah Network has flourished. In June 1990 its total membership in North America and Europe was 1000 strong. In: Gitelle Rapoport, "U.S. Women Sue for the Right to Hold Group Prayer at Wall," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 29 June 1990).

[37]Larry Cohler, "Orthodox Rabbis' Responsa...," *The Jewish World* (15-21 Feb 1985): 15.

[38]For arguments on behalf of women's prayer groups, see: Michael Chernick, "In Support of Women's Prayer Groups," *Sh'ma* 15 (17 May 1985): 105-108; Eliezer Berkovits, "Women's Prayer Groups," (letter to the editor) *The Jerusalem Post* (20 September 1985); and, Avraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Groups* (Hoboken, NJ, 1990/5750). When the Yeshiva University professors' responsa appeared, rabbis who had previously expressed support for women's prayer groups, including Rabbis Saul Berman and Avraham Weiss, were expected to publish responsa underscoring the halakhic legitimacy of such groups. In: "Orthodox Women's...," *Lilith* (5746).

themselves as a minyan with the approval of an Orthodox rabbi and a community of feminist-minded men and women have devised a rubric for women's Torah reading within the synagogue framework.

A Women's *Minyan*. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, a group of Jerusalemites organized a religious women's consciousness raising group.[39] When the group would occasionally hold services together, they prayed in the home of one of their members, Penina Peli. The women constituted themselves a *minyan* and would read Torah using the Peli family's *sefer torah*.

Deborah Weissman, who belonged to the group, recalls that Penina's husband, Rabbi Pinchas Peli (l"z) gave his approval to the women's minyan.

> [He] had said at that point -- he would change his mind later -- [that] if you are a group of women who take all this stuff real seriously, and you meet regularly, then there's no reason why you shouldn't do everything.[40]

The consciousness raising group met for approximately two years,[41] but a women's *minyan* continued davening at the Peli home at least through the spring of 1987.[42] Throughout the years the women's *minyan* "acted according to traditional Jewish forms as set for congregations composed of a male quorum."[43]

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[39]The group's main focus was to discuss personal experiences and issues that were relevant to them as women and as Jewish. They would occasionally invite speakers, study together or hold services. In: Deborah Weissman, Doctoral candidate at Hebrew University and co-founder of Kehillat Yedidiah in Talpiot, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 14 July 1991.

[40]Weissman, interview, 14 July 1991.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Vanessa Ochs describes a women's Shabbat morning Torah service held at the Peli's apartment during her stay in Jerusalem. Ochs doesn't specify how frequently the group meets. In: Vanessa Ochs, *Words on Fire, One Woman's Journey into the Sacred*, (New York, 1990), 136-140.

[43]Penina Peli, letter to author, 20 Jan 1992.

Kehillat Yedidiah. Kehillat Yedidiah is a community of men and women whose "goal is to push the *halakhah* as far as it will go on women's issues."[44] They will not go beyond *halakhah*, but they do change customs.[45] Yedidiah began in the late 1970's as a *minyan* that davened together in people's homes on *chagim*. On Rosh Hashanah 5741, the group decided to begin praying together every Shabbat.[46]

Kehillat Yedidiah's style of acting on egalitarian principles without compromising *halakhah* is illustrated by their use of the *mechitzah*. The congregation uses the distinction between *tefillah* (prayer) and *limmud* (study) to determine when their retractable *mechitzah* will stand between the men's and women's sections. During *tefillah* the *mechitzah* divides the congregation, but it is retracted during *limmud*. The *mechitzah* is retracted during aspects of worship which are not strictly considered *tefillah*, including *divrei torah* and reading *megillot*.[47]

The female worshipers at Yedidiah hold a women's Torah reading on one Shabbat per month. On those Shabbatot, the *kehillah* davens in the sanctuary as usual except when the women go into a different area of the building for the Torah service.

Thus, women's prayer groups and Torah readings existed in Israel years before the first service held by a women's prayer group at the Kotel on 1 December 1988. In common with the Women of the Kotel, Peli's minyan

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[44]Green, interview, 6 August 1991.

[45]Weissman, interview, 14 July 1991.

[46]Green, interview, 6 August 1991.

[47]Men and women divide the responsibility for delivering *divrei torah* and of chanting from the *megillot* as members of the kehillah. Weissman, interview, 14 July 1991.

existed for over a decade and the women's Torah reading at Kehillat Yedidiah continues to exist as a successful model of women's prayer in Jerusalem. The membership of these groups draws from a pool of modern Orthodox Anglo-American immigrants who came to Israel during the 1970's. In contrast with Women of the Kotel, Penina Peli's women's *minyan* and the women's participation in services at Yedidiah are neither in the public eye nor are they given attention by the rabbinical establishment.

## The Women

The women who have worshipped at the Kotel as a prayer group can be divided into two groups: the delegates from the First International Jewish Feminist Conference who set a precedent on Thursday morning, 1 December 1988 as the first women's prayer group to *daven* at the Kotel, and, 'the Israelis,'[48] the women who were living in Jerusalem as citizens or as temporary residents, who seized the opportunity to continue the momentum set by the conference members' unprecedented service.

Of the over three hundred women from 23 countries[49] who attended "The Empowerment of Jewish Women" conference on 28 November - 1 December 1988, an estimated 50-80 delegates[50] prayed at the Kotel as a

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[48]The women residing in Israel who became known as "Women of the Kotel" will henceforth be referred to as 'Israelis.'

[49]Reports on the number of delegates at the conference in total and the number of women who worshiped together at the Kotel vary. A consensus of sources indicates that over 300 delegates participated, but the exact tally is debatable. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, in "The Jerusalem Agenda," *MS.* 17 (March 1989): 23, reports over 300 participants, and, Laurence Agron, "A Landmark Gathering," *Midstream* 35 (May 1989): 26, writes that 350 women attended. Somewhere between 21-23 countries were represented at the conference. The program for the conference lists panelists from 21 countries and Pogrebin, "The Jerusalem Agenda," 23, reports that full participation was from that number of countries, whereas Laurence Agron, "A Landmark Gathering," 26, claims that representatives of 23 countries attended.

prayer group on the last morning of the conference. The members of that first women's davening group to pray at the Kotel represented much of the religious, geographical and cultural spectrum of world Jewry. Women from every stream of Judaism and some who are not affiliated with a Jewish movement were present. Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform, Orthodox, secular, agnostic, Goddess-worshipping. Most of the group and its leadership were American or Canadian, but delegates from Israel, West Germany, Brazil, India, England, New Zealand and Sweden also participated.[51] The liturgy for

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[50]The estimated number of participants varies widely. "Feminist Service . . ." *Jerusalem Post* (2 Dec 1988) estimated several dozen. *The Times* of London (which ran a short Reuters' insert) and *The New York Times* reported in 2 December coverage that 50 women prayed as a group. Randi Jo Land, "Changing the Face of Judaism," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 29 June 1990), 23 reported that approximately ninety women participated; and, "100 Feminists . . ." *Ha'aretz* (2 Dec 1988) and Jeremy Kaplan, "Jewish Feminism Must Come to Terms with Tradition and Yet Can't Jettison Its Cultural Continuity," *The Nation* (Israel: 2 December 1988) gave an account of 100 participants.

Months after the event, the American Jewish Congress, which co-sponsored the conference, offered conflicting reports of participation. The organization's magazine, *Congress Monthly* estimated that sixty women worshipped as a group at the Kotel on 1 December 1988, while the Congress' resolution on "Women's Prayer at the Western Wall" states that more than 80 conference delegates participated. In: Rochelle Distelheim, "Jewish and Feminist in Jerusalem," *Congress Monthly* 56 (Feb 1989): 14; and, "American Jewish Congress resolution on Women's Prayer at the Western Wall," adopted by the governing council, 25 June 1989.

Little is known about the majority of conference delegates who chose not to worship at the Kotel with the group. Alice Shalvi, principal of Pelech, a progressive Jerusalem high school for Orthodox girls, didn't participate in order to avoid disapproval from her faculty who had previously accused her of inappropriately mixing politics into the school curriculum. In: Alice Shalvi, Co-founder and Chair of the Israel Women's Network (in this capacity she served on the Conference Committee for the 1986 International Conference on Women and Halakhah), [former?] Professor of English Literature at Hebrew University, and former principal of the Pelech School for Girls, interview by author, Handwritten notes, Jerusalem, Israel, 7 August 1991.

Naomi Graetz, chair of the Negev branch of the Israel Women's Network and a participant in the First International Jewish Feminist Conference, explained her choice not to pray with the conference delegates in her article, "Can an Orthodox Feminist Pray at the Western Wall and Find Happiness?." In this piece, Graetz expounds her view that feminist and Orthodoxy are incompatible and she expresses the continuity she finds between her feminism and her affiliation with the Masorti movement (the Israeli branch of Conservative Judaism). Recalling the planning meeting on 30 November 1988 in anticipation of the first women's Torah service at the Kotel, Graetz reports that 38 women attended, a third of whom were Israeli. Graetz writes that most Israeli women, like herself, felt uncomfortable with the plans to pray at the Kotel: "We felt that it smacked of a public relations gimmick." For details of her position, see: Naomi Graetz, "Can an Orthodox Feminist Pray at the Western Wall and Find Happiness?," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 13 April 1989), 7.

this service (and all subsequent worship held by the Women of the Kotel) was prepared and conducted in accordance with the halakhic guidelines developed by the Women's Tefillah Network.[52]

The Israeli women who would become known as the Women of the Kotel represent three general groups: women who participated in the conference and the 1 December service, Israeli immigrants from North America, and diaspora Jews who were temporarily residing in Jerusalem. Anat Hoffman[53] and Bonna Haberman[54] are among the Israelis who attended the 1 December service who refused to let the women's prayer service be a one-time event for tourists that the religious establishment tolerated.[55] Academics who were living in Jerusalem during their sabbatical leaves, like Shulamit Magnus[56] and Barbara Wachs, also provided continuity between the original prayer group and the newly forming Israeli davening group.

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[51]Phyllis Chesler, "The Walls Came Tumbling Down," *On The Issues* 11 (1989): 7-11.

[52]Geela Rayzel Robinson assisted by Miriam Klotz, "Reclaiming the Kotel," *Sh'ma* 19 (26 May 1989): 107.

[53]Anat Hoffman, is a native-born Israeli who attended the First International Jewish Feminist Conference and participated in their service at the Kotel, an organizer of the Women of the Kotel, a Jerusalem city council representative for the Civil Rights Movement, and a member of Kehillat Kol Haneshamah.

[54]Bonna Haberman attended the First International Jewish Feminist Conference and was one of the organizers of the Israeli effort to hold a women's Rosh Chodesh service as a continuation of the precedent that the delegates from the conference set on 1 December 1988. [Green, interview, 6 August 1991.] She is a Canadian Israeli who holds a doctorate in philosophy. [Randi Jo Land, "Changing the Face of Judaism," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 29 June 1990), 23.] She was an instructor in Mishnah at Sue Kahn's Lina Slom School. [Kahn, interview, 22 July 1991]. Haberman was a member of Beit Midrash Elul during 1990-91 (not known of she has continued).

[55]Anat Hoffman, interview with author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 22 July 1991; and, Green, interview, 6 August 1991.

[56]At the time of the conference, Dr. Magnus was living in Jerusalem on sabbatical leave from her position as Director of the Program in Modern Jewish Civilization at the Reconstruction Rabbinical College. After nine years teaching the Modern Core at RRC, she recently accepted an appointment to the faculty in the department of Jewish Studies at Stanford University, where she began teaching during the fall semester 1991.

Haberman, fired by enthusiasm and conviction, effectively recruited other Orthodox 'Anglosaxiot' to join what was envisioned as a women's *rosh chodesh* group at the Kotel. While persuasive appeals were effective in drawing women's attention to the issue, the Israeli women who became involved developed their own motivations for davening at the Kotel month after month. Judith Green, who began davening with the women after an appeal from Haberman, explains her decision to pray with the group.

> I went because it seemed like the right thing to do. It had been done once and there seemed to be a call for it. Why not continue once the chance was opened up, see what would happen, show that women in Israel also would like to pray at the Kotel with a *sefer torah* on *rosh chodesh*.[57]

In contrast, when Fagie Fein's friends contacted her about the women's *rosh chodesh* group at the Kotel, she offered moral support and information about *halakhah*, but had no desire to join the group. When the women and *halakhah* were misrepresented in the press Fein became committed to action as well as giving advice. She remembers:

> Initially, a number of my friends kept trying to involve me. I kept offering moral support... I really didn't get involved in terms of going to *tefillot* until there was something in one of the news media after this had gone on for several months where somebody said that it's against halakhah for women to touch a *sefer torah*... sheer ignorance. When that happens, it's like waving a red flag in front of a bull for me.[58]

Fein and Green hold a general sense of detachment from the Kotel itself. They both hesitated before becoming involved with the women's *rosh chodesh* group at the Kotel because they never self-identified as 'Kotel people.'[59]

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[57]Green, interview, 6 August 1991.

[58]Fagie Fein, currently a law student at Hebrew University she is a leader in Kehillat Yedidiah and in Women of the Kotel, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 29 July 1991.

[59]Green, interview, 6 August 1991; and, Fein, interview, 29 July 1991.

Green's discomfort has a political foundation; she has long been troubled by the use of the Kotel as a nationalist symbol by right-wing groups.[60] Fein's discomfort is rooted in a tendency of some Jews to treat the Kotel as if it were imbued with an inherent holiness:

> I still don't see myself as a Kotel person. It strikes me that people view it as a symbol beyond the symbolism that it has, that it's a remnant. I think there's almost an element... that people worship the Wall rather than what it symbolizes in the place, which is one of the things that bothered me over the years.[61]

Word of the women's *rosh chodesh* group spread among women from the diaspora who were studying in Jerusalem through word of mouth and the institutions where they learned. Women at the Lina Slom School learned about the group from their Mishnah teacher, Bonna Haberman.[62] Machon Pardes informs its students of the Women of the Kotel.

Women of the Kotel: A Drama in (at least) Five Acts

To date, the history of the Women of the Kotel can be described in five discrete segments: 1) the first women's service at the Kotel, held by delegates from The First International Jewish Feminist Conference; 2) worship of an Israeli women's prayer group at the Kotel on *rashei chodashim* and Friday mornings in the face of escalating violence from *charedi* worshipers, climaxing on the Fast of Esther in 1989; 3) responses to *charedi* attacks, police passivity, and rabbinical restrictions on the Women of the Kotel by the women themselves and by their supporters in the diaspora; 4) the visit by members of

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[60]Green, interview, 6 August 1991.

[61]Fein, interview, 29 July 1991.

[62]Kahn, interview, 22 July 1991.

the International Committee for Women of the Kotel when they presented a *sefer torah* to the Women of the Kotel, their attempt to pray at the Kotel themselves, and their response to governmental restrictions on their actions, 5) the period of waiting.

The First Women's Prayer Service at the Kotel

Rivka Haut, co-founder of the Women's Tefillah Network, was invited to speak on women's prayer groups during a session on "Women Within Jewish Tradition" at the First International Jewish Feminist Conference. While she welcomed the opportunity, she was disappointed that religious women's issues would be addressed in only one session during the four-day conference. Haut decided that an appropriate way to supplement the religious facet of the conference would be for delegates to daven as a prayer group at the Kotel.

At the end of the plenary session on "Women Within Jewish Tradition" Haut invited the conference participants to pray as a group the next morning (Thursday 1 December 1988, the last day of the gathering) at the Kotel. Interested delegates met on Wednesday evening to reach consensus on the details of their plan. With Deborah Brin[63] as facilitator, the group determined that they would not grant interviews to the press,[64] they would form a protective circle around the *sefer torah* if there were any sign of danger,[65] and they would

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[63]Rabbi Deborah Brin received ordination in 1985 from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

[64]The women knew that many members of the press who were covering the conference planned to come to the service the following morning; they also knew that the American Jewish Congress wanted as little media hype about the upcoming *tefillah* as possible. In: Haut, interview, 13 August 1991.

[65]Rabbi Helene Ferris borrowed a Torah from the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. In: Ibid. Ferris received rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in 1981. At the time of the First International Jewish

worship in accordance with the traditional liturgy.[66] Like the delegates who decided to pray together, the women who planned and led the *tefillah* represented diverse streams within Judaism.[67]

At 7:30 A.M. on 1 December two busloads of women from the conference arrived at the Kotel for *tefillah*.[68] The group had the same ritual items that are typically found at a service in the men's section: they brought a *sefer torah*[69] and some wore *kippah* and/or *tallit*.[70] When they began praying, they only drew attention from reporters covering the service.[71]

Once they started singing, a *charedi* woman denounced them, shouting: "It is a shame and a disgrace for women to handle the Torah scroll of men."[72] Angry protests then erupted from the men's section.[73] Security forces

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Feminist Conference: she was serving as Associate Rabbi at Steven Wise Free Synagogue in Manhattan.

[66]Using this liturgy, any delegate would be able to participate in the service. In: Ibid; summary of the preliminaries leading up to the 1 December tefillah at the Kotel in: Haut, interview, 13 August 1991.

[67]Worship was prepared by Rivka Haut, Norma Joseph, Helene Ferris, and Shulamit Magnus. *Shacharit* services at the Kotel were led by Deborah Brin and Geela Rayzel Robinson; Helene Ferris, Shulamit Magnus and Marion Krug read Torah; Blu Greenberg had the first *aliyah*. In: Chesler, "The Walls Came Tumbling...," 7-11.

[68]"Feminist Service at Western Wall Ires Male Worshippers," *Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 2 December 1988), and "100 Feminists Held a Protest Service with a Torah Scroll at the Kotel," *Ha'aretz* (Israel: 2 December 1988) [In Hebrew].

[69]Many sources, including "100 Feminists...," Ha'aretz, 2 December 1988, and, Haut, interview, 13 August 1991.

[70]"Jewish Feminists Prompt Protests at Wailing Wall," (photo caption) *The New York Times* (New York: 2 December 1988), A10.

No mention was made in any news accounts or interviews regarding women wearing *tefillin*; presumably, ritual garments were limited to *kippot* and *tallitot*.

[71]"Feminist Service...," *The Jerusalem Post* (2 Dec 1988).

[72]"100 Feminists...," *Ha'aretz* (2 Dec 1988).

[73]Kaplan, "Jewish Feminism...," *The Nation* (2 Dec 1988).

prevented the men's protests from going beyond verbal accusations.[74] Amidst the shouts from *charedim*, service leader Deborah Brin urged the women to focus on the *tefillah*.[75] After concluding the service,[76] the conference delegates returned to their buses in song.[77]

Two official responses were issued following the women's prayers. Harav Meir Yehudah Getz, Rabbi of the Kotel, stated that the group had done nothing forbidden, but that women's public prayer was *lo mekubbal*, not a generally accepted custom.[78] Harav Getz reported the incident to Zevulun Orlev, Director General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The ministry issued a statement expressing regret over behavior that was outside accepted Jewish practice and might cause distress to other worshipers at the Kotel.[79]

Women Continue Worshipping at the Kotel and Charedi Reactions Intensify

The Israeli group of women interested in praying at the Kotel formed in the wake of the 1 December service. They believed that if women's prayer groups continued worshipping at the site, then their *tefillah* would become part

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[74]"Feminist Service...." *The Jerusalem Post* (2 Dec 1988).

[75]Haut, interview, 13 August 1991.

[76]After completing their worship, the women recited kaddish, a tradition that has continued through the present. Ibid.

[77]Kaplan, "Jewish Feminism...." *The Nation* (2 Dec 1988).

[78]"100 Feminists...," *Ha'aretz* (2 Dec 1988) and "Feminist Service...." *The Jerusalem Post* (2 Dec 1988). In it's photo caption recounting the event, the *New York Times* mistakenly attributed the quote, "A woman carrying a Torah is like a pig at the Wailing Wall" to Rav Getz. "Jewish Feminists...." *The New York Times* (2 Dec 1988).This error was made in other media as well, and drew sharp criticism of the Rabbi of the Kotel.

[79]"Feminist Service...," *The Jerusalem Post* (2 Dec 1988).

of the accepted custom.[80] They decided to *daven* together on *rosh chodesh*, beginning the next week on Rosh Chodesh Tevet, 9 December.

The conditions for that first Israeli *tefillah* at the Kotel differed significantly from the women's service held during the previous week. On Rosh Chodesh Tevet the group of twenty women came to the Kotel without notifying the press in advance[81] and without arranging for protection.[82] Under these circumstances, the women learned how vulnerable they were: they were physically attacked by angry *charedim* who tried to take their *sefer torah*.[83] The police asked the women's prayer group to leave the Kotel area.[84] The women cooperated and concluded their worship outside the Dung Gate.

After worship that morning, the group decided to pray together on Friday mornings at the Kotel (in addition to *rosh chodesh*) in order to strengthen their *kavvanah*, to become a more regular presence at the Kotel,[85] and to pray at less provocative times (in contrast with *rosh chodesh*, Torah is not read on

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[80]Green, interview, 6 August 1991.

[81]Robinson assisted by Klotz, "Reclaiming the Kotel," *Sh'ma*, 107.

[82]Green, interview, 6 August 1991; while the arrangements for protection before the 1 December 1988 service are not detailed, the report in *Ha'aretz* states that a small force of police officers was present to protect the group of female worshippers; in "100 Feminists Held a Protest Service with a Torah Scroll at the Kotel," *Ha'aretz* (Israel, 2 December 1988). [In Hebrew]. According to an Israeli attorney who attended early meetings of the Israeli Women of the Kotel to offer informal legal advice, husbands and boyfriends of conference delegates who traveled with them to Israel may have been present at the Kotel during the 1 December service, offering support and unofficial protection. Edward Rettig, interview by author, Handwritten notes, Cincinnati, Ohio, 17 March 1992.

[83]Randi Jo Land, "Women Pledge to Bring Torah Back to the Wall," *In Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 10 February 1989). It is unclear whether the Women of the Kotel continued borrowing a *sefer torah* from HUC or whether they used a torah scroll belonging to another institution or a privately owned one.

[84]Budner, "Facing the Wall..." *New Outlook* (June/July 1989).

[85]Robinson assisted by Klotz, "Reclaiming the Kotel," *Sh'ma*, 107.

Friday mornings).[86] The group began their weekly davening on Friday, 16 December without *tallit* and *kippah* (and of course without a Torah scroll) to avoid inciting the *charedim*.

On Rosh Chodesh Adar I (Monday, 6 February 1989),[87] twenty women arrived at the Kotel with a *sefer torah* at 6:30 AM for morning worship. Vocal protests arose from the women's and then the men's sections. When verbal accusations failed to stop the women's davening, the *charedim* moved to physical force. women tried to break into the group to stop the Torah reading and men hurled chairs at them from across the *mechitzah*. The Women of the Kotel had notified the police in advance of their plan to pray together, but to no avail; the police watched the attacks from their vans without intervening.[88] After finishing their worship, the women encircled the Torah and backed out of the Kotel area, "harassed by the *charedim* all along the way."[89]

Members of the rabbinical establishment denounced the women's *tefillah*. The chief rabbis sent a letter to Harav Getz, who held a low profile on Rosh Chodesh Adar I, "saying that the women's Torah reading was contrary to the traditions of 2,000 years at the Western Wall and thus should not be permitted."[90] Rabbi Yitzchak Kolitz, chief rabbi of Jerusalem, voiced disapproval in response to the service which he considered "a cheap

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[86]Fagie Fein, currently a law student at Hebrew University she is a leader in Kehillat Yedidiah and in Women of the Kotel, interview by author. Tape recording, 29 July 1991.

[87]Rosh Chodesh Shevat fell on Shabbat during 5749, so presumably the women prayed at their customary places of worship on that day.

[88]The description above is a paraphrase from Haim Shapiro, "Women's Service at Wall Causes Near Riot," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem 7 February 1989).

[89]Land, "Women Pledge...," *In Jerusalem* (10 Feb 1989).

[90]Haim Shapiro, "Women's Service at Wall...," *The Jerusalem Post* (7 Feb 1989).

demonstration against Jewish tradition." He added that violence was not a fit response and that the Kotel ushers were responsible for containing such outbreaks.[91]

Spokespersons for the police force defended police inaction on three counts: the police can only act at the Kotel in response to a specific complaint, and no such complaint was filed; the commander on duty didn't judge the situation "critical enough;" and, the police aren't a private security force. Like Rabbi Kolitz, the police placed responsibility for protecting worshipers with the Ministry of Religious Affairs-hired ushers.[92] In contrast, leaders of the Women of the Kotel claimed that the police were simply avoiding confrontation with the *charedim*.[93]

On 3 March, *Maariv* reported that Harav Getz informed the commander of the Old City Police, Ya'ir Most, that prayer rituals that violate accepted custom at the Kotel (e.g., women wearing *tallitot* and reading Torah) are forbidden.[94] The progression of statements from Harav Getz indicates that he gradually succumbed to pressure from leadership in the religious establishment: during the first three months of women worshiping at the Kotel, his position went from one of tolerance to silence to condemnation. Most relayed Getz's warning to the Women of the Kotel explaining that violation of the Getz's restriction would result in their arrest.[95]

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[91]Land, "Women Pledge . . ." *In Jerusalem* (10 Feb 1989).

[92]Ibid.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Getz defended his position by explaining that the women's mode of worship was lo mekubbal, incited violence among worshippers, and a breach of order at the Kotel. In Aryeh Bender, "Rabbi of the Kotel: Women in Tallitot Cannot Pray at a Holy Site," *Maariv* (Israel 3 March 1989). [In Hebrew]

On Monday 20 March, the Fast of Esther, approximately 40 women arrived at the Kotel just after 7:00 AM to pray.[96] Reports conflict on whether the women acted in accordance with Harav Getz's order, refraining from bringing a *sefer torah* and from wearing *tallitot* for their worship. However, most evidence indicates that the women did pray with *tallitot* and a *sefer torah* at their worship for the Fast of Esther.[97] As they approached the *ezrat nashim*, the women's section, the Women of the Kotel were confronted by ultra-Orthodox men and boys who were shouting and blocking access to Kotel area. Ushers and border forces cleared passage for the women's group.[98]

During worship, ushers continued clearing *charedi* men out of the *ezrat nashim*.[99] The angered men began hurling chairs at the women from the men's section, striking one member of the women's group on the head.[100] Old

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[95]Andy Court, "Women Torah Readers at Western Wall Get Warning from Police," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 13 March 1989).

[96]"Women Attacked at the Wailing Wall," *The New York Times* (New York: 21 March 1989), 3.

[97]The single unambiguous report of the women's adherence to Getz's requirements is in: Tzvi Zinger, "Reform Women that Prayed in the Kotel Plaza Absorbed a Dose of Abuse and Chairs," *Yediot Achronot* (Israel: 21 March 1989) [In Hebrew].

The *NY Times* article is contradictory, first claiming that the women were trying to hold morning prayers, read from a Torah while wearing *tallitot*. The same piece reports: "Fear of igniting a riot caused the women to abandon their plan to carry the Torah scroll this morning and only a few of them wore prayer shawls, though rabbinical scholars say there is nothing in Jewish religious law that prohibits women from either action."

Other coverage reports clearly supports the claim that the women's prayer group came with *tallitot* and *sefer torah*. See: "They Only Wanted to Pray," *Ha'aretz* (Israel: 5 April 1989). [In Hebrew], and Saul P. Wachs, "New Voice in a Chorus of Praise, *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 27 July 1989).

[98] Zinger, "Reform Women..." *Yediot Achronot* (21 March 1989).

[99]Haim Shapiro and Andy Court, "Extremists Attack Women Holding Fast of Esther Prayer at Wall," *The Jerusalem Post* (21 March 1989).

[100]Rachel Levin, who received a head injury, was treated at Hadassah Medical Center and released. In: Shapiro and Court, "Extremists Attack Women...," *The Jerusalem Post* (21 March 1989).

City Police forces observed the melée from the roof of their building until they received a request for intervention from the Ministry of Religious Affairs.[101] When verbal commands failed, the police used tear gas to clear the area.[102] Even when he was identified, police did not apprehend the assailant who struck a female worshiper with a chair.[103]

The leadership of the religious establishment gave mixed responses to the women's *tefillah*. Zevulun Orlev, Director General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs was critical of the Women of the Kotel[104] and asserted that the prohibition against women's prayer services is a Jewish tradition which cannot be changed.[105] Despite the restrictions which he imposed on their ritual observance, Harav Getz continued underscoring the halakhic legitimacy of the women's worship.[106]

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[101]Ibid., and, Zinger, "Reform Women...," *Yediot Achronot* (21 March 1989)

[102]This is the only incident when tear gas has been used at the Kotel since 1967. In Shapiro and Court, "Extremists Attack Women...," *The Jerusalem Post* (21 March 1989)

[103]Reports of how he was identified differ, but all agree that the man was never taken into custody. According to the *NY Times*, "The man was tackled by policemen, dragged out of the women's section but was then released." Shapiro and Court report that the assailant "was apprehended by male supporters of the women's group and brought to the nearby police station," but the police did not arrest him. (The identities of these "male supporters" are not specified, but they are probably spouses of members of the women's prayer group and sympathetic political figures, as indicated in the quote from Zinger's article cited in this note.) They cite Bonna Haberman's claim that six policemen watched him throw the chair and none moved to capture him. Zinger writes that border guards were on site and didn't try to stop the assailant even though "three citizens, among them a member of the Jerusalem City Council, Ornan Yakutieli [of the Civil Rights Movement] had pointed him out."

[104]Shapiro and Court, "Extremists Attack Women...," *The Jerusalem Post* (21 March 1989)

[105]"Women Attacked...," *The New York Times* (21 March 1989)

[106]Zinger, "Reform Women...," *Yediot Achronot* (21 March 1989). Zinger quotes Harav Getz: "They entered in accordance with *halakhah*. I have no claim against them. As Jews, it is their right to pray at the Western Wall. Even women who are not Jewish have the right to pray at the Kotel."

Women Worshipers in Israel Petition the Supreme Court and Supporters Abroad Work Behind the Scenes

In Israel, the Women of the Kotel responded to the events on the Fast of Esther with legal means. On 21 March leaders of the Women of the Kotel[107]

> ...filed a petition in the Supreme Court demanding that Minister of Religious Affairs Zevulun Hammer, Ministry Director-General Zevulun Orlev, Rabbi Yehudah Getz, the chief rabbis, and the police responsible for the Western Wall area, justify the prohibition against women reading from the Torah and wearing prayer shawls at the wall.[108]

In North America, women who led and took active roles in the original women's *tefillah* at the Kotel[109] responded to the Fast of Esther violence by establishing the International Committee for Women of the Kotel [ICWK]. ICWK members view the struggle for women's groups to worship at the Kotel as a concern of world Jewry.[110] During 1989, members of the ICWK supported their counterparts in Jerusalem by raising funds to pay for security guards for protecting the Women of the Kotel during prayer and to purchase a *sefer torah* for the group in Jerusalem,[111] organizing worship services in the diaspora which coincided with women's services at the Kotel, speaking with Israeli officials who could influence the women's success in Israel, and publicizing the struggle of the women at the Kotel.[112]

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[107]Judith Green, Bonna Haberman, Anat Hoffman and Geela Rayzel Robinson (who was then studying Jewish education in the diaspora at Hebrew University) filed the petition. In: Budner, "Facing the Wall..." *New Outlook* (June/July 1989)

[108]Ibid.; the petition to the High Court of Justice was also reported in Lynfield, "Women's Group Set to Come Back..." *In Jerusalem* (24 March 1989), and,"Women to the Supreme Court: They Want to Pray in Tallitot at the Kotel." *Yediot Achronot* (Israel: 22 March 1989) [In Hebrew]

[109]The ICWK was organized by Rivka Haut, Susan Aranoff, and Phyllis Chesler (NYC), Norma Joseph (Montreal), Rabbis Helene Ferris (Reform) and Nina Beth Cardin (Conservative). Toby Axelrod, "'Don't Anger the Men'," *Lilith* 14 (summer 1989): 29

[110]Ibid.

[111]Rivka Haut, interview, August 1991

On Rosh Chodesh Nisan (Thursday 6 April), approximately two hundred individuals held a five-minute silent vigil in the Kotel area, outside the *ezrat nashim*.[113] Fearing another riot, the group moved to a nearby archaeological garden for their worship.[114] Protected by the police, the *tefillah* proceeded smoothly and without interruption.[115]

The next day, the women's Friday morning *tefillah* was disrupted by a violent attack from *charedi* women.[116] The police pressed charges against the attackers.[117]

On May 25, Israel's Supreme Court heard the Women of the Kotel's petition and set 31 December 1989 as the State's deadline for presenting its arguments.[118] The court gave a temporary ruling that required the Ministry of Religious Affairs to protect the Women of the Kotel at prayer provided that the group adhered to Harav Getz's prohibitions against women wearing *tallitot* and reading Torah.[119] From that time on, the women davened the morning

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[112]In April 1989, solidarity services were held simultaneously in Jerusalem and in several North American cities. In the months that followed, members of the ICWK met with Minister of Religious Affairs, Zevulun Hammer, and with the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapira, during their visits to the U.S. In: Toby Axelrod, "'Don't Anger...'" *Lilith* (summer 1989).

[113]Randi Jo Land, "Amirav Raps Kolleck for Panning Women," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem 14 April 1989).

[114]Ibid.; presumably the women prayed with *tallit* and Torah when worshiping outside the Kotel area, where women are restricted from wearing *tallit* and reading Torah.

[115]Advertisement thanking police officers on duty paid for by Women's Rosh Chodesh Group in *Yediot Achronot* (Israel: 10 April 1989). [In Hebrew]

[116]Dan Izenberg, "Orthodox Kick Women Worshippers at the Wall," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 9 April 1989); and, Yoram Levi, "Incident at the Kotel Plaza Between the 'Rosh Chodesh' Women and Charedi Women," *Davar* (Israel: 9 April 1989).

[117]Land, "Amirav Raps Kollek...," *The Jerusalem Post* (14 Apr 1989).

[118]"American Jewish Congress resolution...," governing council, 25 June 1989.

[119]Ibid., and, Randi Jo Land, "Singing Sparks Clash at Wall," *In Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: 7 July 1989), 6.

liturgy together at the Kotel in accordance with Getz's regulations. On Friday mornings, they davened their complete service at the Kotel and on *rashei chodashim* they moved to the nearby archaeological garden for Torah readings, with varying levels of protest from *charedi* worshipers.[120]

A new complication was introduced on Rosh Chodesh Tammuz (Wednesday 5 July). During that service female guards hired by the Ministry of Religious Affairs introduced a new restriction on women's worship: singing aloud had been added to the list of prohibitions.[121] In response to the new regulation, the Women of the Kotel requested that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Rabbi of the Kotel protect their worship without prohibiting singing.[122] On 21 August, Judge Aharon Barak ruled against their petition. He decided that the Women of the Kotel must comply with the ban on singing along with the other prohibitions until the Supreme Court gave a decision on the case.[123]

After a hiatus during the High Holy Days, the Women of the Kotel resumed their worship (on Fridays, *rashei chodashim* and special

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[120]Reports of violence include: on Rosh Chodesh Sivan (Sunday, 4 June 1989), they were attacked by ultra-Orthodox worshippers, in: "American Jewish Congress resolution...," governing council, 25 June 1989; on Shavuot, they went unnoticed while worshipping at the Kotel, but during the Torah service charedim jeered and threw rocks and metal pipes at them, in: Weissman, interview, 14 July 1991; on Rosh Chodesh Tamuz, they were attacked by female guards enforcing the Ministry of Religious Affairs' new regulation against women singing aloud in prayer at holy sites, in: Land, "Singing Sparks Clash...," *In Jerusalem* (7 July 1989); on Rosh Chodesh Av the Women of the Kotel were attacked by the female security guards and charedi women, in: "'Women of the Wall' Dragged Away," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 18 August 1989), 10.

[121]Land, "Singing Sparks Clash...," *In Jerusalem* (7 July 1989).

[122]"High Court Turns Down 'Women at the Wall'," The Jerusalem Post (Jerusalem: 22 August 1989).

[123]"Generosity of the Victor," *Kol Hair* (Israel: 25 August 1989), 37.

observances) at the Kotel on Hoshana Rabbah by returning to the site with *lulav* and *etrog* for that holiday observance.[124]

ICWK ACTIVISM IN ISRAEL AND IN THE DIASPORA

In November 1989, members of the International Committee for Women of the Kotel traveled to Jerusalem on a trip co-sponsored by the American Jewish Congress. Their itinerary included three significant events for the Women of the Kotel. On 27 November the ICWK presented a *sefer torah* to the Women of the Kotel;[125] on Rosh Chodesh Kislev (Tuesday, 28 November)[126] a group of Israeli and diaspora women prayed together at the Kotel in accordance with the requirements of the court injunction without incident;[127]

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[124]Nurit Vorgift, "Returning to the Kotel," *Kol Hair* (Israel, 20 October 1989). [In Hebrew] This article was written on Hoshana Rabbah, reporting on the women's return to the Kotel in the present tense. No reports on the success of their return or reactions to them have been found by this author. Presumably, any response was mild and relatively benign.

[125]The evening service and Torah dedication on Monday, 27 November and Shabbat morning worship on 2 December were scheduled at the Laromme Hotel. The Jerusalem Chief Rabbinate threatened to revoke the hotel's *kashrut* certification if these events took place on the Laromme's premises. The ICWK requested a court order forcing the hotel make its facilities available for the services and Torah dedication, abiding by the original agreement. The Jerusalem Magistrate's Court did not require the Laromme to accommodate the women's group for the Monday evening service and ceremony, but it ordered the hotel provide a facility where the group could pray on Shabbat morning. As a result, on 27 November worship was held outdoors in Yemin Moshe and Torah dedication ceremony took place at the nearby Beit Hayeled School. The hotel gave the women access to an appropriate room, rather than the hotel's synagogue, for Shabbat worship.

For fuller details of the difficulties involved in organizing these events and a description of the dedication ceremony, see: Haim Shapiro, "Kotel Women Get Their Torah, But Not in Hotel," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 28 November 1989); Haim Shapiro, "Court Orders Laromme Hotel to Give Women of the Wall Place to Hold Shabbat Services, *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 29 November 1989); and, Beth Yuval, "Women of Wall to Hold Service, After Dispute with Rabbis, Hotel," *In Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: 1 December 1989).

[126]Kislev was a two-day celebration, falling on 30 Cheshvan 5750/28 November 1989 and 1 Kislev 5750/29 November 1989. Thus the appearance of an article published on Rosh Chodesh Kislev (29 November) reporting on the prayer services held on Rosh Chodesh Kislev (28 November) in *The Jerusalem Post*.

[127]Two security forces were present at that *rosh chodesh* service: one hired by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to enforce Harav Getz's restrictions on women's prayer rituals and the other hired by the American Jewish Congress to protect the women's davening group. In: Shapiro, "Court Orders Laromme Hotel..." *The Jerusalem Post* (29 November 1989).

and, on Thursday 30 November members of the ICWK, after announcing in advance that only diaspora women would participate,[128] tried to hold a Torah service to mark the first anniversary of Women at the Kotel -- they were turned away by a representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs who informed them that the restrictions imposed by Harav Getz apply to all Jewish women, not only to Israelis. The group held their service at a site overlooking the Kotel. Later that day, representatives of the ICWK met with Zevulun Orlev, but they were unable to bridge their differences.[129]

On 31 December, the deadline the Supreme Court set for the State to present arguments in the Women of the Kotel case, the Ministry of Religion invoked a new regulation which restricts women's prayer at the Kotel to silent worship, without *tallit* and Torah. The measure was co-signed by Dan Meridor, Minister of Justice, and Zevulun Hammer, Minister of Religion.[130]

The ICWK responded to the new law in Israel and abroad. In Israel, the organization began a legal battle for women's prayer rights: on behalf of all Jewish women,[131] leaders of the ICWK[132] added their petition to the one filed by the Israeli Women of the Kotel to the Israeli Supreme Court for the right for

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[128]Haim Shapiro, "Backers of Kotel Women Holding 'Halakhic' Prayer Service at Wall," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 30 November 1989).

[129]Aryeh Bender, "Forbidden Worship," *Maariv* (Israel: 1 December 1989) [In Hebrew]; and Haim Shapiro, "Barred from Kotel," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 1 December 1989).

[130]"U.S. Women Sue for Women's Rights at the Wall," *Lilith* 15 (Spring 1990): 26.

[131]Ibid.

[132]Rivka Haut and Susan Alter petitioned the high court on behalf of the diaspora organization. Four other ICWK members later added their names to the petition: Susan Aranoff, Phyllis Chesler, Norma Baumel Joseph, and Shulamit Magnus. In: Rapoport, "U.S. Women Sue...," *The Jewish Week* (29 June 1990).

women's prayer groups to daven at the Kotel according to their custom.[133] In the diaspora, the ICWK launched a letter-writing campaign to urge Israel's President Herzog to support the Women of the Kotel.[134]

Waiting for the Supreme Court Decision

Since the 31 December 1989 regulation restricting women's worship rituals at holy sites, the Women of the Kotel continue praying as a group at the Kotel plaza through the *shmoneh esreh*, beginning their prayers in the garden with the singing of the Hallel.[135] By August 1991, the group was still davening on *rosh chodesh*, but weekly worship was no longer held.[136] Occasionally, they gather for a special observance or celebration.[137] Participants include a

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[133]Haim Shapiro, "American Women to Ask Court for Wall Rights," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 6 January 1990).

Shapiro's 6 January 1990 article and "U.S. Women Sue..." *Lilith* (Spring 1990) report the ICWK's decision to join the Israeli Women of the Kotel's petition, with the ICWK filing suit on behalf of diaspora women. Several articles published in June 1990 react to and report on the ICWK's petition to the Israeli Supreme Court. "Women of the Kotel in America," *Hamachaneh Hacharedi* (Israel: 27 June 1990) [In Hebrew], attacks the piety and motivations of the ICWK. Days later, two American newspapers report the ICWK's petition to the Supreme Court, see Rapoport, "U.S. Women Sue...," *The Jewish Week* (29 June 1990) and "American Women Filed a Petition to Israel's Supreme Court to Permit Their Prayer Services Beside the Western Wall," *Yisrael Shelanu* (New York: 21 June 1990) [In Hebrew]. These June 1990 are equivalent in substance to the January article in *The Jerusalem Post* or the Spring report in *Lilith* (except the Rapoport article's inclusion of additional names joined to the ICWK petition). It is unclear what occurred in June 1990 that prompted three articles within four days on this topic; perhaps the Supreme Court heard arguments from the ICKW's council, thus formalizing the merging of the Israeli and international petitions to the Israeli high court.

[134]The ICWK encouraged letters requesting him to advocate Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, women's prayer groups, and women holding and reading Torah scrolls and for him to condemn Jews preventing other Jews from worshipping with dignity at holy sites. In: Information-action-fundraising pamphlet distributed by The Philadelphia Committee for Women of the Kotel.

[135]Anat Hoffman, interview by author. Tape recording, 22 July 1991. Hoffman is a native-born Israeli who attended the First International Jewish Feminist Conference and participated in their service at the Kotel, an organizer of the Women of the Kotel, a Jerusalem city council representative for the Civil Rights Movement, and a member of Kehillat Kol Haneshamah.

[136]Fein, interview, 29 July 1991.

[137]In June 1990, Sunny Korda, a girl from Mevasseret whose mother occasionally davens with the Women of the Kotel [In: Ibid], celebrated her Bat Mitzvah with the women's group at a site overlooking the Kotel [photo with caption, The Jerusalem Post (Jerusalem: 24 June 1990)]; on

core of Jerusalemites group that come each month and others who live outside Israel's capital or abroad who come occasionally.[138]

The Women of the Kotel continue worshipping as a muted presence while they await the High Court of Justice's decision on their status as a prayer group.

## Responses to Women of the Kotel

Especially during the first fourteen months of women's prayer at the Kotel, from the first service on 1 December 1988 through the ICWK's decision to petition the Israeli Supreme Court for the right to worship at the Kotel according to their custom, the Women of the Kotel elicited strong and varied responses in Israel and abroad. This section examines a sampling of Israeli responses from the print media and women who have a similar profile to the Women of the Kotel.

### As the Press Sees Women of the Kotel

Beginning with their first service, the Women of the Kotel attracted media attention. Despite the barrage of coverage of the women's group in Israel's secular press from December 1988 - January 1990, numerous news and editorial articles indicate that neither journalists nor average Israelis knew basic facts about the Women of the Kotel. If "who," "what," "where," "when," and "why" are the fundamental questions that basic coverage of newsworthy persons and events includes, the press was particularly weak in conveying

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3 September 1990/erev 3 Tishri 5751, the Women of the Kotel prayed *maariv* at the Kotel to mark the Fast of Gedaliah; and, later in 1990 they had an evening of song, dance, and readings on Jewish women at the archaeological garden near the Kotel [Fein, interview, 29 July 1991]

[138]Ibid.

who the women are and why they prayed at the Kotel. The journalistic style and the types of innacuracies differ between the secular and religious press

Through a Secular Lens

The uneven quality of reporting on the Women of the Kotel is illustrated by publications about the 1 December 1988 service. Despite the fact that reporters had prior notice of the event and many of them had been covering "The Empowerment of Women" conference, the aggregate of news accounts reveals a poorly informed press corps. While reports generally agree on the events that occurred and the responses that the women's *tefiliah* evoked, they offered varying estimates of the size of the women's group, erroneous information about the delegates' Jewish affiliations, and mixed opinions about the women's motivations for praying together at the Kotel.

The estimated number of participants varies between several dozen and one hundred.[139] One newspaper article erroneously noted that most participants were part of the Reform movement.[140]

Articles in the press presented conflicting reports of the women's motives for holding services at the Kotel and of how they defined their worship.

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[139]"Feminist Service. . ," *Jerusalem Post* (2 Dec 1988) estimated several dozen; *The Times* of London (which ran a short Reuters' insert) and *The New York Times* reported in 2 December coverage that 50 women prayed as a group; Randi Jo Land, "Changing the Face of Judaism," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 29 June 1990), 23 reported that approximately ninety women participated; and, "100 Feminists...," *Ha'aretz* (2 Dec 1988) and Jeremy Kaplan, "Jewish Feminism Must Come to Terms with Tradition, and Yet Can't Jettison Its Cultural Continuity," *The Nation* (Israel: 2 December 1988) gave an account of 100 participants.

Months after the event, the American Jewish Congress, which co-sponsored the conference, offered conflicting reports of participation. The organization's magazine, *Congress Monthly* estimated that sixty women worshipped as a group at the Kotel on 1 December 1988, while the Congress' resolution on "Women's Prayer at the Western Wall" states that more than 80 conference delegates participated. In: Rochelle Distelheim, "Jewish and Feminist in Jerusalem," *Congress Monthly* 56 (Feb 1989): 14; and, "American Jewish Congress resolution. . ," governing council, 25 June 1989.

[140]Gail Hareven, "Peripheral Empowerment" *Kol Ha'ir* (Israel: 2 December 1988) [In Hebrew].

An article in *Ha'aretz* claimed that the service was to protest the custom of restricting women's worship practices and that one of the conference delegates assured a police officer that they were holding a service, not a demonstration.[141] This article claims the women were there both to demonstrate and to pray at the Kotel as part of the stream of Jewish tradition in accordance with ancient customs. *The Nation* 's report supports the latter explanation: "The women said they were there to pray and read the Torah as Jews have done every Thursday morning for centuries."[142] The women praying at the Kotel that morning constituted themselves a prayer group worshipping within the bounds of *halakhah* but the print media called them a *minyan*.[143]

It is paradoxical that reporting on the first women's *tefillah* group at the Kotel contained such inaccuracies: after all, the service was nested within the context of a four-day conference that received extensive press coverage. Nonetheless, the identities of participating delegates and their motives were a point of confusion. Had journalistic accuracy increased as the group's activities continued, then it could be surmised that the initial errors were symptoms of confusion about the new group. But on the contrary, errors continued throughout 1989.

The most persistant error has been mislabling the Women of the Kotel as a group of Reform Jewish women. For example, the popular daily *Yediot Achronot* reported the attack during the Fast of Esther, in a piece entitled:

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[141]"100 Feminists ..." *Ha'aretz* (2 Dec 1988).

[142]Kaplan, "Jewish Feminism ..." *The Nation* (2 Dec 1988).

[143]"Feminist Service ..." *Jerusalem Post* (2 Dec 1988) and Hareven, "Peripheral Empowerment" *Kol Hair* (2 Dec 1988).

"Reform Women that Prayed in the Kotel Plaza Absorbed a Dose of Abuse and Chairs."[144]

Several weeks later *Ha'aretz* published a letter from Beruriah Barish who chaired Israel's Movement for Progressive Judaism. In her article, Barish underscores the Reform movement's commitment to egalitarianism and pluralism as fundamental values. She distinguishes between single-sex and Reform worship. She then emphasizes the Reform movement's support for all groups that struggle for pluralism and tolerance in Israeli society, including Women of the Kotel. Barish criticizes the Israeli press for wrongly identifying the Women of the Kotel as Reform. She accuses the media of casting a blanket label of "Reform" on any religious group which the religious establishment condemns.[145]

Ironically, Barish highlights an error which persisted long after her letter was published.[146] Barish neglects the religious status of the Women of the Kotel while she tries to sensitize the press and the public to their religious affiliation. She argues for recognition of the distinction between between the Women of the Kotel and the Reform movement in a piece entitled, "The Woman's Minyan at the Kotel - It Isn't Reform." This title cannot be dismissed

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[144] Zinger, "Reform Women...," *Yediot Achronot* (21 March 1989)

[145]Beruria Barish, "The Woman's Minyan at the Kotel - It Isn't Reform," *Ha'aretz* (Israel: 16 April 1989) [In Hebrew]

[146]*Ha'aretz*, four months after publishing Barish's piece, reported that two ultra-Orthodox political parties were seeking to join the case against the Reform Jewish women who disrupt prayer at the Kotel. In: "Shas Asks the High Court of Justice for Permission to Join Deliberation on the Petition of the Reform Women of the Kotel," *Ha'aretz* (Israel: 18 August 1989), 6a, [In Hebrew]. On 6 September 1989, *The Jerusalem Post* broke its tradition of accurately identifying the pluralistic composition of the Women of the Kotel when it ran an article that opened: "A number of women members of the Jewish Reform Movement conducted organized pryaer services at the Western Wall in the Old City...," in: Asher Felix Landau, "Women at the Wall Must Wait," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 6 September 1989)

as a careless editorial choice; Barish refers to the women's group as a *minyan* in the text of her article.[147]

Through the Lens of the Ultra-Orthodox Press

Regardless of their errors, it can be argued that the secular press tried to objectively convey the events that transpired when the Women of the Kotel prayed. In contrast, the ultra-Orthodox press has been accused of publishing articles that would incite violence against the women's prayer group. After the *charedim* attacked the Women of the Kotel on the Fast of Esther, *The Jerusalem Post* reported that one factor that spurred the ultra-Orthodox worshipers to violence was provocation from articles in the *charedi* press.[148] Such accusations have not been limited to the media. On March 23, the women of the Kotel registered a complaint with the police against two ultra-Orthodox newspapers, *Yated Ne'eman* and *Hamodia*, for inciting violence against them.[149]

Ultra-Orthodox fury against the Women of the Kotel is openly expressed in the so-called 'religious press.' In June 1990, *Hamachaneh Hacharedi* presented ultra-Orthodox opposition to the ICWK's petition to the High Court of Justice in to "Women of the Kotel in America." After posing a rhetorical question regarding the nature of the Kotel as a religious versus a national site and asking what kind of input the people who pray there often will have, the article changes tone, raging against the secular government of Israel and and

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[147]Beruria Barish, "The Woman's Minyan . . ." *Ha'aretz* (16 April 1989).

[148] Shapiro and Court, "Extremists Attack Women . . ." *The Jerusalem Post* (21 March 1989).

[149]Shachar Ilan, "The Anonymous One Running Riot," *Kol Hair* (Israel: 24 March 1989). [In Hebrew] A quote included from *Hamodia* reads: "Our writer was informed that it is very desirable for *charedi* women to arrive en masse to stand up for the holiness of the place, and not to allow the order of worship to be shamed."

attacking the piety of diaspora women who pray together at the Kotel. It affirms that "the *charedim* will rise up like one man" against whoever tries to change the customs at the Kotel. The article concludes by predicting that ultimately the ICWK women will give up and return to their comfortable homes, those women who can't even be considered Jews:

> those women are foreigners with no more connection to the Western Wall than Christians or people from any other religion [150]

In the Eyes of Their Peers: Israeli Women Respond to Women of the Kotel

The Israeli women who are outspoken supporters of the Women of the Kotel tend to be those who are directly involved with the prayer group. The silent supporters and vocal critics of the Women of the Kotel within Israel's feminist Jewish community are harder to find.

Many women who would seem to be natural participants in the Women of the Kotel have refrained from joining the women's prayer group. While all the women described below are deeply involved with Jewish women's religious struggles and they all support in principle women's prayer groups and women's prayer at the Kotel, they do not join in prayer with the Women of the Kotel nor do they support them actively. They share discomfort at the Kotel with many of the women who do daven with the group. The Israeli peers of the Women of the Kotel fall into three general categories: participants in the First International Jewish Feminist Conference who chose not to daven at the Kotel during the conference; Israelis who have prayed with the Women of the Kotel occasionally and chose not to continue; and, women who have never davened with the Women of the Kotel.

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[150] "Women of the Kotel ..." *Hamachaneh Hacharedi* (27 June 1990)

Alice Shalvi and Naomi Graetz[151] were delegates to the 1988 conference who chose not to pray with conference participants at the Kotel on 1 December. Shalvi, who is Orthodox, initially chose not to participate in order to avoid controversy at the Pelech school, where she was principal. She has stayed away because of her discomfort with the type of site the Kotel has become:

> I don't like the Kotel since it's become a synagogue. To me it no longer has the spirituality it had on the first Shavuot in 1967 when we went there and prayed together. It was a real mass pilgrimage.[152]

She is sympathetic to the women's struggle, but in addition to her discomfort at the Kotel, Shalvi sees *tefillah* as a low-priority issue in the scope of Israeli society and she questions the sincerity of the women involved.[153]

Naomi Graetz, in one of the few articles written by an Israeli feminist that opposes the basic tenets of the Women of the Kotel, questioned the motivating factors underlying the first women's prayer service at the Kotel and doubted her ability to worship with *kavvanah* in that setting. She felt "it smacked of a public relations gimmick" and decided not to participate after attending the preparatory meeting on 30 November 1988. Graetz, a member of the Masorti movement, asserted in a *Jerusalem Post* article that feminism and Orthodoxy are "incompatible ideas," and that seeking approval from the religious

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[151]Naomi Graetz emigrated to Israel from the U.S. and lives in Omer. She teaches at Ben-Gurion University, chairs the Negev branch of the Israel Women's Network, and reads Torah at Kehillat Magen Avraham in Omer. Magen Avraham is a Masorti congregation headed by her husband, JTS ordinee Rabbi Robert Graetz.

[152]Shalvi, interview, 7 August 1991.

[153]Ibid.

establishment for women to pray at the Kotel is not the most effective way for Orthodox women to seek change.[154]

Among the Israeli women who davened with the Women of the Kotel briefly and felt uncomfortable praying with the group are Deborah Weissman, a co-founder of Kehillat Yedidiah, and Barbara Spectre, former chair of the board of the Masorti Beit Midrash that trains Israeli rabbis and educators.[155] Spectre would like to daven with the Women of the Kotel more often, but is unable to bring herself to go. The group's aims resonate with her political activism in the 1960's, but she feels conflicted when she joins them. Spectre's own lack of *kavvanah* keeps her from praying with Women of the Kotel. In contrast with Graetz, who doesn't participate because she believes the women are demonstrating rather than praying, Spectre refrains from joining the group in prayer because she feels she can only protest while the rest of the group worships with genuine *kavvanah*. By participating as a demostrator, Spectre feels she would disturb the members of the group who are able to daven in that setting.[156]

Deborah Weissman, who prayed with them once, will not repeat the experience. She agreed to chant part of the Scroll of Ruth on Shavuot during 1989. The area near the Kotel was so crowded that no one took notice of the women's *shacharit* service and megillah reading. When they moved to the

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[154]Naomi Graetz, "Can an Orthodox Feminist Pray at the Western Wall and Find Happiness?," *The Jerusalem Post* (Jerusalem: 13 April 1989), 7.

[155]Ms. Spectre's academic training is in philosophy; she holds a BA from Barnard College and an MA from New York University. She and her husband, JTS ordinee Rabbi Philip Spectre, made aliyah in 1967. After fifteen years working together as rabbi and educator at the Masorti congregation which they started in Ashqelon, the Spectres moved to Jerusalem. Rabbi Spectre currently serves as executive director of the Masorti movement.

[156]Barbara Spectre, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 6 August 1991.

archaeological gardens for the Torah reading, they drew attention.[157]

Weissman, who served as *gabbait* at the time, recalls:

> I think this is the worst prayer experience I've ever had in my whole life.
>
> I have never read Torah when there are about three hundred people standing around us, staring at us, shouting at us and throwing things at us. They were throwing metal pipes and rocks. This is how you read Torah?? Obviously I'm not criticizing the women as much as I'm criticizing these horrible people who were standing around and shouting. But I thought to myself: why can't we just go somewhere else? Why did we have to be there? What did we gain?
>
> There's nothing meaningful spiritually about being there. I prayed with a lot of *kavvanah* that the rocks wouldn't hit me on the head. At that point, I said: I don't ever really want to come back and do this again.[158]

While Weissman supports the women's right to pray at the Kotel as a group, she questions the ultimate importance of their goal within the broader context of Israeli society.

> My question is: Is it always necessary to exercise all of your rights? For example, I think that all Jews have the right to settle anywhere in the land of Israel, but I don't think it's necessary to always exercise that right. Sometimes there are other values that take precedence. So, partly because I don't care that much about

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[157]Weissman's account of violence toward the Women of the Kotel during their Torah reading at the archaeological garden is unusual. The absence of press coverage on harassment and violence against the Women of the Kotel during their Torah services raises several possibilities, among them: Weissman's experience on Shavuot might be exceptional - - it is possibile that the women's prayer group was noticed on that occasion because of the sheer numbers of people in the Kotel area and nearby sections of the Jewish Quarter on Shavuot; or, if the verbal and physical abuse during Torah readings was frequent but mild in comparison to attacks endured at the Kotel, perhaps such incidents were not deemed newsworthy by reporters.

The first possibility is more plausible. Typically, violence against the Women of the Kotel was probably contained in the Kotel area. If attacks at the archaeological gardens were a regular occurrence, chances are high that the press corps would have been notified and the events would have been covered. Had the press failed to report on such attacks, members of the women's prayer group or their supporters probably would have submitted articles or letters to the editor to newspapers and journals describing the violence taking place at the archaeological gardens and highlighting the prayer group's vulnerability.

[158]Weissman, interview, 14 July 1991.

> the Wall, partly because I'm not that involved in women's *tefillah*, it's just not my thing.[159]

Among the women who have neither prayed with the Women of the Kotel nor endorsed them officially, there are silent supporters and others who are critical of their priorities. Fagie Fein explains that women who are involved with developing women's *talmud torah* are unable to give explicit support to the Women of the Kotel for fear of losing their credibility within the Orthodox community. However, these same women did come to the November 1989 Torah worship and dedication ceremony (held in Yemin Moshe and at the Beit Hayeled School, respectively),[160] it was a way for them to openly support Women of the Kotel without risking publicity by their actions.[161]

Leah Shakdiel criticizes the aims of the women's *tefillah* group. Shakdiel believes that the flaw in the priorities of the Women of the Kotel is that they are working from the top down. Deborah Weissman recalls,

> Leah said it very well. If there were a really extensive grass roots movement throughout Israel of women's *tefillah* groups and study groups and Rosh Chodesh [groups], then as the culmination, you go to the Wall.[162]

Despite their questions and criticisms of the Women of the Kotel, the Israeli women cited above all support the women's group's struggle for pluralistic worship at the Kotel.

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[159]Ibid.

[160]For details, see note 125 above.

[161]Fein, interview, 29 July 1991.

[162]Weissman, interview, 14 July 1991.

The Implications of Women of the Kotel for Israeli Society

The question of whether the rights of women to worship as a prayer group at the Kotel are significant for Israeli society as a whole is a relevant one, especially when examined from the perspectives of women who hold similar religious and political beliefs to the Women of the Kotel, violent responses from *charedim*, and careless reporting by the secular press. As the background of Women of the Kotel was introduced by examining the status of women's prayer groups and the status of the Kotel separately, an analysis of the meaning of the women's *rosh chodesh* group at the Kotel for Israelis can be better understood by examining the interrelated topics of the status of women's prayer groups and of the Kotel.

The legal status of women's prayer groups at the Kotel is being decided and the halakhic status of such *tefillah* groups divides Modern Orthodox authorities. However, personal experiences of leaders in innovative women's *tefillah* reveal that a longing for expansion of women's prayer rituals may slowly be awakening within the Orthodox community in Jerusalem at least. Linda Gradstein, a leader at Kehillat Yedidiah, believes much of the rigidity regarding women's roles within prayer is due to lack of exposure to halakhic alternatives. When women learn about opportunities for innovative worship, they seek it out. Gradstein relates:

> I got a call... from an Israeli woman, she sounded very young. I have no idea where she got my number. She said: Somebody gave me this number and said that you have a women's *minyan*. A young Israeli, maybe a high school girl, maybe yeshiva, I have no idea... There are these rumors going around that there is stuff going on by people who are also committed to *halakhah*.[163]

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[163]Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1991

Kehillat Yedidiah holds separate women's Torah readings on Simchat Torah.[164] For years it was the only Orthodox community where women could have *aliyot*, and in accordance with custom, the reading would continue until everyone who wanted an *aliyah* could have one. To accommodate the crowd of women who would flock to the congregation, the men would take two *sifre torah* for their reading, leaving five or six for the women's Torah reading.[165] Masses of women came to Yedidiah to observe Simchat Torah and the custom of a women's Torah reading has begun to spread, as Deborah Weissman describes:

> ...hundreds of women come from all over the city, even some from outside of the city. They stay in Jerusalem the *chag* just to come to us. Now it's not the only one because other women have started to emulate our model, but for years, we were the only Orthodox place in Israel where a woman could have an aliyah on Simchat Torah.[166]

While the Women of the Kotel have received press and the violent reaction of the ultra-Orthodox community, grassroots changes in women's prayer rituals are in their nascent stages in other Jerusalem neighborhoods. Further study would be required in order to analyze the impact Women of the Kotel has had on the consciousness of Orthodox women who seek the expansion of women's ritual roles within their halakhic communities. The possible responses from such women to the Women of the Kotel could be

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[164]Presumably, the congregation maintains the custom which they employ in their monthly women's Torah reading held on Shabbat, the community davens together (in their respective sections of the sanctuary, divided by a *mechitzah*) except when they separate for the Torah service.

[165]Gradstein, interview, 18 July 1991.

[166]Weissman, interview, 14 July 1991.

positive, seeing the women's group as a groundbreaking effort, or negative, viewing them as going too far at an early point in the struggle.

During the summer of 1991 the status of the Kotel drew the attention of secular and religious Israelis when Harav Getz decided that the commencement ceremony for Gadna, the IDF's cadet corps, could no longer be held at the Kotel. One line in the *Maariv* article, "The Battle Over the Kotel," indicates the impact of this struggle on Israelis: "There is much pain in this story."[167] Getz objected to behavior which he termed "sexual licentiousness" between male and female cadets during the 1990 ceremony and deemed it an inappropriate ceremony for the Kotel plaza. Minister of Religion Avner Shaki proposed a compromise: to have the male and female soldiers sit separately, but to no avail. After several weeks of debate and drama, the IDF announced on 4 August that the commencement would be moved to another site.

This latest battle over proper behavior at the Kotel elicited bitterness on all sides. After the IDF decision to move the ceremony, a military spokesperson commented: "Twenty four years after the IDF conquered the Kotel, the religious succeeded in removing it from there."[168] Throughout the struggle, Getz held the position that no compromise was possible after he had witnessed the boisterousness of the cadets during the 1990 commencement, which undoubtedly represented the position of his ultra-Orthodox constituency.

In his triumph, Getz himself linked the Gadna and the Women of the Kotel controversies. Getz, explaining that he was prepared for a legal contest in the Supreme Court if necessary, asserted:

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[167]Aryeh Bender and Emanuel Rosen, "The Battle Over the Kotel," *Maariv* (Israel: 5 August 1991), 3. [In Hebrew]

[168]Ibid.

> There was already a precedent when the Reform women wanted to pray according to their custom at the Kotel. I, as the one accountable for the Kotel and for the holy sites, objected and won[169] at the Supreme Court. The law is with me. I am sure that I'm right.[170]

The debate over the site of Gadna's commencement ceremony is decided, but the influence that struggle will have on public opinion during future contests over the status of the Kotel and in relation to the Women of the Kotel is yet to be seen.

The Women of the Kotel as a phenomenon uniquely combines two issues that strike a raw nerve with most Israelis. The status of women's prayer groups is a potent topic for religious and feminist individuals and the status of the Kotel concerns all Israeli Jews. The intertwining of these issues elicits a variety of responses - - the ultra-Orthodox react to the women's groups, the secular community is incensed by the hegemony of the religious establishment, and the entire populace is touched by debates over the symbolic importance of the Kotel.

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[169]Presumably, the victory to which Getz refers is the Supreme Court's upholding of his restrictions on the women's ritual practices until they render a decision in the case of the Women of the Kotel. In May 1989, the high court upheld Getz's prohibition against women reading from the Torah and wearing tallitot at the Kotel and in August 1989, the court upheld the addition of singing to the list of prohibited practices. (see above for details)

[170]Ibid.

## CHAPTER THREE

## SH'LICHOT HATZIBUR: WOMEN RABBIS IN ISRAEL

The entrance of women into the rabbinate is a radical change, not just in Israel, but throughout the Jewish world. It is distinctly a phenomenon of the late twentieth century. Despite outstanding exceptions, such as the legendary scholarship of Beruria during the rabbinic period[1] and the circuit-riding rabbinate of Californian Ray Frank during the 1890's,[2] the roles of scholar and judge that are associated with the pre-emancipation rabbi and the added responsibilities of prayer leader, preacher and pastor, which rabbis have assumed during the modern period,[3] have been beyond the accepted scope of women's activities throughout Jewish history. Despite the twentieth century debate[4] on the issue of the ordination of women and the feminist tide of the

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[1]Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York, 1984), 35.

[2]Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), 285.

[3]*Ibid*., 100-103, 112.

[4]In the American Reform movement, written material on this issue include: Henry Cohen, "Ordination of Women as Rabbis," and Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "Ordination of Women as Rabbis," in: Walter Jacob, ed., *American Reform Responsa: Jewish Questions, Rabbinic Answers* (New York, 1983), 24-25 and 25-43; "Report of Committee on Ordination of Women," *CCAR Yearbook* 66 (1956), 90-93; and Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity*..., 379 and 473 note.

early 1970's, the ordination of Sally Preisand at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in 1972 was a revolutionary event in Jewish history.

The arrival of female rabbis in Israeli society has been recent, and it is too early to describe categorically the extent to which they are accepted in their professional roles in Israeli culture. Like the Progressive (Reform), Masorti (Conservative), and Reconstructionist movements which they represent, women rabbis are exotic and mysterious in the eyes of many Israelis. Currently there are two seminaries in Israel which train rabbinical students outside the Orthodox framework: the Israeli rabbinical program of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion [HUC] and the Beit Midrash of the Masorti movement. Both institutions are located in Jerusalem.

At this writing, two women are enrolled in the program at HUC: native Israeli Maya Leibovic and Na'ama Kelman, an immigrant from the United States. The Beit Midrash does not yet accept female students in its rabbinical program.[5] To date no female rabbis have been ordained from an Israeli rabbinical seminary. Thus, Israel's female rabbis are native Israelis who received some part of their training abroad and immigrants to Israel who received rabbinical ordination abroad before making aliyah.[6]

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[5]Yaron Avitov, "Honor to Rabbi Einat," *Kol Hair* (Israel: 23 July 1989), 59 [In Hebrew]; Ravit Ferrara, "Rabbi Gila Dror, Not Rebbitzin," *Chadashot* (Israel: 28 July 1991), 18 [In Hebrew]; and Rabbi Gila Dror, interview by author, Tape recording, Be'er Sheva, Israel, 4 August 1991.

The Beit Midrash does accept women students in its education program. In: Barbara Spectre, interview by author, 6 August 1991.

[6]A comprehensive accounting of the women who were raised and educated as rabbis in the United States and have subsequently made aliyah to work as rabbis and educators in Israel as of autumn 1990 are mentioned in: Ben Gallob, "Women Rabbis in Israel Fight Secularism, Sexism, and Orthodox Monopoly," *Jewish Ledger* (Rochester: 15 November 1990) and *Jewish Herald Voice* (Houston: 30 March 1991), Photocopied. [distributed through the Jewish Telegraphic Agency]; Gila Dror, the first Conservative female rabbi and the first Israeli-born rabbi to serve a congregation in Israel is the subject of: Ravit Ferrara, "Rabbi Gila Dror, Not Rebbitzin."

Presently seven female rabbis reside in Israel. Among them, five are ordinees from the New York and Cincinnati campuses of HUC-JIR, one was ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia, and one received ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. The following are sketches of the Israeli careers of these seven women rabbis through winter 1991-92.

Gail Shouster-Bouskila, 1979 ordinee of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, made aliyah following completion of her rabbinical studies to become Israel's first woman rabbi. Believing that education is the most effective means to introducing liberal Judaism to Israeli society, she has devoted her rabbinical career to working as an educator. Her teaching efforts have included teaching at the Young Judea Jerusalem Institute and lecturing "at the Diaspora Museum on topics such as Jewish identity, women and Judaism, and Jewish communal life."[7]

Kinneret Shiryon, who was ordained from HUC in 1981, made aliyah with her Israeli husband, Boruch. After living for a brief period on Moshav Yodfat, the Shiryons moved to the Tel Aviv area. Rabbi Shiryon worked as a tour guide and seminar leader at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv until she became rabbi of Kehillat Ramat Aviv in the summer of 1984 (when she became the first woman rabbi serve an Israeli congregation). Shiryon served Kehillat Ramat Aviv through spring 1991, when her maternity leave coincided with an Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism-directed merger between her

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*Chadashot* (Israel [illegible] July 1991), 18. [In Hebrew]; and, Tzvi Alosh, "Go Pray With Her," *Yediot Achronot* (Israel [illegible] July 1991) [In Hebrew]

[7]Information on Rabbi Shouster-Bouskila gathered from: "Women Fight for a Role in Israel's Religious Life," *The Hour* (Norwalk, CT: 18 February 1984); Ben Gallob, "Women Rabbis in Israel . . ." *Jewish Ledger* (15 Nov 1990) and *Jewish Herald Voice* (30 Mar 1991).

community and the older Kedem congregation. The movement hired Rabbi Meir Azari to serve the merger congregation, Beit Daniel.[8]

Karen Kedar made aliyah two weeks after her spring 1985 ordination from HUC in Cincinnati, moving to Israel with her Israeli husband, Ezra. After teaching for two years at High School in Israel, a program for American high school students, she began her three year tenure at Har El Congregation in Jerusalem. During the summer of 1990, Kedar began serving a fledgling congregation in Petach Tikvah on a part-time basis. Following a spring 1991 policy change in the Progressive movement that prioritizes creating larger congregations over supporting small existing communities, funding for Kedar's Petach Tikvah position was eliminated.[9] In February 1992 she accepted an offer to become Director of Programming at Congregation Beth El in Boca Raton, Florida.

Shoshana Laemmle, a 1987 ordinee from HUC in New York made aliyah after working in California as Hillel director at Valley and Pierce Colleges for two years. In Israel, from 1989-1991 Laemmle held an administrative office at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev while volunteering to serve as rabbi at Be'er Sheva's Kehillat Ohel David and traveling monthly to lead worship at Kibbutz Yahel (founded and sponsored by the Progressive movement) in the Negev. During fall 1991, Laemmle moved to Jerusalem

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[8]Rabbi Meir Azari is a native Israeli and an ordinee from HUC's Israeli rabbinical program. In 1986, during his rabbinical studies, Azari succeeded Rabbi Mordechai Rotem as director of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism. Following his ordination, Azari moved with his wife to San Francisco, where she held the deputy position at the Israeli consulate. He is returning to Israel to serve as rabbi of Beit Daniel.

[9]The timetable for Kedar's termination at the Progressive chavurah in Petach Tikvah is not known. During interviews with Rabbi Kedar in late July and with founder of the chavurah, Mira Raz in early August 1991, no mention was made to this author of any expected changes. Presumably Kedar's tenure continued at least through the High Holy Days 5752.

where she holds several part time positions, including teaching for the College Academic Year program, a year-long work-study experience in Israel for college students that the American Reform movement sponsors [10] She lives near and takes an active role in the Progressive congregation in the Bakka section of Jerusalem, Kol Haneshamah.

After serving for one year as Assistant Rabbi at Temple Emanuel in Worcester, Massachusetts, Janice Garfunkel, a 1988 ordinee from HUC in New York made aliyah. To date she has not been placed in one of Israel's Progressive congregations. She has held various part-time positions, including staff work for the North American Federation of Temple Youth [NFTY] and for the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism.

After her 1988 ordination at HUC in New York, Yael Romer worked in order to put together financial resources in anticipation of making aliyah. She went to Israel during the spring of 1989. Rabbi Romer held congregational positions for two years. she held a part time position in 1989-90 (5750) as Assistant Rabbi at Congregation Ohel Avraham, the synagogue in Haifa that is associated with the Leo Baeck Education Center; and, during 1990-91 (5751) she became the first ordained rabbi to serve the Progressive congregation in Tivon until a personal issue with her family in the U.S. caused her to give up her position. The congregation in Tivon has since folded (probably due to a financial decision by leaders of the movement to funnel funds to larger congregations, similar to the case of Petach Tikvah); Romer works with her

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[10]The College Academic Year program is co-sponsored by the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and based at Kibbutz Tzora and the Jerusalem campus of HUC.

Israeli husband in his business and teaches part-time at the Leo Baeck Center.[11]

Israeli-born Gila Dror received rabbinical ordination from JTS in June 1990. After a year of part-time rabbinical work that included coordinating the conversion institute of the Masorti movement and teaching *b'nai mitzvah* and adult lessons at in a variety of liberal Jewish settings in Jerusalem and Omer, Rabbi Dror began serving as rabbi of Kehillat Eshel Avraham in Be'er Sheva in June 1991. She is the first female rabbi in the Masorti movement to hold a congregation in Israel.

This study focuses primarily on four women. Rabbis Kinneret Shiryon, Karyn Kedar, and Gila Dror and Israeli rabbinical student Maya Leibovic. While they are each unique individuals, these women share a fascination with and love of Judaism, experience in the American Jewish milieu, a commitment to egalitarianism, and supportive influences which encouraged their pursuit of Judaic learning for its own sake and toward the goal of rabbinical ordination. The following biographical summaries are intended to acquaint the reader with these rabbis as unique members of a minority within world Jewry, Israeli society, and the rabbinate, a necessary preliminary to exploring their roles as congregational rabbis in Israel during the 1980's and 1990's.

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[11]Career sketches of women rabbis in the Progressive movement derived from interviews with Rabbis Arnold Gluck, Karen Kedar, and Kinneret Shiryon, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Deans Lawrence Raphael and Gary Zola, "Roster of Members," in: Eliot L Stevens, ed., *Central Conference of American Rabbis, One-Hundred-First Convention, Yearbook Volume C* (New York: 1991); and, *1988 Rabbinic Alumni Directory* of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion.

Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon[12]

Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon, was ordained at the New York campus of HUC in 1981. Following her ordination, Shiryon became Director of Interreligious Affairs and Jewish Community Relations for the American Jewish Committee in Los Angeles. In 1983, she and her husband Boruch, a native Israeli, moved to Israel as part of a six-family *garin* (seed group) that settled on Moshav Yodfat.[13] When the group's plans disintegrated, the Shiryons left the moshav[14] and moved to Ma'oz Aviv;[15] Rabbi Shiryon led tours at the Diaspora Museum until she was hired as the rabbi for Kehillat Ramat Aviv (in Ramat Aviv, where she and her family then settled), a Progressive congregation which was founded in 1971.[16] When she accepted the position in 1984, Shiryon became the first woman rabbi to serve an Israeli congregation.

Shiryon's Jewish identity was nurtured in the Jewish environment which her family provided. She explains, "I always give credit to my family in terms of my very strong Jewish identity because growing up in the United States as a minority in a majority culture, I was always led to believe that I was special. Not

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[12]Unless otherwise noted, all unattributed information and quotations in this section about Rabbi Shiryon are from: Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon, interview by author, Tape recording, Ramat Aviv, Israel, 24 July 1991.

[13]Beverly Beyette, "American Will Be Israel's 1st Resident Woman Rabbi," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles: 30 November 1982).

[14]Fern Allen, "A Push for Pluralism: Israel's First Female Rabbi Attacks Orthodox Monopoly," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 5 July 1985), 2.

[15]Iris Avital, "Only in Israel...," *Kochav Tzafon Tel Aviv* (2 Feb 1988) [In Hebrew]

[16]A group of members from the Kedem Congregation in Tel Aviv left that community to form Kehillat Ramat Aviv in 1971. In: Beruria Barish, co-founder Kehillat Ramat Aviv and former chairperson of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, interview by author, Tape recording, Ramat Aviv, Israel, 24 July 1991.

just different, but special. There was a lot of pride in being Jewish in my family, a lot of focus on holiday celebrations as well as Shabbat. [my parents] were highly committed to being Jewish and imparting that Jewish identity to their kids."

At age 13, Shiryon found herself challenging the limits of acceptable practice for a girl set by her synagogue. She was considered a radical by her family's "Conservadox" congregation because she wanted a religious ceremony to mark her becoming a Bat Mitzvah, as her older brother had for his Bar Mitzvah. As a compromise, to celebrate her Bat Mitzvah, Shiryon led certain prayers during Friday night services, read the Haftarah without reciting the associated blessings, and delivered a *d'var torah*.[17] "I felt very good that I achieved all that and it was just later that I resented the fact that that was all I could do."

As a result of their daughter's increasing discomfort in their synagogue community and their own desire to be in a congregation whose values more closely resembled their own, Shiryon's parents joined a Conservative congregation. That Conservative community provided a supportive structure in which Shiryon's already strong Jewish identity flourished. She remembers, "I thrived on it. The synagogue for me was a second home, it was a home away from home." At age 15, she was teaching remedial Hebrew to younger student, leading services for children in the congregation, and emerging as a leader in her chapter and region of United Synagogue Youth. At that time, as her abilities as a teacher and leader among her Jewish peers, Shiryon decided to become a rabbi. Her resolve was supported by the role she held in her

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[17]The Hebrew term for a discussion of some element of the weekly portion of the Torah which is read for that particular Shabbat.

synagogue community and the encouragement she received from her rabbi and her family. Shiryon recalls:

> Before there were female rabbis, I was called 'rabbi' [by children in the synagogue]. That's when I started my journey and my one person battle.... I remember talking to the rabbi of the congregation [who had been ordained as an Orthodox rabbi]. He thought it was a great idea. He thought it was unusual that it was a young woman who want[ed] to do this. And my family also, they didn't laugh at me. They thought it was peculiar, but were very supportive from the very beginning.

From that time onward, Shiryon began laying the groundwork which she hoped would enable her to enter the Jewish Theological Seminary [JTS] as a rabbinical student. As a child of the Conservative movement, she gravitated toward JTS as the natural place for her rabbinical studies. As an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, Shiryon majored in comparative literature, studying Hebrew and French. She wanted a field that would be both enjoyable and good preparation for rabbinical studies. Simultaneously, she began corresponding with JTS; the seminary informed her that the education program was open to her, but that women were not being admitted in the rabbinical program. Over time, she resigned herself to the fact that her approach was too liberal for the movement in which she was raised and began investigating rabbinical programs that accepted female candidates.

Ultimately, Shiryon decided to attend HUC in New York. Her four years in rabbinical school were a time of personal and professional growth.[18] During that time, as on the occasion of her Bat Mitzvah, she set precedents, but this time as a student rabbi. She was the first woman to function as a

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[18]Because of her background in Hebrew and Judaica, Shiryon was exempted from the required first year program at HUC's Jerusalem campus. Thus, she fulfilled the requirements for rabbinical ordination at the end of four years of study in New York.

congregational rabbi in Australia during her summer in Adelaide and at a student pulpit in Connecticut.[19]

As her family and synagogue community provided settings where Shiryon could develop as a Jew, and as rabbinical school and congregational internships offered opportunities in which she grew professionally, American society was fertile ground for Shiryon's feminism. She explains, "feminism for me is what I would call humanism," which grows from the inequality that women experienced in the American society in which she was raised. Women "were not seen in the same light as men... as a source of authority or a source of respect... I saw that if you weren't a feminist, then you just didn't care about the human race. For me, that was a litmus test... a feminist was a person who was interested in equality, equal access and equal opportunities for everybody. Those are just the basic rights of a human being to express themselves in all areas... whether it's professional, whether it's personal, whether it's social."

In 1983, Kinneret Shiryon arrived in Israel as a new immigrant, a rabbi with a rich Judaic background, experience as a female pioneer in Jewish observance and leadership, and commitment to an egalitarian-feminist ideal which she has integrated in her personal and professional life. She served as rabbi to Kehillat Ramat Aviv from 1984-1991.[20]

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[19]Hillit Bloom, "A [Male] Rabbi that Plays Soccer, A [Female Rabbi] that Rides a Bicycle." *Bemachaneh* (Israel: 13 June 1990): 28. [In Hebrew]

[20]Kehillat Ramat Aviv and Kedem Congregation have been merged under the directive of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Beruria Barish, former chair of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism explains: "The position of the World Union [for Progressive Judaism] [WUPJ] is that for three kilometers distance, there's no justification for two small synagogues there's no justification for two rabbis, it's always a question of money." In addition, there is a question whether the municipality of Tel Aviv will allow Kehillat Ramat Aviv to continue using the municipal property on 5 Levitan Street, as their synagogue. While Kehillat Ramat Aviv continues to grow as a community, Kedem Congregation is a shrinking congregation that owns the building in which it meets. The WUPJ has directed the erection of a new structure for the newly merged

Rabbi Karyn Kedar[21]

Karyn Kedar grew up in a family whose commitment to Judaism was evidenced by active involvement at their Reform congregation in the Washington, D.C. area and by her father's roles as a lay leader in Reform Jewish organizations.[22] She grew up in a home with a traditional family structure: her father worked outside the home and her mother's primary responsibilities revolved around home and child rearing.

Karyn remembers that her father encouraged her intellectual curiosity and her love of Judaism. He demonstrated her family's attitude of respecting people for their particular interests and talents. Kedar tells:

"The story... which typifies how my family respects individuals as individuals is: On Saturday morning [while I was growing up], we used to eat breakfast together. My dad and I would start to talk about things and by noon, there were... books [covering] the table. Once we sat down and read Genesis together, we had all this fun intellectually. He would sit down and read me a part from Buber, from Heschel..."

"After he was done with me at noon, my brother, who was very different from me, said, 'Come on, dad, let's go out and work on the car.' My dad would change into his jeans and the two of them would go out and they would spend the next three hours taking the car apart... The attitude was always: 'Do what you want to do, just be good at it.'"

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congregation, Beit Daniel. It was to be ready for the High Holy Days 5752. In: Barish, interview, 24 July 1991.

[21]Unless otherwise noted, all unattributed information and quotations in this section about Rabbi Kedar are from: Rabbi Karyn Kedar, interview by author, Tape recording, Pisgat Ze'ev, Israel, 23 July 1991.

[22]Karyn Kedar's father, Norman Schwartz, currently serves as president of the Association of Reform Zionists of America [ARZA].

Kedar learned from her father's example that life is a personal journey, and that it is incumbent upon each individual to choose and pursue whatever goal suits that person. Whatever the journey, it if is undertaken with persistence, that is respectable. From this model of liberal individualism, Kedar derives her understanding of feminism. Like Shiryon, she understands the ideal of feminism to be closer to humanism which enables all people to achieve fulfillment, rather than a movement which is particularly focused on women or one that excludes men on some level.

Kedar's feminism was also informed by challenges to her family's notion of respecting individual preferences and goals, which she encountered as an adult. "I became a feminist in college when people started telling me, 'You can't. You can't do that, you're too pretty. You can't do that, you're too sexy. You can't do that, you're a woman. You can't do that, there is no such thing.'" In reaction to such comments, Kedar's identity as a feminist grew.

At eight, Kedar first expressed her desire to become a rabbi. This was before the ordination of women became a reality. Her father went to an Orthodox rabbi to ask if there were *halakhic* reasons against women becoming rabbis. The rabbi replied that there were none. From that point onward, her father supported her completely. "My wanting to be a rabbi had nothing to do with feminism, it didn't occur to me that women didn't do that. It just seemed natural. I liked my rabbi, he was a role model. Why wouldn't I want to do it?"

Kedar believes that difficulties arise when people perceive barriers to their goals and take them too seriously. She became convinced of this phenomenon while she served as rabbi at Har El Congregation. One day, after she led services, someone from the congregation approached her and asked if she recognized him. She didn't and he explained that he was a student at

Johns Hopkins University when Kedar was the advisor for the Reform students' group. At that time, he had asked her what she wanted to do with her life. She told him she wanted to become a rabbi and to make aliyah, and that she would have to make a choice. Kedar responded to the man's story with relief that she had forgotten about that conversation. She explains, "I think that typifies it all. When you don't see that there's a barrier in front of you, there's no barrier. So when I forgot that I couldn't do both, I just did both."

Kedar's congruent desires to study for the rabbinate and to make aliyah became increasingly enmeshed. During her first year program at HUC in Jerusalem, she married Ezra, a native Israeli. They lived in Cincinnati for the next four years, while she completed her rabbinical studies. Living in Israel was the natural choice for both of them. Two weeks after her ordination in 1985, they returned to Israel.

For two years, Kedar taught in the Hod Hasharon-based program, High School in Israel. In 1987, she began working at Har El Congregation[23] in Jerusalem, where she served as assistant rabbi with Rabbi Tovia Ben Chorin for two years. She remained for an additional year while Ben Chorin took a sabbatical leave. In August 1990, Kedar started serving the fledgling Progressive community in Petach Tikvah on a part time basis. During February 1992, Kedar accepted a position as Director of Programming at Congregation Beth El in Boca Raton, Florida.[24]

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[23]For background on the establishment of this congregation, see: Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 348-349.

[24]"Placement News," *News Letter of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* 38 (February 1992).

Rabbi Gila Dror[25]

The first woman rabbi in the Masorti movement to serve an Israeli congregation, Gila Dror, came to the rabbinate by a different route from those of Kinneret Shiryon and Karyn Kedar. Dror was born in Israel and moved with her family to Brooklyn as a child where she studied at the Yeshivah of Flatbush. Influenced by Orthodox teachings at school, she imported traditional practice into her home. At that time her mother, who had left Orthodoxy years earlier, was becoming more engaged in Jewish practice and study. Thus, her mother was receptive to her daughter's desire to live an Orthodox lifestyle, and Jewish learning became part of their family life. Dror explains, "[During junior high and high school], I was going to Young Israel of Flatbush and there the rabbi invited women to come study in his Talmud *shiurim* that he used to give, and my mother used to go to that and I went also. We were into the education of women, but I certainly would not have been called a feminist at that time by any stretch of the imagination!"

Dror's family communicated dichotomous messages about the abilities of women. "The attitude... was that women could do anything. My grandfather always told me [about] his sisters. one was a doctor and the [other] was a nurse... Women could do anything! Nobody actually put together the problem with religion... I grew up with two different stories in my mind. one was that there's no problem, women could do anything; and the other was, well women have this different role in religion and that's natural and fine and there's no conflict between the two. It didn't seem like a conflict much at the beginning

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[25]Unless otherwise noted, all unattributed information and quotations in this section about Rabbi Dror are from: Rabbi Gila Dror, interview by author, Tape recording, Be'er Sheva, Israel, 4 August 1991.

And then, slowly, the more I studied, the more problematic it seemed to me until it became very problematic!"

Despite her dissatisfaction with this bifurcated view of women and their roles, Dror continued her Orthodox observance and study. In fact, she was encouraged to keep on studying: "I continued learning because what I was told when I started asking the questions was, 'Keep studying and you'll find it. The answer will come to you... you've got a good head, keep on studying.' So with my good head, I kept on studying and I didn't find the answer. I finally decided that I wasn't going to find the answer in this direction and it's time to start looking elsewhere. But it took a long time until I got to that stage."

In the meantime, she was also pursuing her secular education. At the encouragement of her teachers, who had observed her enjoyment and success in studying Talmud, Dror decided to become an attorney. When she was twenty-two,[26] she returned to Israel, earned a law degree, went through the necessary apprenticeship and began practicing law. Throughout this period, Dror kept up with her study of Jewish texts with special interest in Talmud and the legal aspects of Judaism.

Because of the religious and social milieu in which she grew up, Gila Dror had a traditional framework through which she perceived women's roles in Judaism; nonetheless, as a youngster, like her female peers in the Progressive movement, she contemplated becoming a rabbi. "I always did have this feeling that the rabbinate was a wonderful profession... I always thought that it was a marvelous thing to do and to be, but I didn't think in terms

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[26]Sue Fishkoff, "Call Her Rabbi," *The Jerusalem Post International Edition* (Jerusalem: week ending 21 September 1991), 12.

of being a rabbi at the time, it never occurred to me that a woman could. If I were a man, that's what I would have wanted to be."

It wasn't until she was practicing law that Dror began to consider studying for rabbinical ordination seriously. "My decision to go to rabbinical school happened after I met a women who was studying to be a rabbi [a student from JTS who was then studying at Neve Schecter, JTS's program in Jerusalem]. she said to me, 'Why don't you do what you've always wanted to do?' That's how it started. I started to study in order to see whether I really liked it or not, and I did."

As a woman, Dror was ineligible to enter the rabbinical program at the Masorti movement's Beit Midrash. Instead, she applied to JTS in New York and worked out a compromise program with that institution. "I studied for four years at Neve Shechter, at Hebrew University and in independent studies and it was all part of the JTS program. I was registered at JTS in New York and I was studying [in Jerusalem]. I did their program, not in the same order that they do it, and then I had to go to the States for a year to finish." Dror received rabbinical ordination from JTS in New York in June 1990.

Dror defines the goal of feminism as equal opportunity. Her first struggle toward this end was during her elementary school education at the Yeshivah of Flatbush. In sixth grade, boys and girls were separated for certain topics and the boys were given more hours of Talmud study. "At that point, one of my friends and I organized a little demonstration. We didn't want this to happen, but we didn't succeed, we failed miserably."

As an adult, identifying herself as a feminist was a gradual process. It began with the perceptions of her which others expressed and slowly became integrated into her self-perception and her world view. "At some point, one of

my teachers turned around to me and said, 'You as a feminist should know ' and I remember that moment and I looked at him and I thought, 'OK I guess I'm a feminist from now on because I couldn't say 'No, I'm not.' at that point.' I [really] became a feminist when it became clear to me that people were telling me 'No ' because I was a woman." She went on to explain that her identity as a feminist was solidified when her daughter would inquire and complain about inequalities which exist in Judaism. Dror recognized that she could accept, or at least tolerate, things for oneself which she couldn't endure for her children.

On June 1, 1991 Gila Dror began serving as rabbi in Kehillat Eshel Avraham, a Masorti congregation in Be'er Sheva.

Maya Leibovic[27]

Maya Leibovic is the first native Israeli woman to study in an Israeli rabbinical program and she is expected to become the first woman ordained as a rabbi in the State of Israel. Unlike Rabbis Dror, Kedar and Shiryon, she did not grow up in a religious family. Leibovic's parents left Czechoslovakia in 1939-40, and they "lost God"[28] in the Sho'ah. "My grandfather came from an honored family of Orthodox rabbis. I grew up in a household of deniers. My father said, in the style of Judge Hayyim Cohen, that if the Sho'ah occurred, there is no God. [In our home,] Judaism was not passed on to us as something of educational value."[29]

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[27]Unless otherwise noted, all unattributed information and quotations in this section about Ms. Leibovic are from: Maya Leibovic, rabbinical student at HUC in Jerusalem, interview by author, Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 22 July 1991.

[28]Idit Bat-Meshi, "Wrapped in a Tallit," *Ha'aretz* (Israel), 20 October 1988). [In Hebrew]

[29]Bloom, "A [Male] Rabbi that Plays Soccer ...," 56.

Leibovic's first meaningful contact with Judaism began when she was in the army. "I had a religious friend who took me home with her on Friday. I was enchanted with this distinction: six days and Shabbat -- profane and holy -- the atmosphere, a day of being calm. I began a process of self-education."[30]

Her interest in Judaism grew into a commitment to have a Jewish home. When she and her husband Menachem married, they both wanted to have a Jewish home, although they weren't sure what that meant for them. Early in their marriage, they moved to Washington, D.C. for three years. During that period, Menachem was a *shaliach* and Maya taught in local synagogue Hebrew schools and at George Washington University. In the course of their three-year immersion in American society, their Judaic knowledge and their understanding of the various Jewish movements flourished.

Upon returning to Israel, Maya Leibovic continued working as an educator in various capacities, including running an ulpan in Ashqelon, teaching youth in Arad and working as a tour guide. Professionally, she was struck with the idea of becoming a rabbi suddenly in 1985, she watched a television interview with Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon. "This lit a light for me." Leibovic realized that she could take an active leadership position in Judaism within the Israeli milieu.

By chance, Maya's growing interest in the rabbinate coincided with Menachem's interview for the position of manager of Beit Shmuel.[31] The couple decided that if Menachem were offered the position in Jerusalem, they and their four children would move from Arad to Israel's capital and that Maya

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[30]Ibid.

[31]The conference center-youth hostel which is part of HUC's campus in Jerusalem.

would consider applying to HUC's rabbinical program.[32] Thus through self-education, personal growth within her family, and fortuitous timing, Maya became the first native Israeli woman to study for ordination in an Israeli rabbinical seminary.

While Leibovic admits that she has not developed a personal feminist ideology, she is articulate about her perceptions of women's roles in Israeli secular and religious society. In her youth, she believed that Israeli society was progressive in nature, as evidenced by the presence of women in the military. As she matured, Leibovic grew to see Israeli culture as conservative and male-oriented, far from progressive with respect to women's roles.

In one interview, Leibovic introduced the topic of women's roles in Israel's secular and religious sectors herself. "'Why a woman all of a sudden, right?' She opened and clarified immediately that the accepted interpretation of 'All glorious is the king's daughter within the palace'[33] [represents] the glittering anti-feminism of our Sages of blessed memory. 'And I ask you, why not a woman? Just because at one time [they] thought that we weren't capable? Look how absurd this situation is, that a woman in Israel is able to be the leader of the State - while you ask me by what right I come to lead [worship] in a synagogue. Or that women serve, for example, as judges in the highest court of law, but when they arrive at a rabbinical court, they are unable even to be witnesses. We have arrived at the conclusion that there is no reason why a

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[32]In addition to managing Beit Schmuel, Menachem Leibovic currently serves as the director of Israel operations for the World Union for Progressive Judaism. In "Your Passport to the World Union." *Reform Judaism* 20 (Spring 1992): 37.

[33]Psalms 45:14 [1917 translation of the Tanakh by the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia]

woman should be unable to be a representative of the community [by leading prayer]. In our movement, women are able to hold any position '"[34]

As a student, Leibovic has held various teaching positions and opportunities to serve as rabbi at small congregations in Israel which do not yet have an ordained rabbi working with them. Her ordination is eagerly anticipated, especially by members of the Progressive and Masorti movements who are interested in women's issues.

Looking at This Sample of Israel's Female Rabbinical Community as a Group

While these four women each chose careers in the Progressive and Masorti Israeli rabbinate by her own route, they share certain commonalities.

The single factor which Shiryon, Kedar, Dror and Leibovic have all experienced is life in American Jewish communities. Their years in the United States contributed to their development as feminists and as Jews. As daughters of the Reform and Conservative movements, Kedar and Shiryon belonged to communities where women held a range of leadership roles. They were adolescents when Sally Preisand became ordained as the first woman rabbi in 1972.[35] As young adults during the 1970's, they matured in a climate of social activism in which one of the popular causes was feminism. That atmosphere may have strengthened their resolve to pursue careers in the rabbinate.

The American environment probably influenced the Orthodox rabbis who directly and indirectly planted seeds of encouragement for Shiryon, Kedar and Dror by taking relatively lenient stances toward women's roles within

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[34]Bat-Meshi, "Wrapped in a Tallit," 20 October 1988.

[35]Shiryon was born in 1955 and Kedar in 1957.

Judaism. The rabbi who nurtured Kinneret Shiryon's adolescent hunger for Jewish knowledge, desire to teach and lead prayer, and encouraged her pursuit of a career in the rabbinate, was an ordinee from Yeshiva University. In Kedar's instance, the Orthodox rabbi with whom her father consulted when she announced at age eight that she wanted to become a rabbi informed the concerned father that halakhically there was no problem with a woman becoming a rabbi. As an adolescent during the 1960's, Dror accompanied her mother to study Talmud with an Orthodox rabbi in Brooklyn. While these three rabbis acted and spoke with lenience relative to their peers,[36] the American atmosphere of Jewish pluralism likely influenced their adoption of stances which encouraged interested young girls on paths that ultimately lead to careers in the rabbinate.

For Maya Leibovic, who spent three years of her adult life in Washington, D.C., living in America offered her and her husband the opportunity to learn about the diversity possible within a Jewish community during the early years in their marriage when they were searching for ways to integrate Judaism in to their life together.

Encouragement from their families in response to hunger for Judaic knowledge provided a supportive backdrop for these women during their youths. Kedar, Shiryon and Dror each recall parental participation in their process of Jewish learning. Kedar and her father explored intellectual Jewish terrain over the breakfast table on Saturday mornings; Shiryon's parents changed synagogues so their daughter could take a more active role within

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[36]In the case of Karyn Kedar's father, the Orthodox rabbi may not have had any notion of the practical nature of the question being posed. Nonetheless, Kedar's father placed value on the rabbi's reply and was able to wholeheartedly support his daughter's goals as a result of that rabbinical response.

Jewish study and ritual life; and, Dror imported Orthodox practice from the Yeshivah of Flatbush into her home with her mother's cooperation, and she and her mother learned Talmud at their rabbi's *shiurim*.

Family acceptance was a significant factor as they expressed and then pursued rabbinical careers. From the times of their youthful pronouncements, Kinneret Shiryon and Karyn Kedar's families nurtured their daughters' efforts.

As in all two-career families, the spousal partnership has been a key element in key for the success of academic and professional pursuits by married rabbincal students and rabbis. For married rabbinical students, a husband's willingness to relocate to another city, as in the case of Maya and Menachem Leibovic, or to another country, as with Karyn and Ezra Kedar, while his wife pursued her studies testifies to flexibility and support of her efforts. In the case of Kinneret and Boruch Shiryon, during her early years at Kehillat Ramat Aviv, his home-based career as an artist and commitment to shared parenting freed her to pursue her rabbinate with little conflict.

In their individual ways, Kinneret Shiryon and Gila Dror learned that leniency and encouragement have limits. Both grew up and found comfort in movements that proved themselves unable to accept Shiryon and Dror's respective modes of Jewish practice and career goals. For Shiryon, a daughter of the American Conservative movement, the timing was wrong: she wanted to enter rabbinical school in 1977, eight years before the first woman received ordination from JTS. Finding herself with a more liberal approach than her movement could tolerate, Shiryon chose HUC in New York for her rabbinical education and became comfortable with the practice and goals of the Reform movement.

Similarly, from the beginning of her studies at the Yeshiva of Flatbush at age seven through her career as a lawyer, Gila Dror embraced an Orthodox level of Jewish observance. When she had questions that her teachers couldn't answer, she was advised to study. After years of learning Jewish texts, she realized that study did not reveal satisfactory responses and she began searching outside the Orthodox framework. After finding the Masorti approach more congruent with her own tendencies, Dror again had to seek a more lenient option. Since the Masorti movement's Israeli rabbinical program does not yet accept female candidates, Dror registered with JTS in New York. She fulfilled the bulk of her course work over four years of ad hoc study in Jerusalem and completed the program at JTS in New York for her fifth year. Once ordained, the Masorti movement has been supportive, though certain barriers remain in place (e.g. women are not permitted to serve on the Israeli Rabbinical Assembly's Law Committee and although she is the Beit Din coordinator, she may not sit on the body that resides over Masorti conversions in Israel).[37]

Dror and Shiryon sound at peace with their decisions to change their affiliations. It was a straightforward process as they describe it: they each came to a point where their convictions, goals and levels of observance no longer fit in with the Jewish communities in which they were raised. When they recognized that disparity, they sought a better fit, found it and went on from there.

American-born Kedar and Shiryon and the Israeli-born Dror and Leibovic can be paired in terms of life path and age as well as according to

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[37]Dror, interview, 4 August 1991; and, Sue Fishkoff, "Call Her Rabbi," *The Jerusalem Post International Edition* (21 Sept 1991).

country of origin. Kedar and Shiryon, ages 35 and 37, were raised in the United States, formed strong Jewish identities, attachments to Israel and attraction to the rabbinate as youngsters, married Israeli men, and returned to Israel with their husbands soon after ordination to start their careers and their families. Dror and Leibovic, ages 41 and 44, entered rabbinical school in pursuit of second careers, having started their families before entering rabbinical school. The paired similarities between the native Americans and Israelis can be attributed to environmental factors. Shiryon and Kedar fit the trend of their time, when it was typical for women entering rabbinical school to do so soon after completing their undergraduate studies. Considering the radical posture female rabbis in Israel project, it is no surprise that Leibovic and Dror, equipped with the maturity and broader perspective that careers and living in America's pluralistic Jewish environment provide, are the type of Israeli women that study for the rabbinate in Israel.

For each of these women, the love of Judaism, Israel, and the future of Jewish pluralism in Israeli society combine and support a determination to become pioneers within minority Progressive and Masorti communities, to educate and nurture fledgling congregations and enrich Israeli life.

## Israel's Fascination with Women Rabbis

Women rabbis are anomalies in Israeli society : they are women who carry out the role and bear the authority of 'rabbi,' and they are rabbis who lead communities of religious Jews who are not Orthodox in their affiliation or in their manner of Jewish observance. From the numerous articles which have appeared in Israeli newspapers and periodicals about women who serve as rabbis in Progressive and Masorti congregations in Israel, it may be concluded

that these women and their professional lives are interesting to Israelis. Women rabbis are exotic: they are a minority among the rabbis in the liberal religious communities that constitute a tiny fraction of the Israeli populace.

What is the point of fascination which draws Israeli interest to these women? Whether they trigger attraction or repulsion, compliments or condemnation, women rabbis elicit curiosity and strong visceral and intellectual reactions from Israeli society. It is difficult to determine the extent to which interest in female rabbis is prompted because of their uniqueness as women or because of their unusual status as religious Jews operating outside the Orthodox establishment. The Israeli populace can be understood as two discrete groups, each with its own tendency when reacting to female rabbis: persons affiliated with the Progressive or Masorti movements respond primarily to them as rabbis who are noteworthy because they are women, whereas Israeli society in general responds more strongly to these women as religious Jews outside the Orthodox framework. The responses of members of liberal movements and of Israeli society in general will be treated separately.

Responses to Women Rabbis Within Their Respective Movements

Before analyzing the reactions of Israeli congregants and rabbis in the Progressive and Masorti movements toward women rabbis, the complexity involved in attempting to distinguish between responses to a rabbi because she is a woman and reactions to her as an individual must be acknowledged.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar views any discussion of sexism with regard to female rabbis as a difficult and sensitive area. Kedar believes that the egalitarian position of the Progressive movement inhibits members of affiliated congregations from voicing any discomfort they might feel regarding female rabbis. She makes an analogy between debating the role of women clergy in

the Progressive movement with peace in broader society: just as no one will say they are against peace, because of issues of ideology and political correctness no one will open a debate over women's roles in the Progressive movement. Therefore, Jews affiliated with the movement favor a female rabbi ideologically and criticism becomes couched in personal terms for or against the rabbi herself.[38]

The attitudes that members of the Progressive and Masorti movements hold toward women rabbis are manifest in a variety of settings including: the hiring process, the interactions between congregants and rabbis in the congregational setting, and the relations among members of a given movement's rabbinical association.

Hiring a Female Rabbi

In most cases, the gender of rabbinical candidates for congregational positions has been a significant factor. The most open expression of discomfort and questioning about women as rabbis has come from the Masorti movement.[39] This is most dramatically illustrated in the case of Einat Ramon, a JTS ordinee who is the first native-born Israeli woman to receive rabbinical ordination. Upon returning to Israel after her ordination in 1989, Ramon was informed by the Masorti movement that their congregations were not yet ready for a female rabbi. The only professional position which the movement would

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[38]Kedar, interview, 23 July 1991.

[39]For an orientation to the status of women within the Masorti movement, see: Patricia Golan, "Changing Times Changing Status: Israeli Women Conduct a survey on Women's Role in Ritual and Leadership," *Women's League Outlook*, Summer 1990; 22-23, and the 1990 position paper compiled by the ad-hoc Sub-Committee on the Status of Women in the Masorti Movement (photocopied).

offer her in Israel was as coordinator for the movement in northern Israel, for which she would receive a rabbi's salary.

Ramon reacted with skepticism to the Masorti movement's claim about their congregations. In a survey conducted by the movement in 1986, 63% of respondents answered in the affirmative when asked if they were ready to accept a woman in the capacity of rabbi. Rather than accept the non-congregational position offered to her in Israel, Ramon decided to pursue doctoral studies at Stanford University, where she would have opportunities "to teach, write and gain more experience as a pulpit rabbi. 'Before I become a rabbi who's a second- or third-class citizen with no rights in Israel, I want to be a rabbi with full rights. I want to know what to strive for.'"[40]

Two years later, Gila Dror became the first woman rabbi in the Masorti movement to serve an Israeli congregation. However, Kehillat Eshel Avraham[41] and Rabbi Dror found each other without assistance from the official channels of the Masorti movement. After her ordination from JTS in 1990, Dror returned to Israel immediately. She began working at a variety of part time positions in Jerusalem: coordinating the Masorti movement's conversion institute; teaching *b'nai mitzvah* lessons at the Reform Har El Congregation; filling in to teach Talmud for adults at Masorti congregations and at the Conservative Center in Jerusalem; and driving one day each week to Kehillat Magen Avraham, the Masorti congregation in Omer, where she taught *b'nai mitzvah* students and courses for adults.

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[40]Randi Jo Land, "Female rabbi breaks new ground," *In Jerusalem*, 14 June 1989, and, Yaron Avitov, "Honor to Rabbi Einat," 59.

[41]Kehillat Eshel Avraham has been an egalitarian congregation since 1980, when JTS ordinee Jon Perlman was hired as the rabbi of their community. In: Dror, interview, 4 August 1991.

During the winter of 1990, someone in Omer told her that Jon Perlman, the rabbi of Kehillat Eshel Avraham in Be'er Sheba, was leaving and asked if she would consider applying for that position. She expressed interest and her contact inquired, only to find out that the congregation wasn't interested in hiring a woman. Soon after, Dror met the president of Kehillat Eshel Avraham by coincidence and they discussed the position. Following that initial meeting, she had a three hour interview with the president. At that point, he invited Dror down for a Shabbat, not to interview, but so people could meet her. She accepted the invitation. "I felt at the end of the Shabbat that they liked me and I also felt that I like them, which was part of the process. But I felt that a lot of people had a question in their minds about a woman rabbi. How would it be? And why wasn't there one already? It's something different."

Gila's impression of the congregation's response to her were accurate on both counts. "[The community] decided to have a general meeting rather than [having] the board [make the decision about hiring me] because of the fact that it is a woman rabbi and it's something so new. They invited me back to talk to them the evening of their meeting when they were going to vote later, to talk and to answer questions. So I spoke about the issue of a woman rabbi and I answered their questions." After their discussion, the congregation asked Dror to leave while they voted. The decision was almost unanimous in favor of hiring Dror;[42] the congregation offered her the position that evening.[43]

The process of hiring female rabbis in the Progressive movement congregations has not been characterized by the candor and community-wide

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[42]Sue Fishkoff, "Call Her Rabbi," *The Jerusalem Post International Edition* (21 Sept 1991).

[43]Information and quotations in this section about Rabbi Dror are from: Dror, interview, 4 August 1991.

participation which took place in Be'er Sheva. In contrast to the informal communication first to Rabbi Dror that the position at Kehillat Eshel Avraham would be available and the coincidental manner with which she met that congregation's president, Rabbis Shiryon and Kedar were deliberately matched with their congregations by means of more formal, less democratic procedures.

Kinneret Shiryon's first contact with Rabbi Mordechai Rotem, then executive director of the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, was in Los Angeles where she was working for the American Jewish Committee following her ordination. "I said to him, 'Look, I plan to be in Israel within the next year. I would like very much to find a role professionally within the movement, but I won't talk to you until I get there.' He was impressed with the fact that I wasn't coming to Israel only if a job was set up. I was making aliyah and I was going to see what I could do." In 1984, a year after Shiryon made aliyah, Rotem told her that Kehillat Ramat Aviv was the only place where he would consider placing her. They had a history of strong female leadership and it was the one community which he thought would be receptive to having a woman rabbi.

The integration into Kehillat Ramat Aviv that Shiryon experienced was a gradual one, with hiring decisions made from the top. During the spring of 1984, she interviewed with the chairperson and treasurer of Kehillat Ramat Aviv. She was then asked to lead a seminar on prayer, an 18-week course which was well attended. During that period, she was invited to lead worship as a guest rabbi from time to time. Before the High Holy Days, she was hired at a half-time salary.[44] According to Beruria Barish, who chaired the board of the

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[44]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991.

congregation at the time, Kehillat Ramat Aviv's hiring process: she and the treasurer would meet with an applicant, then they would report their impressions to the board, which would then make a hiring decision.[45]

Barish explains that the issue of hiring a female rabbi was a topic of discussion among the board members. "It was discussed... not in front of [Shiryon]. There were questions [about the possibility] that people would come in and say 'We don't like a woman rabbi, we're not that liberal.' It happen[ed], but... not... in a drastic way. I would say that the drastic split of the congregation... was mainly because people disagreed on the way [Shiryon's predecessor] was fired. But, as it happens... those people have come back to the congregation and... some are very active."[46]

In retrospect, Shiryon agrees that gender was an issue for her congregation at the time when she was interviewing. She believes that for Kehillat Ramat Aviv, it was strategic and intriguing to hire a woman. "The fact that I was female, I think, was enticing to this particular group. I think they saw it as a gimmick... to bring in Israelis. At least the members of the executive board at the time thought that people would come because they would be curious about a female and that would give them good exposure to the community. Perhaps people would like what they saw and would stay. I think they saw that as... an interesting experiment. I don't think they took me on my merits alone."[47]

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Rabbis at Progressive congregations receive their salaries from the movement, not from the communities for whom they work.

[45]Barish, interview, 24 July 1991.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991.

Similarly, Har El Congregation's decision to hire Rabbi Karyn Kedar was made on an executive level; however, the process employed was even further removed from the average congregant. During the end of her second year as an instructor at High School in Israel, Kedar's rabbinical peers and her family encouraged her involvement in the Progressive movement. In 1987, she was hired at Jerusalem's Har El Congregation as an assistant rabbi as part of an absorption program for integrating rabbis that had recently immigrated into Israel's congregational rabbinate. Kedar didn't perceive tensions about her being a female rabbi until after she was hired.

In contrast, the community which Kedar until recently served in Petach Tikvah barely had a hiring process and whether their rabbi was male or female was incidental. The congregation in Petach Tikvah has unique grass roots origins. During the summer of 1989, Mira Raz, a native Israeli living in Petach Tikvah, saw a newspaper advertisement paid for by the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism which listed the times and locations for High Holy Day services for the New Year 5749 [1988-1989] at their affiliated congregations. The notice caught her interest; Mira clipped the ad, filed it and forgot about it. After Purim [spring 1989], Raz found the newspaper clipping and called the movement office in Jerusalem to inquire why there was no Progressive synagogue in Petach Tikvah. She was told that if she organized a group of interested people, then the movement would send someone to work with them. Within two weeks, Raz called back saying that she had 18-20 people interested.

From that point onward, the group's professional leadership was in the hands of the Progressive movement. A community worker began meeting with the group in Petach Tikvah to gain a sense of their needs and goals and to organize a structure that would suit their community. For the High Holy Days

5750 [1989-1990], a student rabbi from HUC's Israeli rabbinical program led worship. The community worker from the Progressive movement continued coming to Petach Tikvah throughout that year. In August 1990, Karyn Kedar began coming to the community on a part-time basis to lead adult study and prayer. Kedar and Raz explain that group wanted to learn more about Judaism and to experience egalitarian worship; the introduction of a female rabbi caused no upheaval.

Karyn's introduction in Petach Tikvah was significantly different from her experience at Har El Congregation and from the hiring experiences of her female peers. The dramatic difference in style may be attributed to several factors, including: for the Petach Tikvah group, exploring Progressive Judaism was a powerful enough motivating factor that the question of a rabbi's gender paled in comparison; and, Mira Raz and the community worker are both women, so female leadership has been an intrinsic component of this community's formation and growth throughout its brief history.

An examination of the congregational hiring processes which these four women rabbis experienced in the Progressive and Masorti movements in Israel reveals that the gender of the candidate has typically been factored into the decision-making process. Whether there was a generally favorable bias, as in the case of Kinneret Shiryon at Kehillat Ramat Aviv, or an explicit rejection which prevented contact with a congregation from occurring, as with Einat Ramon and the Masorti movement, the question of accepting a woman as a rabbi is relevant even among the most liberal religious communities in Israel. The experiences of Rabbi Gila Dror in Be'er Sheva and Rabbi Karyn Kedar in Petach Tikvah suggest factors with the potential for facilitating healthier adjustments for congregations and female rabbis: incorporating honest

discourse into the hiring process by holding a discussion on the issue of women and the rabbinate for rabbi-applicant and congregation so concerns and opinions may be expressed early in the relationship; and, placing female rabbis in communities where issues such as developing Jewish religious identity are more important than the gender of the rabbi guiding educational and spiritual processes. The long-term success of these relationships will indicate whether such adjustments in hiring and rabbinical placement are significant.

Feedback from Congregants

While knowledge of the hiring process is significant in understanding the history of a congregation-rabbi relationship, feedback from congregants more clearly elucidates the attitudes members of a given community hold toward their female rabbi (as would be the case in any congregation with respect to their rabbi). After two months at Kehillat Eshel Avraham, naturally Gila Dror can convey only first impressions of the impact that her arrival has had on her congregants. "A lot of people see me still as a woman rabbi, which a lot of people find refreshing and other people find problematic. It's clearly an issue it isn't [as if] everything was solved at the minute the vote was taken."[48]

Congregants can reveal much about their attitudes shortly after a rabbi's arrival. At Kehillat Ramat Aviv, Kinneret Shiryon learned about the process of being accepted when one congregant shared her reactions with the new rabbi: "There's this one woman in the community... a down to earth kind of person and she said to me after four months of being a rabbi [there], she said, 'I want you to know that I found it very peculiar having you up there: young, female, it

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[48]Dror, interview, 4 August 1991.

just didn't sit well with me. Intellectually, I was all for it and I believed in it completely, but on an emotional level it was very difficult for me to relate to you. And then one day I noticed that I was relating to you as my rabbi and I stopped relating to you as a female.'[49] And that, to me shows... the willingness of this particular community, that they were open enough to try it. Once they tried it, and once they got to know me, they saw what I had to offer and they liked it. We built on that together."[50]

A wide gap can indeed exist between a congregant's intellectual approach to women in the rabbinate and that person's emotional response to a female rabbi. This dichotomy surfaces most consistently when the rabbi is pregnant. The underlying question that seems to arise is: who will she nurture, the congregation or her family? Despite the fact that Shiryon was visibly pregnant with her first child when she interviewed with Kehillat Ramat Aviv, some segment of the congregational leadership metaphorically held its breath during her three subsequent pregnancies. "Every time I got pregnant, I think, was a crisis for [many of the men on her congregation's executive board]. They had mixed feelings. They were all hip hip hooray for having more children because in Israeli society that's very important and there's a lot of value placed on that, [but] on the other side is 'Hey, wait a minute, she's having another child. What does that mean about how she's going to function as our rabbinic leader?'... They forgot so quickly after each child[birth], that I went back to work immediately, that I was right back into the stream of things... When I got

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[49]Shiryon also recalls this exchange in: Avital, "Only in Israel..." *Kochav Tzafon Tel Aviv* (2 Feb 1988) [In Hebrew]

[50]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991

pregnant with number four, I think they just all panicked. those issues would not be issues if I were a man."[51]

Even at Karyn Kedar's community in Petach Tikvah, whose members focus their energies on studying Judaism and developing a positive religious Jewish identity, the rabbi's pregnancy triggered a degree of ambivalence. One member, a Moroccan-born man who had been Orthodox, began treating Kedar with ambiguity during her pregnancy. He gave her respect as his rabbi, but he also treated her as if she were fragile. In Kedar's view, his behavior represented something more than typical concern about a pregnant friend or colleague.[52]

At times, a rabbi's personal style, gender, and youth combine to evoke attitudes and behaviors from congregants that demonstrate an ambivalence toward her. Shiryon explains that when she first arrived at Kehillat Ramat Aviv, she sensed that the transition was difficult. "It was a lot for the congregation to take my style. I have a female style of being a rabbi. It's different, because... my leadership is not leadership at the helm and moving people to follow me. Rather, it's nurturing people to become leaders themselves, which I think is very female. I also believe in that system because I think it's much more effective than being... charismatic, pulling, sucking people in, and yet when you're not there, the whole system collapses. I'm much more of the mind set that if you can plant the seeds within people themselves to take responsibility for what they're doing, you'll be much more effective in terms of your leadership. But that's a longer process."

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[51]Ibid. Shiryon mentions mixed reactions from congregants to her third pregnancy in: Naeh Gal, "[Female Rabbi] Kinneret Shiryon," *Davar* (Israel, 6 February 1989) [In Hebrew]

[52]Kedar, interview, 23 July 1991

Upon her arrival in the congregation, Shiryon sensed that some of the men were determined to test her. That faded over time, but she believes that some board members retained some ambivalence toward her leadership throughout her tenure at Kehillat Ramat Aviv. "I felt, with the executive board they had to confront the success of my female leadership which was bringing the congregation into a new direction that they were not happy with. And I do not believe that they responded to me... as a rabbinical authority. They did not take my professional judgment seriously, and they were relating to me as a father to a daughter. I found that very difficult in... negotiating with them and working with them in this past year of my relationship and my tenure with them as rabbi... [With one exception,] these were all men over the age of sixty and all have children older than me or my age."[53]

For Karyn Kedar, feedback was not couched within the context of a topical issue, such as leadership style. "Some people admitted to me that they never got past the female part," of adjusting to her as a rabbi. During her last year at Har El Congregation, the female presence on the *bimah* became intensified as an issue among some congregants. In addition to Kedar as rabbi, the cantor and the majority of congregants reading Torah were female. Congregants expressed frustration, yet men did not avail themselves of opportunities for learning to read Torah. In part, Kedar attributes the dissatisfaction with a dominant feminine presence in leading worship to the rigid expectations of elderly, predominantly German congregants who constituted a majority of Har El's membership. With the recent infusion of younger Soviet families into the congregation, she wonders if increased diversity has influenced the prevailing attitudes at Har El Congregation.

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[53]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991.

The issue of the female presence on the *bimah* nagged Gila Dror as she prepared for her first High Holy Days at Kehillat Eshel Abraham. "I was thinking about *kol nidre* night, and we have a woman here who [has been] a prayer leader for years, and she's done *kol nidre* before and she would like to be the prayer leader and I told her that would be great. Then I realized... that she's going to be the prayer leader and I'm going to do the *d'rashah* and it's going to be an all women's evening. I asked one of the members of the congregation... if he would do a *d'rashah* on Yom Kippur, and he said to me, 'do you mean in the evening or in the morning?' I said, 'I was actually thinking about the morning because I figured I need to be the one who does it in the evening, because it would be expected for the rabbi to do it. But my hesitation was because of this problem. For me it's a problem that I perceive it as a problem, because if it were all men, who would even think about it for a second? I was disturbed by my own thought process on the one hand and on the other hand, I see it as something to deal with."[54]

While it is true that different rabbis, regardless of gender, will evoke a range of responses from members of their congregation, a pervasive issue exists for Israeli congregations with women rabbis: how do Israelis overcome the dissonance of being intellectually committed to having women in the rabbinate while still feeling emotional discomfort or protectiveness toward their female rabbi? Whether it be at executive board meetings or on the *bimah*, Israel's women rabbis are self-conscious of their female presence and of the responses which they evoke, purely on the basis of being a woman, among their congregants.

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[54]Dror, interview, 4 August 1991

Relationships with Male Peers

Each female congregational rabbi in Israel belongs to her movement's rabbinical organization. When she made aliyah in 1983, Kinneret Shiryon joined the Council of Progressive Rabbis. "In the beginning, they accepted me with hidden suspicion, but this passed quickly."[55] Shiryon found that the differences between herself and her male colleagues were minor in comparison to their struggles with the rest of Israeli society. "My male colleagues face the same battles I do. It takes some of the sharp edges out of the fights [for religious pluralism in Israel]."[56]

In some areas, such as liturgical reform, at least two female rabbis believe their male colleagues are sensitive to issues of gender in the language of prayer once it is brought to their attention, but without the presence of women, change might not occur. Kinneret Shiryon and Maya Leibovic took active roles in developing the Progressive movement's *machzor*.[57] As contributors and members of the committee that wrote and edited the *machzor*, their desire for prayers using feminine language as an aid to inclusive worship was influential. Shiryon believes that the linguistic innovations included in the *machzor* are "extraordinary strides" that would not have taken place without the presence of women in the process. Although there were men who strongly

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[55] Iris Avital, "Only in Israel Would Thousands of Jews Be Turned Into Non-Jews," *Kochav Tzafon Tel Aviv* (Tel Aviv: 2 February 1988), 10. [In Hebrew]

[56] Fern Allen, "A Push for Pluralism: Israel's First Female Rabbi Attacks Orthodox Monopoly," *The Jewish Week* (Queens, NY: 5 July, 1985), 2.

[57] This prayer book for the High Holy Days includes in the first section of the amidah prayer, the avot, the names of the avot and imahot, the patriarches and matriarches. Parallel to the Avinu Malkeinu (Our Father Our King) prayer, this machzor includes "Shechinah, source of life," which has feminine language which matches this name of God which is in the feminine case. In: Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991; and, Bat-Meshi, "Wrapped in a Tallit," 20 October 1988.

supported the women's suggestions, she does not think the same initiative for change would have emerged from an all male committee.[58]

Not all women rabbis in the Progressive movement feel accepted by their male colleagues. Rabbi Yael Romer, former rabbi of congregation Ohel Avraham in Haifa who now teaches at the Leo Baeck School, "says that as hard as they try to accept a woman as rabbi, her male colleagues 'are still in the Dark Ages. They feel threatened by women and by issues they have never had to deal with.'"[59]

The attitude within the administration of the Masorti movement's Beit Midrash that prevents the acceptance of women into the rabbinical program does not pervade the movement itself. Much to her surprise, the Israeli Rabbinical Assembly [RA] accepted her application for membership immediately. However, Dror explained: "The RA ... isn't totally open... to women either, yet. There are certain committees that are still closed to women or [that] they haven't decided to open ... up yet to women. We'll see." For example, although she has served as the coordinator[60] for the Masorti conversion institute since the year immediately following her 1990 ordination, she is not permitted to sit on the *beit din*. Likewise, the RA's law committee is not yet open to women.

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[58]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991.

[59]Ben Gallob, "Women Rabbis in Israel...," *Jewish Ledger* (15 Nov 1990) and *Jewish Herald Voice* (30 Mar 1991).

[60]Among her responsibilities as coordinator, Dror conducts intake interviews with the potential candidates who seek entrance into the process of conversion in the Masorti movement. She presents the *beit din* with an evaluation of the candidate's appropriateness for their program, but she cannot participate on the *beit din* itself. Likewise, while she can tutor candidates for conversion, she obviously does not sit on the *beit din* at the completion of her students' studies. In: Dror, interview, 4 August 1991.

Of the two factors which make women rabbis unusual in Israeli society, gender and non-Orthodox religious affiliation, gender is the noteworthy factor among members of the liberal movements. Despite the ideological belief in equality among all Jews that is inherent in Progressive Judaism, a gap continues to exist for many congregants between support for female rabbis and comfort with a woman rabbi leading one's own congregation. This dissonance is evidenced in the hiring process and in congregational life. In the Masorti movement, where equal status for has not become an accepted policy, the struggle over women rabbis gaining full recognition among their peers and in congregations tends to be more vocal. On the whole, rabbinical organizations in Israel take an accepting attitude toward female colleagues and the male members (at least within the Progressive movement) seem open to learning about and becoming sensitized to issues that especially concern women, such as gender and God language in liturgy.

Acceptance of Women Rabbis in Israeli Society

The average Israeli views female rabbis as exceptional because they are women who function in a traditionally male role and because they are affiliated with Jewish movements outside the Orthodox framework. While one might expect the issue of gender to be the focus of attention, articles in the popular press and feedback which women rabbis hear from guests to their congregations indicate that non-Orthodox religiosity draws interest from Israeli society to female rabbis.

Press Coverage on Women Rabbis

Press coverage indicates that women rabbis are interesting to Israeli journalists, and presumably to the Israeli public, but with the focus on their

leadership of liberal Jewish communities rather than on their gender. When she began her tenure at Kehillat Ramat Aviv, Kinneret Shiryon received pressure to grant interviews to the press. She refused any offers from the media until she was comfortable and confident in her position as rabbi and with her understanding of Israeli society. "In 1985, after I had been involved [with the congregation for] a year... I said, 'I'm ready... to go public.' And that was when there was a whole publicity blitz. I was on television twice, I was on the radio a few times. I was, I think, in every single publication there was in the Hebrew press and the English press, and the Spanish press... you name it!"[61] After that initial "media splash" in 1985, articles which include Shiryon tend to focus on the Progressive movement.

In contrast, there was virtually no media coverage of Karyn Kedar's tenure at Har El Congregation. The reports about the community at Petach Tikvah after Kedar moved to that congregation focus solely on their struggle with the Orthodox groups in the area that were trying to prevent their use of a municipal hall for High Holy Days services. The articles examine the issues related to the presence of a liberal Jewish group, not their female rabbi.[62]

Likewise, the articles that feature Maya Leibovic tend to focus on the Progressive movement. For example, while the 1988 article, "Wrapped in a Tallit," includes information about Maya's Judaic background and her explanation of why women can become rabbis, the content is devoted to a description of Progressive Judaism and the potential impact it could have on secular Israelis. Descriptions of Leibovic's manner, dress, and style of leading

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[61]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991.

[62]Mira Raz, founder of the Progressive Chavurah of Petach Tikvah, interview by author, Hand-written notes, Petach Tikvah, Israel, 1 August 1991.

worship direct the reader's attention to the realities of liberal Judaism rather than to the habits and characteristics of a woman rabbi.[63]

One of the most extensive articles published in the Hebrew press that covers the Progressive movement is Hillit Bloom's article in *Bamachaneh*, "A [Male] Rabbi that Plays Soccer, A [Female Rabbi] that Rides a Bicycle." While this article portrays Progressive Judaism in an unusually positive light, it includes a representative sampling of the questions asked of female rabbis. This extensive report includes a description of the Jewish educational program for pre-school children at Kehillat Ramat Aviv; an interview with Kinneret Shiryon that includes her view on the role of liberal religion in Israel, her desire to become a rabbi, and her experience as a rabbi in Israel - focusing on her daily schedule and not being recognized as a rabbi by the Orthodox establishment; an interview with Dr. Michael Klein of HUC in Jerusalem about his religious journey from Orthodoxy to Liberal Judaism; an interview with an American rabbinical student studying at HUC in Jerusalem for the first year of HUC's American rabbinical program that conveys her hopes for a rabbinate in America and the impact of a year in Israel had on her perspective; and, an interview with Maya Leibovic, which highlights her youth in a secular Israeli home, her adult search for meaningful religious expression, and her vision of the role that Progressive Judaism could play in the life of the typical secular Israeli.[64]

Gender attracts the media when a female achieves notoriety as the first woman to hold a particular position of authority within her community. During the first week of August 1991, Gila Dror was a focus of media attention on

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[63]Bat-Meshi, "Wrapped in a Tallit," 20 October 1988.

[64]Bloom, "A [Male] Rabbi that Plays Soccer . . ," 56.

account of her status as the first woman rabbi to hold a congregational position in the Masorti movement. During a single week she was interviewed on television and was featured in numerous newspaper articles.

In general, there is a little sensitivity to the question of what to call a woman rabbi in Hebrew? In English, 'rabbi' suffices for either gender. However, in Hebrew, where every noun has a gender marker, there is no word for the modern concept of a woman who is a rabbi. Common parlance includes the terms *harav*, which indicates a male rabbi, and *rabbanit*, which indicates the wife of a rabbi. The Israel Academy of Language has designated *rabit* as the term for a woman who is a rabbi, but it is neither accepted by women rabbis nor is it used colloquially.[65] The terms which are preferred by women rabbis are *rav isha*[66] and *harav*, which does not distinguish the rabbi as a woman, but does denote the honorific title without role confusion.[67]

The majority of articles in Hebrew which include mention of women rabbis refer to them as *rabbanit*.[68] Articles that raise the issue or use one of the alternative titles for 'woman rabbi' tend to be more recent publications.[69]

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[65]Leibovic, interview, 22 July 1991.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ravit Ferrara, "Rabbi Gila Dror ..." *Chadashot* (28 July 1991).

[68]Articles in Hebrew that use the term *rabbanit* as the title for a female rabbi include: "Israel's First Female Congregational Rabbi," Press Release from the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism, 20 May 1985 (photocopied); Ron Kislev, "The Beginning of the Revolution," *Ha'aretz* (Israel: 29 May 1987); Avital, "Only in Israel ..." *Kochav Tzafon Tel Aviv* (2 Feb 1988); Simon Kadmon, "Women at the Holy Ark," *Sofshavua* section of *Maariv* (11 March 1988), caption of picture, 41; Pinchas Shamir, "'A Pioneer Before the Camp...," *Signon* section of *Maariv* (Israel 19 October 1988), 36; Bat-Meshi, "Wrapped in a Tallit," *Ha'aretz* (20 Oct 1988); Naeh Gal, "[Female Rabbi] Kinneret Shiryon," *Davar* (6 Feb 1989); Bloom, "A [Male] Rabbi that Plays Soccer ..." *Bemachaneh* (13 June 1990), 26, 28-29, 56.

[69] Articles in Hebrew that mention the linguistic difficulty regarding the title of a female rabbi include: "It's Difficult to be a Reform [Female Rabbi]," *Signon* section of *Maariv* (Israel: 12 June 1985), 40 , which uses the term *rabbanit*, but explains that the title is used to refer to Shiryon as a rabbi, not as a rabbi's wife; the titles *harav* and *rav ishah* refer to Einat Ramon in: Avitov, "Honor

which could indicate heightened awareness on the part of journalists or increasing assertiveness by female rabbis on this issue. It is unclear whether reporters using the term *rabbanit* are insensitive or if they are ignorant of this linguistic problem. Without knowing the backgrounds of individual journalists involved, this remains an open question. The distance between the average secular Israeli and the vocabulary of Judaism could be the underlying issue. This hypothesis is supported by an article containing a description of Kabbalat Shabbat worship in which the author refers to the congregation singing "*mah tov hu*,"[70] a well known liturgical piece whose title is '*mah tovu*.'

In a 1986 article, Eric Yoffie cites articles from Israel's right-wing Orthodox and left-wing secular press to support his assertion that both ends of the political spectrum object to women as rabbis.[71] Yoffie relates, "*Shaarim*, an Orthodox newspaper accused Rabbi Shiryon of desecrating the sanctity of the synagogue, of making heretical statements and of wearing sleeves that were too short and therefore immodest. The paper announced that the Orthodox rabbinate of Tel Aviv was planning a publicity campaign against Reform Judaism, which it said was responsible for assimilation, intermarriage and the destruction of Torah in America."[72] Interestingly, while the article initially objects to women as rabbis, the thrust of its attack lashes against the

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to Rabbi Einat," *Kol Hair* (23 July 1989), the title *harav* is used in "'Half the Kingdom' a Film about Jewish Feminist Women," in "Women, Money and Power," *Yedion* (the Hebrew newsletter of the Israel Women's Network) #28 (Israel: April 1990), 3, and Ferrara, "Rabbi Gila Dror, Not Rebbitzin," *Chadashot* (28 July 1991), and, although the author refers to her as '*rabbanit*', Dror's preference for the title *rav* over *rabbanit* is included in: Alosh, "Go Pray With Her," *Yediot Achronot* (28 July 1991).

[70]Bat-Meshi, "Wrapped in a Tallit," 20 October 1988.

[71]Eric H. Yoffie, "Kinneret Shiryon: Israel's First Woman Rabbi," *Reform Judaism* 14 (Spring 1986), 12-13.

[72]Ibid., 12.

movement which ordains them, widening the focus of anger from the issue of female rabbis to pluralism within Judaism.

Yoffie continues, "In *Haolam Hazeh*, a militantly leftist weekly... Sarit Yishai Levi, proclaimed her sympathy for Reform Judaism and found herself to be in substantial agreement with [Kinneret Shiryon's] religious views. Yet, when the two of them entered the Ramat Aviv sanctuary and Rabbi Shiryon put on a *kippah* and a *tallit* and stood before the ark, Ms. Yishai-Levi reacted with horror: 'At that moment it seemed to me that I was watching a grotesque spectacle... It may be that God approves of this. It may be that in less than 100 years the phenomenon of a woman rabbi with *kippah* and *tallit* will be absolutely routine. But... after this, I could not take the 'esteemed rabbi' seriously - despite the fact that Progressive Judaism is completely suitable in most ways to my life style.'"[73] Levi experienced a dissonance that bears close resemblance to the feelings which some members of liberal congregations reported when they first encountered women rabbis.

While the poles of the political spectrum and right-wing religious groups react with strong negative opinions to the presence of women in the liberal Jewish rabbinate, a majority of articles in the mainstream press take a neutral stance and focus primarily on the experiences of these women as liberal rabbis.

Reactions from Secular Israelis

The main source of direct feedback which women rabbis receive from the general Israeli populace comes from family and friends who attend life-

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[73]Ibid.

cycle ceremony in the lives of their congregants as guests. Such contact typically occurs at bar or bat mitzvah ceremonies.

During her first two months at Kehillat Eshel Avraham, Gila Dror officiated at three *b'nai mitzvah*. Guests at her congregation have offered positive and critical comments. The substance of their remarks address her presence as a female prayer leader, rather than the Masorti approach to Jewish prayer. "The guests that come from all over the country have been very happy, very pleased to see me; they feel it's sort of a breath of fresh air. The issue [of a woman rabbi] is still there for some people, obviously, and sometimes people comment on what I should do or shouldn't do as a woman because I'm a woman. It comes up a lot... people say things like, well your sermons are so much like other women rabbis that I hear. It's not just another rabbi, that's for sure."[74]

When a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony takes place at Kehillat Ramat Aviv, the sanctuary typically fills with over 100 people including family and friends from outside the congregation. Shiryon recalls that for those guests "many times, it's their first touch, their first contact with progressive Jewish prayer, progressive Jewish ideas and values... how they translate themselves in reality."[75]

Some people responded to the worship positively. They would approach Shiryon to express regret that they did not know about her community at the time of their children's *b'nai mitzvah*, they would have prefered celebrating their *simchah* in such an atmosphere. Others expressed a personal connection with the worship service. "[they would say,] 'It was

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[74]Dror, interview, 4 August 1991.

[75]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991.

wonderful and I could follow the service, and your presence... permeated the synagogue and I felt spiritually fulfilled.' Not enough that they're going to change their lifestyles and come to services each week, but enough to look at this prayer experience in a very positive way."

In contrast, "the other kind of response was, 'I'm not a religious person, but to see you lead a service up there was so against anything I could fathom as Jewish, there's no way that this is real. When my son becomes a bar mitzvah, I'm going to take him to a real synagogue.' That's part of the Israeli experience of not being exposed to pluralistic approaches to Judaism. Here's a man who says he doesn't identify religiously, but the synagogue he chooses not to go into is an Orthodox one. He gives legitimacy just to the Orthodox view of what Judaism is even though he doesn't... identify with it."[76]

During her tenure at Kehillat Ramat Aviv, Shiryon received positive and negative feedback from secular guests in her community. She remembers the comments of the individuals who were impressed by worship at her congregation as leaving the experience with a more positive attitude toward liberal Judaism. She remembers negative comments as having been directed toward her, but she interpreted such feedback as a symptom of a monolithic view of Judaism. The comments against her were a sign of intolerance against Jewish pluralism, not against women as rabbis.

In contrast to the generally positive tone of mainstream press reports, the feedback that secular guests articulate in response women rabbis is mixed. Feedback from visitors to the congregation is directed more personally toward the women rabbis themselves and is aimed at them as women rather than as representatives of a particular approach to Judaism.

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[76]Ibid.

## Is There a Future for Women Rabbis in Israel?

This study coincides with a period of dramatic change in the position of women rabbis in the Masorti movement and in the policies of the Progressive movement. In such a climate, it is difficult to venture confident predictions on future progress regarding the status of female rabbis.

The summer of 1991 represented a time of progress for the status of women within the religious leadership of the Masorti movement, as marked by Gila Dror becoming that movement's first female rabbi to serve an Israeli congregation. Shifting attitudes were evident among the movement leadership prior to Kehillat Eshel Avraham's decision to engage Dror as their rabbi. Dror returned to Israel immediately after receiving ordination from JTS in June 1990; upon her arrival, she was immediately accepted as a member of the Masorti Rabbinical Assembly. Dror's reception differs significantly from Einat Ramon's experience when she returned to Israel after receiving ordination at JTS in May 1989.

Dror's experience does not, however, indicate a complete turnaround in the Masorti movement's understanding of the status of women within Judaism. It is noteworthy that the hiring process that Dror and Kehillat Eshel Avraham shared was not influenced by the official ranks it was wholly independent from the official ranks and administration of Israel's Masorti movement. In spite of the Rabbinical Assembly's immediate acceptance of Dror as a member, she does not yet enjoy equal standing with her male colleagues: she cannot sit on the Assembly's Law Committee nor on the *beit din* for conversions (or any other matter). Overall, a significant portion of the rabbinical leadership and at least one congregation in the Masorti movement have grown more accepting of

women as rabbis. On that basis, Dror's optimistic view that progress is likely to continue seems well founded.

In contrast, the Progressive movement lacks evidence of a steadily improving position of women rabbis in the congregational rabbinate. During the summer of 1991, Karyn Kedar, who had worked full-time at Har El Congregation for three years, was serving her congregation in Petach Tikvah on a quarter-time basis; and, Kinneret Shiryon, after seven years at Kehillat Ramat Aviv, was unemployed. Any erosion of job security among female rabbis is due to a change in movement policies rather than congregational dissatisfaction. A document was passed at the Progressive movement's 1991 biennial conference that put all small congregations on notice that their funding could be cut[77] due to the priority shift from establishing and maintaining many small congregations to creating larger Progressive centers.[78]

A direct result of this new policy was the elimination of funding from the Progressive group at Petach Tikvah. Within months of the biennial conference, the movement notified Kedar that her salary for serving her congregation was being withdrawn.[79] Within six months, Kedar secured employment in the US; it can be speculated that lack of opportunity for rabbinical positions in Israel informed her decision to seek work overseas.

Shiryon's loss of employment stems from a decision made by leaders of Israel's Progressive movement and the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

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[77]In contrast with diaspora customs, where congregations are supported by monies from affiliated members, in Israel the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism pays for professional services including salaries for rabbis.

[78]Rabbi Arnold Gluck, interview by author, Handwritten notes from phone interview, Somerville, NJ-Cincinnati, OH, 20 March 1992.

[79]Ibid.

A generation after a group of members left Kedem Congregation in Tel Aviv to found Kehillat Ramat Aviv, the movement merged the congregations to establish the synagogue center, Beit Daniel. Following a successful seven-year tenure at Kehillat Ramat Aviv,[80] Shiryon is without a rabbinical post. She thrived in her Ramat Aviv community and had no desire to become the main rabbi at a large, artificially merged congregation. Shiryon explained that:

> When Beit Daniel got off the ground, I did not apply for that position, to be the main rabbi the way it was set up. I was pushing for a different kind of framework of rabbinic[al] leadership there, of a team of rabbis..[81]

Despite the Progressive movement's financial difficulties and corresponding policy changes, Maya Leibovic conveys confidence in anticipation of becoming the first Israeli-born, trained and ordained woman rabbi. Even in absentia, an aura of hope and optimism exists for Na'ama Kelman's future as a rabbi within the Progressive movement; she has returned to Jerusalem to finish HUC's Israeli rabbinical program.[82]

Movement support for Leibovic and Kelman casts doubts on theories that Kedar and Shiryon might have lost their positions because of their gender. In the absence of documentation, it may be only be hypothesized that the Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism is more committed to placing its Israeli-

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[80]Rabbi Gluck, who served for five years as community director and then as congregational rabbi at the Leo Baeck School and its Kehillat Ohel Avraham in Haifa, gives Shiryon the highest compliment possible for any American immigrant, "she overcame the stigma of being an Anglo." [In. Ibid.] Shiryon's success is further corroborated by the continual growth of her congregation during her tenure as rabbi of Kehillat Ramat Aviv.

[81]Shiryon, interview, 24 July 1991.

[82]In addition to her studies, Kelman currently works as the education coordinator of the Progressive movement's day school in Jerusalem, Beit Sefer Chaim. In. Gluck, interview, 20 March 1992.

trained rabbis in congregations than immigrants, even foreign-born rabbis who have achieved high levels of success in the Israeli milieu

By summer 1991, both Kedar and Shiryon were worn down by the politics within the Progressive movement, though they expressed commitment and enthusiasm when discussing their rabbinates. Had this study been conducted two or three years ago, Shiryon and Kedar probably would have expressed optimism checked by reality similar to that of Gila Dror and Maya Leibovic

Little evidence is available for tracing progress in secular Israeli attitudes toward female rabbis. Since liberal Judaism eclipses gender as a focus of the secular press, one would expect popular attitudes toward women rabbis to be congruent with public opinions regarding the Progressive and Masorti movements. If sensitivity to the linguistic difficulty of finding an appropriate Hebrew title for a female rabbi is used as a gauge of acceptance of women rabbis, press coverage of recent ordinees indicates increasing awareness of women in positions of rabbinical leadership.

In sum, the position of women rabbis within the liberal movements is in flux, with increasing levels of acceptance in the Masorti community and decreasing job security in the Progressive movement. Women's abilities to attain congregational positions and achieve longevity in the Israeli rabbinate will ultimately determine the success of women rabbis in Israel.

# CONCLUSIONS

This concluding chapter re-examines the collective efforts of religious women who seek to improve women's status within Jewish life through *talmud torah*, worshiping as a prayer group and assuming rabbinical leadership by posing three questions 1) Can their efforts be described as feminist religious activism? 2) Are these discrete coincidental phenomena or a movement? and 3) To what extent do these women's endeavors represent an incursion of "Anglosaxon" values vs an expression of organic needs existing in Israeli society?

## Religious and somewhat activist, but feminist?

The value of describing the phenomena studied in the chapters above with one particular phrase can be debated. On the one hand, the attempt to label the activities examined with one phrase can be seen as an effort to pigeonhole these discrete groups into one neat category. On the other hand, the search for an accurate phrase that is broad enough to encompass the variety of endeavors surveyed here might represent an effort to place these women, their beliefs and goals within the broader societal contexts.

Since the ultimate aim of the women studied above is to enhance women's status within Judaism, all such activity may be termed 'religious.' While some observers have questioned whether Women of the Kotel are acting out of pious or political motivations, all leaders and women who participated regularly in the women's prayer group identify religious motivations for worshiping at that location in that mode. If the participants consider themselves as 'religious,' then their actions can be legitimately described as such.

Although their activities do not fit conventional definitions of activism supporting a particular issue by means of a forceful or mass demonstration,[1] activism seems to be an appropriate description in that these women defend their positions with dedication and seek to influence others either by example (e.g. female rabbis) or actually encouraging others to join their endeavor through teaching, learning or prayer.

Feminism is a controversial term with equivocal meanings, especially within the Israeli context. Alice Shalvi, who describes herself as a feminist, elucidates this point by distinguishing between feminism and egalitarianism. She would define a feminist as one who wishes to see female modes of action become more prominent or at least more equivalent with male hierarchical tendencies in society.[2] Shalvi believes that most Israelis, if they have any identification with the concept of feminism, generally equate feminism with egalitarianism. That generalization was true among the sampling of women interviewed for this study.

The extent to which the women studied here self-identify as feminists, describe their aims as feminist, or use that term in their vocabularies varies. In

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[1] *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA, 1976), s.v. "activism."

[2] Alice Shalvi, interview by author. Tape recording, Jerusalem, Israel, 28 July 1991.

contrast with Shalvi, who devotes tremendous personal and professional energies to advocating feminist issues, Malke Bina has been quoted saying that "she does not have 'the time or patience' to be bothered with egalitarianism."[3] Her goals for training women to enter the world of Jewish text study and her vision of her students someday becoming *poskot* on women's issues in *halakhah* notwithstanding, 'feminism' just isn't part of her vocabulary. Bina's statement is tempered by means of clarification; she certainly seeks improvement in the status of women, but her method and description of her actions are her own. "I'll do it in my own quiet way, in a way the system will allow."[4]

Maya Leibovic, the daughter of a secular Israeli family, grew up believing that the egalitarian ideal had been realized in Israeli society. As a youth, she saw universal conscription and reasoned that she lived in a progressive culture that valued men and women equally. Over time Leibovic grew to recognize Israeli society as conservative and male-oriented, with a long way to go before approaching egalitarianism. She hasn't developed a personal feminist ideology, but from her comments, her notion of feminism is roughly equivalent to striving for equality.[5]

The three understandings of feminism represented by Shalvi, Bina and Leibovic demonstrate a range of accepted definitions and levels of comfort that Israeli women hold with regard to this concept. To a certain extent, feminism is in the eye of the beholder. Whether 'feminist' is a fair way to characterize these women's expressions religious activism is debatable. Opinions regarding the

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[3]Toby Klein Greenwald, "Wise Women," Kol Emunah (Winter/Spring 1991), 11.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Maya Leibovic, interview by author, Handwritten notes, Jerusalem, Israel, 22 July 1991.

appropriateness of this term would vary depending on the definition used and one's religious and cultural orientation. The legitimacy of applying the term 'feminist' to the religious activism examined in this study does not seem intellectually honest since the majority of activists would feel some level of discomfort or outright reject that description.

Manifestations of an emerging women's religious movement?

The coincidental timing of women's efforts to improve their status within Judaism and bonds of friendship or at least admiration linking the women who head these efforts lead to the question of whether a religious women's movement is emerging. Despite the general atmosphere of mutual support, at this time, women's religious activism is manifest as discrete phenomena. As Fagie Fein explains, for the time being fragmented efforts are viable, but significant success in one area could foster climate in which a more cohesive movement would be viable.[6]

Transplanted Western Values vs. Indigenous Struggle

An accusation that is leveled against women's activism in any sphere of Israeli society is that feminism [read: efforts to improve women's status such that it might threaten the status quo] has been imported to Israel by "*Anglosaxim*," immigrants to Israel from Western nations, especially the US, Canada and UK. The majority of women organizing and participating in the activist ventures studied here are American-born. Nevertheless, there are signs of support, interest and hunger for these types of change among native Israelis.

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[6]Fagie Fein, interview by author, Tape-recorded, Jerusalem, Israel, 29 July 1991

Education

Most institutions offering *talmud torah* for women were established by Western-born immigrants to Israel with visitors and immigrants of similar origins in mind. However, the success of study centers that offer rigorous advanced-level courses in Hebrew (e.g. Matan, Beit Midrash Elul and the Judith Lieberman Institute) belie a lack of interest among native-born Israelis for Jewish text study.

Women of the Kotel

While participation in the women's prayer group at the Kotel has been generally limited to women raised in Western nations, there are subtle indications that secular and religious Israelis desire prayer rituals that deviate to some extent from the traditional Orthodox framework. Ruth Calderon, secular co-founder and director of Beit Midrash Elul, recalls that her brother requested that Calderon and her husband write and conduct a ceremony celebrating his son's circumcision. The service was egalitarian, giving both parents the opportunity to lead readings. The friends and family attending this innovative celebration were also secular, yet their response was enthusiastic. They were enchanted that this was Judaism, that it could be so beautiful.[7]

Secular Israelis are not alone in their hunger for modified religious ritual. Linda Gradstein describes traditionally observant women gathering to read the scroll of Esther as a group on the morning of Purim, women flocking to Kehillat Yedidiah in order to celebrate Simchat Torah with an aliyah to the Torah, and receiving an anonymous call from a young Orthodox girl seeking information

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[7]Ruth Calderon, interview by author, Handwritten notes, Jerusalem, Israel, 18 July 1991. These reactions echo the positive responses that Kinneret Shiryon and Gila Dror report when guests come to life cycle events at their liberal synagogues.

about women's prayer groups. Through friends and by word of mouth, women seek to create and join along with innovative forms of worship within a halakhic setting.

Such attraction to innovative ritual by secular Israelis and to women's halakhic prayer rituals by Orthodox women may indicate that the activities of Women of the Kotel have more popular support than is realized by the press or the women's prayer group itself.

Women Rabbis

Maya Leibovic's life experience and career choice demonstrate that the message of the liberal Jewish movements and the existence of women rabbis are relevant for secular Israeli society. Strictly secular until her military service, Leibovic became attracted to Judaism through an observant friend in the army. Her interest was reinforced by trying with her husband to create a "Jewish home" and through their exposure to pluralism within American Judaism. Seeing an interview with Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon on television was the catalyst for Leibovic's decision to become a rabbi. Understanding the growth of her own religious identity, Leibovic speaks with conviction about the richness that liberal Judaism can bring to secular Israelis.[8] Success is couched in terms of the religious message - - egalitarianism and female rabbis are just part of the whole.

This study, has surveyed three manifestations of religious activism among Israeli women, but it is far from exhaustive. Women's talmud torah, prayer groups and rabbinical leadership could each be studied in greater

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[8] Leibovic, interview , 22 July 1991.

depth through more extensive interviewing of both leadership, participants/laity and popular opinion. Study of women's efforts to attain seats on municipal religious councils (especially as illustrated by Leah Shakdiel's struggle) would provide another rich area of research.

The activities in which these religious women exert their energies have existed for less than a generation; their efforts and the attempts to study them are in their nascent stages.

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