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THE JOFA journal

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

# LIBI BA-MIZRAH...

*By Judy Heicklen*

In May, my eighty-year-old father made *aliyah*. He has carefully followed all of the instructions in the booklet that Nefesh b'Nefesh supplied him, dutifully making the rounds of the various bureaucracies. He has learned the bus routes, located the barber and the bridge club, and even spent a few nights at Shaare Zedek Hospital. He has gone *shul*-hopping and found one that is a close walk and uses tunes he knows. He has renewed acquaintances with old friends and already made some new ones, who have taken him to events as varied as the Women in Green Conference in Hebron in July and the Israel Museum Wine Festival in August. He has settled in magnificently to his new circumstances. We have joked that if Moshe Rabbeinu could begin a new life at eighty and start off for the Promised Land, there's no reason Dad couldn't do the same.

I grew up in a Zionist family, spending fifth grade in Jerusalem when my father had a sabbatical at the Hebrew University. I have tried to instill a similar Zionism in my children. We visit Israel as frequently as we can, they attend schools with an emphasis on Hebrew and Israel, and my older ones have had the opportunity to live in Israel for a year. We are fortunate to have many friends and family members who live there, which makes our visits there mini-reunions. In fact, my five-year-old's best friend is her cousin in Hashmonaim.

Yehuda HaLevi wrote, *"Libi ba-mizrah va'anokhi b'sof ma'arav"* ("My heart is in the east, and I am in the far west") around 1100 CE, expressing his yearning to be in the land of Israel; he finally made it there in 1141. Modern transportation and the establishment of the State of Israel have made that journey much easier. And modern communication tools—the Web, Skype, cable channels—have allowed us to stay in contact with what goes on there 24/7. This has enabled us to nurture and develop deep connections with Israel, with many of us sending our children there for the year after

*continued on page 3*

## Kolech—Your Voice: The Voice of Religious Feminism in Israel

*By Hannah Kehat and Elana Zion Golumbic*

In January 1996, a group of seven women gathered to discuss the bleak situation facing religious women in Israel. They were brought together by a common sense of distress about what they considered the degrading treatment of women and women's complete exclusion from all leadership positions within the religious community.

The group was made up of prominent women from Israeli academia and political life who were greatly respected and appreciated within general secular Israeli society. Within the religious community, however, not only did they receive very little professional recognition, but they were also often subjected to outright chauvinistic, disparaging, and derisive treatment. One woman, the dean of a religious college for women, recalls being asked by the board of that college (all men) whether her husband had given her permission to come to a board meeting.

The feeling shared by this group of women was that Israeli religious society, of which they were a part, had not yet fully internalized the twentieth-century revolution in the status of women. They realized that it was up to them to educate and influence the religious leadership and the community at large, in order to bring about changes in the attitude toward women. Internal conversations about how to take action continued over the months that followed, culminating in a fruitful brainstorming session at the second JOFA conference in New York in 1998, where the seeds were planted for forming the organization Kolech, meaning "your voice."

*continued on page 29*

## IN THIS ISSUE:



**Rena Bannett, *Transitions/Judean Hills*, 2007, 9"x12.5", rice paper collage and watercolor**

Rena Bannett holds degrees from Bar-Ilan University, is a graduate of the Drisha Scholar's Circle, and spent two years as a member of the Drisha Arts Fellows. She recently realized her dream of returning to live in Israel.


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# Women in Israel: From Illusion of Equality to Exclusion

*By Ruth Halperin-Kaddari*

Any serious discussion of the present situation of women in Israel is bound to start with, and pay tribute to, the 2012 emergence of the "new" phenomenon of "women's exclusion." Israeli media were shocked to report on women's exclusion from public buses, sidewalks, checkout lines in supermarkets, and faces on billboards; on the banning of girls from dancing in public gatherings and female soldiers from singing in official ceremonies; and on and on. The Israeli public was similarly outraged by these unprecedented expressions of women's exclusion. It took a little while to sink in, but as people realized this was more than just a passing trend, an impressive body of human rights and women's rights organizations signed up for the fight. It may be difficult to admit, but currently, even as the media have moved on to other stories, the phenomenon of women's exclusion is here to stay.

Upon deeper reflection, what is surprising here is the public's apparently honest surprise and outcry. It is surprising because the truth is that women have always been barred from equal and full participation within Israeli public life and the public sphere.

## The Myth of Israeli Women's Equality

Much scholarship during the past couple of decades has dealt with debunking the myth of women's equality in pre-State Israel and during the nation's early years. By now it is well established that those old photos, so deeply engrained in our collective memories, of the women settlers *(halutzot)* wearing short working pants, holding spades, standing side by side with the men, only served to enhance the myth of an equality that never really existed here. The equality myth of the early years has turned into a contemporary manifestation in the form of the "no-problem problem"—namely, the ongoing denial of the reality of women's inferior status and of gender discrimination. Only when based on such a dismissive perception can women's exclusion be understood as new and unprecedented.

The truth is, of course, that women's exclusion fits well into the context of growing rates of gender-based violence against women, of the ongoing feminization of poverty, of undiminished gender pay gaps and a highly gender-segregated labor market, of the shamefully low presence of women in public office, and, above all, of discriminatory religious marriage and divorce laws. The "no-problem" culture leads people to attribute little importance to the lack of civil marriage and divorce in Israel, for example, and to refrain from linking that lack to such clear expressions of gender discrimination as women's economic inferiority and their meager representation in public life.

Part of what enables this is a collective oblivion about women's struggle for equality in the pre-State era. The story of the Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association of Palestine—the local suffragist movement—and its relentless struggle against the objections of the Orthodox for the right to vote has never been part of the official historiography taught in schools. Thus, not many know of the pressures directed at the association's leaders, who were caught in the dilemma typical of women in many national liberation struggles, between commitment to independence and commitment to their feminist cause, as eloquently phrased by political scientist Yael Yishai: "between the flag and the banner."[1] It may well be that

*continued on page 4*

## From Our President, *continued from cover*

high school, pursuing "twinning" opportunities as a way to celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah, and, in some cases, making *aliyah* ourselves.

While I have always followed events in Israel, now that my father is there, I am getting daily dispatches on matters large and small. And there is much to hear about: the cottage cheese protests, the conflicted response to illegal immigrants, the short-lived Likud–Kadima coalition, and much news of particular interest to Orthodox feminists, many items of which I mentioned in my last column. It is these developments that led us to focus this journal on Israel, to give our readership a view into recent events and trends.

When I was a teenager, I always thought of Israel as a model of equality: Women served in the army, and Israel had one of the first female heads of state and Supreme Court justices. And, in some ways, that model still holds true. According to a recent research report published by Credit Suisse, titled "Gender Diversity and Corporate Performance," Israel has one of the smallest gaps between male and female participation rates in the workforce among modern economies. But recent occurrences of *hadarat nashim*—the exclusion of women—have certainly highlighted the tensions that still exist. As the Hareidi community becomes more integrated into larger Israeli society—in the army, in the workforce, and in new neighborhoods—the role of women will clearly be a friction point. I hope this issue of the journal will provide insight into the tensions and inspire all of us to find solutions that respect the dignity of all members of the community.

*Shanah tovah and hag sameah!*

## Women in Israel, *continued from page 3*

Israel's sense of insecurity and fragile existence continues to feed into this feminist-existential dilemma, causing us to question where our allegiance rests.

In light of this, I would like to suggest that our founding mothers were much more daring and uncompromising than we are now. Of course, things are different today, and we are equal citizens in this beloved yet painful state. Or are we? From my position as a member in the United Nations Committee on the Implementation of the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), I can unequivocally state that women in Israel are the only women in the Western world who are still exposed to formal discrimination in the form of discriminatory laws, in the most personal and critical sphere of private life—namely, marriage and divorce. They are also the only women in the Western world who are completely barred from fulfilling official judicial roles in national religious courts.

Perhaps, then, we are not really part of the Western world. The distressing truth is that in the area of marriage and divorce laws (a fundamental area of women's rights), the State of Israel fits rather well into the geographic sphere in which it is located. It is not easy to face this truth; it is easier to ignore it and address other issues. It is important to stress that, although women in Israel appear to have gained their formal equality almost a hundred years ago with the successful culmination of their battle for the ballot, they are, in fact, still exposed to formal discrimination and thus cannot be said to be fully equal citizens, either formally or substantively.

As such, things may have not changed that much after all. Our foremothers argued against the exclusive control of religious law and religious courts over marriage and divorce; we do too. They accompanied anguished and distressed women to divorce proceedings in rabbinical courts; we do too. They argued for advancing solutions to the *agunah* problem; we do too. They campaigned to raise the age of marriage, as do we, although, admittedly, the need then was to set a minimum age, whereas today it is to raise it from 17 to 18. So what is the difference?

One of the differences is that ninety years ago, suffrage was the major issue around which all activists could unite, and they won. The unsuccessful struggles over the personal status laws were secondary to the main cause. Today these issues are—or should be—our main cause, and we are nowhere near winning. Another difference is that the global mobilization then is nowhere to be found today. Why is there no "women's rebellion" over this cause? Have women internalized or acquiesced to the discriminatory situation? Is it part of a more general compliance with the lack of civil marriages in Israel, so that civil marriage is practically a non-issue?

As with so many other complex matters, it is a combination of factors and is, indeed, related to the larger (non-)issue of civil marriage. It seems that women, including women activists, share the general reluctance to enter this minefield for fear of tearing the nation apart, thus buying into the axiom that civil marriage would destroy the nation's unity. This pattern mirrors the historic development of Israel's feminist movement, whereby most feminists gradually left the formal political sphere and moved to service-providing and social roles, whereas those who remained generally became involved in left-wing politics and the peace movement. As political scientist Yaacov Yadgar and I have observed:

> Israel's continuing violent conflict with its Arab neighbors has overshadowed most other civil and social issues, rendering them "secondary" to the primary concern of securing the safe existence of the state. … [T]his perception has pushed such pressing issues as gender equality and women's rights aside, marking them "less important" than the national conflict, thus allowing for the perpetuation of discriminatory, sometimes rather repressive treatment of women in Israel. The most blatant expression of this is the turning of the struggle for civil marriage and divorce into a non-issue.[2]

As if this reluctance to deal with the lack of civil marriage and divorce in Israel were not enough, in an empiric research study I conducted with sociologist Bryna Bogoch, we concluded that Israeli divorce practitioners have internalized women's legal inferiority to such an extent that it is not even recognized. Thus, the reason that women are not regarded as having less power than men is that the basic disadvantage of women in the law is so taken for granted that it is no longer seen as actually affecting the negotiations leading to divorce. We suggested: "Gender inequalities are naturalized in the routine practice of divorce … and the issue of women's dependence on men for divorce is itself divorced from professional discourse of power and equality."[3]

### The Trap of "Formal Equality"

This observation confirms my analysis of the civil family court system, in which I also concluded that many family judges fell into the trap of what legal theory and feminist critics calls "formal equality"—namely, a simplistic "as if" notion of treating everyone equally, as if there were no basic differences between the parties. Formal equality not only ignores initial differences between the parties, but also overlooks the underlying context and disregards any disparaging effects it may have on the subject matter. As such, the civil jurists tend to see the narrow issues at hand before them—those of parents and children, support, marital property, and financial matters—and completely ignore the broader contexts of divorce and Jewish divorce law, which underlie these matters. The courts feel the responsibility to implement equality in the case at hand, but they disregard the background rules of divorce. It is

as if those rules were conveniently invisible, so that the civil courts do not see themselves responsible for them, nor are they responsible for eliminating their resultant discrimination or distortion. It is possible that the civil judiciary has, in a way, accepted and internalized the religious discriminatory rules of divorce to such an extent that they have become an axiomatic threshold on which all other rules are built.

Thus we are faced with a troubling development in Israeli family law—namely, the possibility of revoking the existing "tender years" presumption in custody disputes, which provides for maternal preference when physical custody is at issue (while legal custody is always equally shared between both parents). Like their counterparts all over industrialized countries, local men's organizations have seized on the only area of marital law in which women have some advantage, and in the name of gender equality, they are calling to abolish this law and adopt a default rule of shared physical custody, ignoring the overall discriminatory framework within which this law operates, as well as the perspective of the best interests of the child. It is disturbing to see how the hollow rhetoric of formal equality catches the public ear and the legislative eye. Furthermore, while all this goes on, the rabbinical courts continue in their gendered interpretation of Jewish law, using such halakhically dubious tools as retroactive invalidation of the *get* and allowing men to condition the *get* on such terms as will enhance the power of the rabbinical courts (e.g., by demanding that disputes originally filed in civil family court be transferred to rabbinical court jurisdiction or by requiring that disputes already settled in family court be reopened).

These developments go mostly unnoticed in the media and in the public eye, which—if at all concerned with women's rights and gender equality—are satisfied to express their shock and dismay at the intolerable phenomenon of women's exclusion. It is time that they noticed the ongoing exclusion and outright discrimination against women in the most vital, intimate sphere of any woman's life, which eventually affects all other areas of women's lives, private and public alike.

***Dr. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari**, a professor of law at Bar-Ilan University, is the director of the Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women there. She is a member (and former vice president) of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).*

[1] Yael Yishai, *Between the Flag and the Banner: Israeli Women in Politics* (SUNY Press, 1997).

[2] Ruth Halperin-Kaddari and Yaacov Yadgar, "Between Universal Feminism and Particular Nationalism: Politics, Religion and Gender (In)equality in Israel," *Third World Quarterly* 31: 905-20 (2010), at 906.

[3] Bryna Bogoch and Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, "Divorce Israeli Style: Professional Perceptions of Gender and Power in Mediated and Lawyer-Negotiated Divorces," *Law and Policy* 28: 137-63 (2006), at 155.

# Beit Shemesh: A Case Study in Hareidi Zealotry

*By Sima Zalcberg Block*

In recent years, one of the main hubs of religious coercion and violence toward women has been located in the city of Beit Shemesh. These incidents involve harsh acts of violence perpetrated by local radical Hareidim (ultra-Orthodox) who have made the lives of many of the city's residents so unbearable as to cause them to leave town.

Until a decade and a half ago, most of Beit Shemesh's residents were either traditionally religious or secular. The city was first populated by Hareidim in 1994, with the establishment of Hakirya HaHareidit, the first Hareidi neighborhood. Initially, this neighborhood was populated primarily by families from the radical Toldot Aharon sect and the Yerushalmi (Jerusalemite) groups that reflect the radical tradition of the old Ashkenazi anti-Zionist *yishuv* (settlement). These families had been living in the Mea Shearim neighborhood of Jerusalem and were forced to leave the "Hareidi ghetto" because of a housing shortage.

Following in their footsteps, many other Hareidi families began to arrive in Beit Shemesh, where they established and populated two additional Hareidi neighborhoods in the city: Ramat Beit Shemesh A and Ramat Beit Shemesh B (hereafter, Ramah A and Ramah B, respectively). These families included a wide range of Hareidi denominations and groupings, among them Hasidim from the various Hasidic courts, non-Hasidic Litvaks (both Israeli and Anglo-Saxon), ultra-Orthodox Sephardim, *ba'alei teshuvah* (newly observant), Neturei Karta, and "Yerushalmim." As things stand today, the Hareidi population of Beit Shemesh is concentrated in these three neighborhoods and constitutes roughly half the city's population, which numbers approximately 100,000 people.

Despite the fact that the Hareidi community in Beit Shemesh does not constitute one uniform bloc, many people do not distinguish among the various Hareidi groups when complaining that the "Hareidim" have taken over the area and are inciting violence against its inhabitants. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that we are speaking of a few radical groups who terrorize the inhabitants of Beit Shemesh. Moreover, among the local Hareidim, there are some who are trying to battle this minority of radical zealots, because the latter have been intimidating the Hareidi "silent majority," as they put it, and have been defaming the general Hareidi public.

There are a number of settings in Beit Shemesh where religious coercion and violence are being perpetrated against the backdrop of gender issues, as has emerged from the ethnographic research that I conducted on site.

*continued on page 6*

## Beit Shemesh, *continued from page 5*

### Vandalism and "Modesty Signs"

Some of the most salient expressions of religious coercion and violence on the part of the radical zealots take the form of vandalism and "modesty signs." A classic example may be seen in the radical zealots' destruction of all the permanent benches that were placed along one of the main thoroughfares of Ramah B, to prevent people from sitting on them "indecently." As a result, all that remains are remnants of benches on which it is impossible to sit. Likewise, the public parks in the neighborhood display signs that demand that women avoid sitting on the benches in order to preserve their internal modesty, citing the verse from Psalms 45:14, "The daughter of the king is all glorious within."

In Ramah A at the entrance of the supermarket located in the heart of the commercial center, visitors are greeted by the following sign:

> Women walking through our neighborhood are requested to respect the residents' feelings and to come
>
> **DRESSED IN MODEST CLOTHING ONLY**
>
> Modest clothing includes: a buttoned-up blouse with long sleeves, a long skirt that is not tightly fitted
>
> Neighborhood Rabbis
> Torah and Hesed Institutions The Residents

When it was first erected, the sign was the cause of many disputes that led to violence; however, the supermarket management refused to take it down, arguing that Hareidi residents threatened to harm them if they dared remove it. In the not-so-distant past, the supermarket also had a "modesty stand" that was operated by a woman who would present female shoppers with a long piece of cloth and demand that they cover themselves with it. The "modesty stand" was operative for a number of months until it was removed, due to pressure exerted by shoppers who objected.

The radicals have not been satisfied with one sign on top of the entrance to the supermarket; at almost all the shops in the commercial center, those entering are greeted with the following sign:

> Honored customers, we respect the feelings of the neighborhood residents. Accordingly, you are requested to enter dressed in modest and appropriate clothing only.

Many of the business proprietors displayed these signs after radical Hareidim threatened them with a buyers' boycott, with smashing their shop windows, and even with physically harming them and their family members. Moreover, residents have reported that in the commercial center, self-appointed "modesty inspectors"—male Hareidim—have approached women whom they regard as immodestly clad and warned them to dress more appropriately. There is a sense, say the residents, that these radicals are "lying in wait" in the commercial center, ready to pounce on their prey.

### Physical Violence

The zealous preservation of women's modesty is one of the most prominent characteristics of the radical groups in Beit Shemesh. It manifests itself in both verbal and physical violence: from destroying street posters showing women's faces to cursing female pedestrians in the street, and even to spitting, throwing stones, or striking these women. Debbie,[1] a local resident, had to endure stones, spittle, and curses hurled at her over the course of her morning run. Michal, a young local resident, boarded a *Mehadrin* bus (on which the men sit in front and the women are required to sit at the back) without realizing the travel rules. She sat down in the front in the area designated for men, and, consequently, was beaten aggressively. Daniela and two of her friends, young girls from the National Religious community, were viciously attacked by a group of Hareidim while taking a stroll through the Hareidi neighborhood on Friday night. Members of the group threw eggs at them and kicked them so hard that they were left rolling on the ground. A religious youth who was in the area ran to help them, but the Hareidim attacked him as well.

These stories are among the many that illustrate the physical violence these radicals in Beit Shemesh have perpetrated against women whose outward appearance was not sufficiently modest from their perspective. Even Hareidi men whom the radicals consider to be contributing to inappropriate behavior cannot escape this violence. Thus, a group of radicals made accusations against a Hareidi pizzeria owner in Ramah B and poured fuel and tar on the seats and floor of his establishment because the attire of some of the customers did not meet their standards.

Yoel, a Hareidi *ba'al teshuvah,* reported that a group of radicals dragged him and his son to a nearby forest, where they beat their heads with a hammer. The reason, explained Yoel, was "because those radicals claimed that they saw my son, who is now seventeen years old, walking around with girls in the street. My son does not walk around with girls; he walks with his sister, who is sixteen years old, but even that has now become forbidden." These radicals did not stop at beatings, but brought a bulldozer to destroy part of the walls of Yoel's family's private home. This was the last straw for the family, who felt compelled to leave the city.

### "The Complete Opposite of Modesty"

Many moderate Hareidi residents of Beit Shemesh have recoiled from this extremism in the sphere of modesty, and emphasize that the consequent zealotry

and violence are alien to the spirit of Hareidi Judaism. Yosef, a local Hareidi, argues that the exaggerated preoccupation with modesty is, in fact, the "complete opposite of modesty." He argues, "If you do not wish men to think bad thoughts [about women and about sex], why are you dealing with this all the time?"

It appears that the overly stringent supervision of sexuality as it has taken shape in Beit Shemesh demonstrates an intensive, if not obsessive, occupation with sex. Michel Foucault[2] thinks that the discourse on sexuality becomes a means of control over society, as the ramifications of this discourse are a knowledge monopoly that defines what may and what may not be said. Consequently, one may view the discourse on sexuality that has erupted in the Hareidi neighborhoods of Beit Shemesh as part of the supervision and control mechanisms imposed by the radical zealots on all the residents.

## Who Are These Radical Groups and What Characterizes Them?

A large portion of the radical activists in Ramah B are part of the radical Hareidim who originate from the Mea Shearim neighborhood in Jerusalem. The majority are affiliated with the Eidah Hareidit, a framework that unites the groups that refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the State of Israel as a Jewish state.[3] Although many of the groups that identify with the Eidah have branches in Beit Shemesh, most are not among the violent elements. The instigators of violence come primarily from some of the Yerushalmim (Jerusalemite groups) and from Neturei Karta, as well as a few first- and second-generation *ba'alei teshuvah*. They operate within a framework of a few groups led by local rabbis. According to the residents, the hard core of these groups consists of approximately two hundred men who are occasionally joined by up to an additional four hundred.

In Ramah A, one may find radical zealots who hail primarily from the Litvak denomination. The radical zealots from all the groups are mainly young, idle, uneducated *kollel* students, who, lacking any profession or occupation, are looking for excitement.

Hareidim from other groups in Beit Shemesh view some of these groups as a "cult" for all intents and purposes. "They are a cult," explains Shlomo, a local Hareidi resident, "with all the characteristics of a cult, including heavy brainwashing, a strong social managerial regime that negates the other and all who do not follow their ways."

Their harassment of others demonstrates an inability to tolerate people whose lifestyle and *weltanschauung* are different from their own and a desire to force all the residents to adopt their ways. As Shlomo observes, they "wish to show the residents who is the real boss."

Despite the terror they have sown throughout the city, it is important to remember that we are dealing with a very small minority—marginal groups who do not represent the general Hareidi community.

## Summary: Why Beit Shemesh?

How did so many parts of Beit Shemesh, a town that until a decade and a half ago had a *masorati* (traditional) and secular majority, turn into a major hub for the activities of radical zealots? It appears that a number of cumulative factors led to this revolution.

First, most of the Beit Shemesh radicals originate from the Mea Shearim neighborhood. For this community, it was important to demonstrate that leaving the inner sanctum of Hareidi Jerusalem would not cause a decline in their degree of separatism, religious punctiliousness, and zealotry. The best way to express this from their perspective was through demonstrating behavior more severe than the "original."

Second, in the past few decades, Hareidi society in Israel, in all its diversity, has shown greater openness to Israeli society, to modernity, and to Zionism than ever before.[4] These changes are not in keeping with the spirit of the radical zealots, who aspire to "rectify" the situation in Beit Shemesh by building a community with all possible strictures.

Third, the existence of young married *kollel* students, with no education or profession, who are restless and seeking adventure, constitutes fertile grounds for the growth of violent zealous activity committed under the guise of religiosity. This is a well-known phenomenon that characterizes fundamentalist groups among various religions.[5]

Fourth, the presence of many *ba'alei teshuvah* in the city also constitutes a ripe platform for the development of religious zealotry. Given their desire to cope with internal gnawing doubts and to be accepted as equal members of the group, and given their lack of deep-rooted family traditions that could check their behavior, these individuals are likely to adopt especially stringent norms that could lead them to religious zealotry.

Fifth, because Beit Shemesh does not have well-defined physical boundaries between the Hareidi areas and the non-Hareidi areas, the radical zealots have been unable to create a Hareidi area of concentration that is completely separate from general society.[6] Consequently, unavoidable contact between radical figures from the Hareidi community and the general population takes place, and the former have tried to compel the general population to adopt their lifestyles and their stringent norms. Thus the battle surrounding the various modesty signs, as well as the conflict regarding use of the public square, is an expression of the struggle for power and control taking place between the radical Hareidi community and general society, and of attempts by the former to determine the rules for the latter.

Furthermore, Hareidi communities (like all religious communities) operate today in a competitive free market in which individuals choose their religious communities.[7] As a result, their rabbis tend to issue halakhic rulings in accordance with the inclinations of

*continued on page 8*

## Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

I enjoyed the recent issue of the *JOFA Journal* that was devoted to ceremonies to welcome our daughters.

I thought that your readers might also be interested in taking a look at the book I wrote on the subject, *Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter: Creating Jewish Ways to Welcome Baby Girls into the Covenant* (Jewish Lights).

It is designed as a manual for new parents interested in creating their own Jewish ritual to welcome their daughter, either in synagogue or another environment, such as home, or to add something of their own on to a *zeved habat* or other traditional ceremony. The book includes a history of welcoming ceremonies for Jewish girls; a plethora of readings, blessings and prayers; and sample ceremonies that include one tailored to the needs of Orthodox Jews.

Sincerely,
Debra Nussbaum Cohen

**Rena Bannett, *Olive Tree*, 2012, 8"x10", ceramic tile, high-fire clay.**

### Beit Shemesh, *continued from page 7*

their members, so as not to lose them. In a community where most of the members tend to be overscrupulous in their observance, the halakhic decisor will likely decide for stringent halakhic norms (and vice versa). This phenomenon is well attested to in Beit Shemesh, where a number of rabbis have radicalized their positions in response to pressure exerted on them by radicals in their communities. Moreover, there is undeclared competition among certain groups as to the degree of stringency to be adopted.

Yehiel, one of the leading activists in the fight against violence in the city, explains: "There are rabbis who are forced to submit to the dictates of the members of the radical group, because they know that if they don't, the members of their community will rebel against them. We speak with not a few Hareidi rabbis who are considered relatively moderate, and they denounce this phenomenon to us, but are not ready or able to act publicly to defeat the problem."

Additionally, Benjamin states, "The minute one group does a radical action, the extremists from another group imitate them, so they will not be considered less radical than the first group."

Because the outward appearance of women is something immediately noticeable, and because stringency in modesty is perceived as highly significant in Hareidi society,[8] women are seen as a convenient object to be ruled over and their outward appearance a most appropriate arena for demonstrating stringency.

***Sima Zalcberg Block,** who holds a PhD in sociology and anthropology from Bar-Ilan University, is a researcher into Hareidi society, focusing on radical groups. She wrote a more extensive article on this topic, "The Rush to Modesty," in* Eretz Acheret: About Israel and Judaism *51 (2009), pp. 30–42.*

[1] This is a fictional name to preserve the privacy of this individual. All interviewees in this article have been given fictional names.

[2] Foucault, M., "Truth and Power," in C. Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 51–75; idem, "The Repressive Hypothesis," in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 301–30.

[3] Friedman, M., "The Market Model and Religious Radicalism," in M. Kahane, ed., *In the Throes of Tradition and Change: A Collection of Papers in Memory of Arye Lang* (Rehovot: Kivunim Pub., 1990), 262–77.

[4] Caplan, K., "Studying Israeli Hareidi Society: Characteristics, Achievements, and Challenges," in E. Sivan and K. Caplan, eds., *Israeli Hareidim, Integration without Assimilation* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 2003), 224–78 (Hebrew); Caplan, K, *The Secret Hareidi Discourse* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2007).

[5] Appleby, R. S. and Martin, E., "Fundamentalism," *Foreign Policy* 128 (2002), 6–22.

[6] Kahaner, L., "The Development of the Spatial and Hierarchic Structure of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish Population in Israel" (PhD dissertation, Haifa University, 2009).

[7] Friedman, M., op. cit.

[8] See Heilman, S., *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken, 1992). Also see Zalcberg Block, S., "Shouldering the Burden of the Redemption: How the 'Fashion' of Wearing Capes Developed in Ultra-Orthodox Society," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 22 (2011), 32–55.

# Women of the Wall: Fighting for the Right to Pray

*By Rivka Haut*

On December 1, 1988, a group of about seventy-five Israeli, American, and Canadian women had a life-altering experience at the Kotel, the reverberations of which are with us still. We were attending the American Jewish Congress's International Conference for the Empowerment of Jewish Women. I was invited to speak about Orthodox women's prayer groups, which were then considered to be cutting-edge, radical feminist groups. Instead of lecturing about them, I decided to organize a women's group prayer service, complete with Torah reading, at the Kotel. Thus began a wonderful journey into the heart of feminine spirituality.

Legend has it that the *Shekhinah,* God's immanent presence, journeyed with the people of Israel through our long years of exile and returned with us to the Land of Israel, where we became an independent nation once again. On that historic December day, we, Jewish women, proudly celebrated our own return from centuries of exile, of being distanced from the center of religious life, by reclaiming our share in Torah, communal prayer, and religious leadership.

Our group was diverse, the service led by women from every Jewish denominational stream. The mystical experience we were privileged to encounter at that site, holy to so many, has been beautifully described by some of the participants in *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site,* edited by Phyllis Chesler and me (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003). Since that day, almost twenty-four years ago, the struggle for women's rights at the Kotel has continued. Anat Hoffman, who participated in that first historic service, assumed a leadership position and has ably led the group to this day.

## Support from Diaspora Women, but an Israeli Identity

It is miraculous that Women of the Wall (WOW), embattled from the first and continually facing formidable obstacles, has endured and grown stronger. At first, the help of Diaspora women was crucial. In 1989, we formed the International Committee for Women of the Wall and purchased a Torah scroll from donations generously sent by hundreds who wished to support the group. We raised monies to hire security guards, which were necessary to protect the women from Hareidi violence, as, sadly, the State of Israel failed to protect them. We raised money for three Israeli Supreme Court lawsuits, which ultimately failed to win religious freedom for women at that holy site.

We participated in all the major decisions that arose, including the most difficult—how to maintain focus, *kavvanah,* when being attacked verbally and physically, and how to maintain the group as halakhic while welcoming all Jewish women, without denying anyone the ability to pray according to her custom. Throughout it all, the group has sustained itself as a united prayer community, and no rival group has arisen—surely an amazing phenomenon in itself.

WOW has now come of age. Although it was formed by a Diaspora initiative, and initially sustained financially by Diaspora dollars, it has now attained independence from the Diaspora and has become a truly Israeli group. The International Committee for Women of the Wall has officially disbanded. Those of us who were in the original group maintain direct contact as board members, receive monthly reports and information over the Internet, and are still called on for advice when problems arise. After women were recently arrested for wearing *tallitot* at the Kotel, a group of us went to the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., as representatives of Women of the Wall. We met with Ambassador Michael Oren, to discuss the incident and to advocate for the group. Our meeting proved to him that many Diaspora women are deeply concerned about Women of the Wall and are dismayed at the recent events. Our discussion was frank, and Oren's advice was useful.

However, despite the strong Diaspora connection, the group now functions as a completely independent Israeli entity. The best example of its Israeli identity is that WOW recently published its own prayer book: *Women of the Wall: Siddur L'Rosh Hodesh*. This wonderful siddur contains prayers and directions in both Hebrew and English, and is used exclusively at the Kotel. The liturgy is grammatically correct for recitation by women and adaptable for different halakhic options. For example, for the recitation of the Kedushah prayer, the siddur allows the prayer leader to choose liturgical language that she is most comfortable with, stating, "We lovingly enable each other to praise the Creator, each according to her belief." Though far from perfect and not yet acceptable to all participating women, the siddur represents a significant development in WOW's ability to deal creatively and tolerantly with the dilemma that has plagued us from the beginning—how best to accommodate everyone's religious needs.

## Violence against Women at Prayer

When WOW began to conduct services for women at the Kotel, violence against the praying women immediately ensued. Virtually the entire Jewish religious and secular worlds ignored the terrible fact that Jewish women were being physically attacked at the Kotel for praying together. Secular Israelis did not appreciate the importance of the struggle, not caring in the least about the Kotel or about women being permitted to pray together there. The non-Orthodox world considered WOW to be an Orthodox group, because, despite their fighting for the right to read Torah and to wear *tallitot,* they did not constitute themselves as a *minyan.*

The Orthodox world, shockingly, also did not care. Only a few Orthodox rabbis condemned the violence against women at that holy site. Rabbi Rene Samuel Sirat, former chief rabbi of France, spoke out strongly in favor

*continued on page 10*

## Women of the Wall, *continued from page 9*

of WOW. Rabbi Avi Weiss of Riverdale wrote a letter condemning the violence against the women of WOW. Recently, Rabbi Shmuel Hertzfeld of Washington, D.C. has strongly supported WOW and condemned the arrests of Anat Hoffman and Nofrat Fraenkel, who were arrested for violating the law by wearing *tallitot* at the Kotel.

Orthodox women's groups have not shown WOW much support, however, and Orthodox women have not attended the monthly Rosh Hodesh services in large numbers. Perhaps this is because they meet early in the morning; perhaps because they risk possible physical danger every time they pray; perhaps because the group has been wrongly perceived as a politically driven group and not a religious one. Whatever the reasons, Orthodox support has been minimal.

Interestingly, tellingly, the small cohort of Orthodox women who have been active on behalf of *agunot,* myself included, have also been major supporters of WOW. It has always been clear to us that women's issues are connected. Women's active participation in learning, in prayer, and women's freedom to exit failed marriages are all at risk. Success in one area has an impact on the success of the others.

Recent events in the Israeli street have proven that WOW's cause is vital for a democratic and free State of Israel. Perhaps if WOW had received the support it needed and deserved, if WOW had won its legal struggle and attained the right to pray together, read Torah, and wear *tallitot* (referred to by WOW as "The Three T's"), if Hareidi violence against women at the Kotel had been condemned and stopped instead of being permitted to grow, the world would have been spared the sights of little girls being spat upon, of women's images on ads and posters being eliminated, and of women being sent to the back of the bus. Permitting a small of group of women to be targets of serious violence, of having metal chairs thrown over the *mehitza* at them, of having diapers filled with fecal matter hurled at them, of hearing profoundly disturbing curses screamed at them every time they prayed for twenty-three years, opened the door to escalating abuses against women. We are now paying the price for ignoring Hareidi violence at the Kotel, for denying women their rights at the Kotel, because their manner of prayer "offends the sensibilities of the worshippers," as the Supreme Court's decision stated.

Recently I heard Rabbi Shlomo Riskin say that he would agree to have the Temple Mount internationalized as long as a synagogue built on the Mount would be allowed. Should that dream ever become reality, Jewish women will be able to claim their rightful space in such a synagogue because of the persistence and courage of the Women of the Wall.

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***Rivka Haut** is an agunah activist and co-author with Phyllis Chesler of* Women of the Wall *(Jewish Lights, 2003). She is a visiting lecturer at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah.*

# Beit Hillel Movement Gives Women a Voice in Spiritual Leadership

***By Karen Miller Jackson***

In February, more than 100 Orthodox rabbis and female Torah scholars came together to establish an Orthodox spiritual leadership forum that represents a more moderate and modern voice within the Religious Zionist camp in Israel. Beit Hillel is a rabbinic organization that has decided to open its ranks to learned women (in addition to community and yeshiva-based rabbis). It took the name Beit Hillel after the followers of Hillel, who conducted themselves modestly and were respectful of their ideological opponents. Members of the board of directors include Rav Amnon Bazak of Yeshivat Har Etzion; Rav Dr. Tsachi Hershkovitz of Petah Tikva and Bar-Ilan University; Rav Meir Nehorai of Masuot Yitzhak; Rav Tzvi Koren, rabbi of Kehillat Kinor David in Ra'anana; Rabbanit Oshra Koren of Matan HaSharon and Kehillat Kinor David in Ra'anana; Rav Ronen Lubitch of Nir Etzion and Haifa University; Rav Yoni Rosensweig of Yeshivat Torat Yosef Hamivtar and community rabbi in Beit Shemesh; and Rav Ronen Neuwirth of Beit Knesset Ohel Ari in Ra'anana. The following is an interview with Rav Neuwirth, conducted by Karen Miller Jackson.

Rav Ronen Neuwirth, one of the founders of Beit Hillel

### *What was the impetus for starting Beit Hillel?*

The goal of the movement is to restore the centrist Orthodox *hashkafah* in Israeli society, a *hashkafah* that has begun losing its legitimacy within religious society in Israel due to a variety of sociological influences. Religious Zionism is a very broad umbrella term for people who believe in the State of Israel and who serve in the army. The Religious Zionist sector is composed of a variety of streams, some leaning more to a Hareidi-Leumi (ultra-Orthodox nationalist) *hashkafah*, others leaning toward a centrist *hashkafah*, more or less aligned with the Modern Orthodox view. Due to many factors, the voice of the Hareidi-Leumi leadership is presently dominant in the Religious Zionist *yeshivot,* educational systems, and communities, whereas the majority of the *ba'alei batim* (congregants) share the centrist Orthodox *hashkafah*. This situation results in much friction within communi-

ties and educational institutions and generates a sense of delegitimization among the Modern Orthodox. The centrist Orthodox approach is often portrayed as a compromise by those who are not serious in their religiosity. Thus, values such as academic studies, modern culture, democracy, equal rights for women, and even commitment to the State of Israel are sometimes dismissed as illegitimate by some rabbis and educators.

Beit Hillel aspires to restore what was previously the mainstream, the solid centrist Orthodox *hashkafah* under the direction and guidance of spiritual and rabbinical leaders. This *hashkafah* is not a compromise, but rather is authentic Judaism, seeking to balance different and sometimes conflicting values.

This goal is expressed in the mission statement of Beit Hillel:

> We believe in the permanence of *Torat Yisrael,* and are absolutely committed to Jewish halakha.
>
> Recent events have presented our Holy Torah to the Israeli public in an inappropriately narrow-minded, exclusionary light. We, who are engaged daily in teaching and studying the Torah, believe that this has misrepresented Judaism, and that only the authentic, enlightened, inclusive Judaism—whose ways are pleasant and peaceful—has a true message for Israel today. In that spirit, we believe it imperative to include women in public leadership roles. It is therefore that we have resolved to establish an Orthodox Spiritual Leadership forum to open its ranks to women. *Talmidot hakhamim,* women scholars and spiritual leaders, will find in Beit Hillel a welcoming home alongside community and yeshiva rabbis.
>
> We view ourselves an inextricable part of Israeli society. Albeit we have our criticisms of certain aspects of the Israeli public sphere, yet we voice such critique with love and identification. Our aim is to elevate Israeli society from within and not from without. We look upon the modern world and its innovations appreciatively. New developments in human society and culture, science, and technology bear promises both good and bad. As such, we refuse to dismiss these developments and choose instead to separate the good from the bad. In our opinion, a general education is crucial to the building of a believing Jewish personality in our age.
>
> We are committed to the State of Israel, and contend that Israel's viability and prosperity are necessary for the Jewish people's continued development. We stand fast against all attacks leveled at the Zionist cause from different quarters in Israeli society.
>
> We are convinced that the ideas we express are acceptable to the majority of the religious community, which is a full partner in the State of Israel and Israeli society. We strive to give voice to the silent majority. *Hazal* taught that the school of Beit Hillel conducted itself modestly and [was] respectful of its ideological opponents. So do we take upon ourselves to conduct an open, attuned dialogue with those with whom we don't identify, while giving expression to our way of studying and spreading Torah.

### *Who can become a member of Beit Hillel? How many members are there? What is the breakdown of male/female membership?*

All members of Beit Hillel serve (or have served) in rabbinical positions or in teaching positions at post-high school institutions, and bring with them immense halakhic and spiritual training, as well as commitment and devotion to Beit Hillel's goals. We have 150 members—30 women and 120 men. We invited most of our members personally, but whoever fits into this category can approach us and seek to join, as many have done.

### *What is the role of the women of Beit Hillel?*

Women have the same role as men in Beit Hillel. They are equal partners in all the discussions and the positions that Beit Hillel takes. They have an equal vote on every matter and have representation on every committee of Beit Hillel. We have decided to call them "Rabbanit"; nevertheless, we are not giving them rabbinical ordination.

### *What actions or activities has Beit Hillel undertaken?*

First, Beit Hillel put together a platform that details our *hashkafah* on the burning issues within the religious Zionist community. All members have signed on to the platform.

We have also taken courageous public positions on issues such as Givat Ha-ulpana [the evacuation of settlers from an extension of the West Bank community of Beit El, from an area where they did not have permission to build], the deportation of Sudanese refugees in southern Tel Aviv [weighing the suffering of the inhabitants of the neighborhood against the need to show *rahamim* toward endangered strangers, and suggesting that the refugees be dispersed over a wider area], and the exclusion of fathers from school celebrations for their young daughters [balancing the desire of fathers to share in the rites of passage of their daughters against the requirements of modesty and the wishes of older girls for privacy].

The following are four programs that Beit Hillel will be promoting in the near future:

- **Beit Midrash for Halakhic and Hashkafic Renaissance:** The *beit midrash* will bring together rabbis and female spiritual leaders with broad experience in the realm of halakha and *hashkafah,* to renew the chain of halakha and compose extensive responsa that will courageously address the major issues evolving from the social and technological changes in modern society, as well as new issues arising from the creation of a Jewish state after two thousand years of exile. The

*continued on page 12*

# ITIM Works for Women

*By Seth Farber*

ITIM: Resources and Advocacy for Jewish Life was founded a decade ago, taking as its mission to enable individuals to lead Jewish lives in Israel. The issues ITIM addresses regarding particular challenges to women focus largely on lifecycle events and conversion. ITIM seeks to make the individual's experience of Jewish life positive, while at the same time addressing the obstacles put in place by a national system that is overwhelmingly anchored in policies that are not friendly to women.

### Conversion of Women

Let me begin in the area in which ITIM's hotline receives the most calls: the area of conversion. ITIM's involvement with conversion goes back to 2005, when we published the first guide to conversion in Israel, which was subsequently adopted as the official sourcebook by the Prime Minister's office. Since then, ITIM has helped more than 4,000 individuals through the conversion process in Israel.

During the past two years, we have fought publicly and vocally to have Orthodox conversions, including conversions performed in the IDF, recognized in Israel. More recently, we have also begun to address the maddening situation concerning conversion of women, whereby rabbinical court judges participate fully at the moment of the woman's immersion in the *mikvah*. A number of articles written on the subject provide ample halakhic grounds to change the norm, under which female converts immediately prior to their immersion—at perhaps their most vulnerable moment—are subjected to questioning by three men who are in the room with them as the women stand or sit in a bathrobe (or less), and who subsequently observe their immersion.

In the sarcastic words of an ITIM female employee who regularly accompanies female converts to the *mikvah*, "The *dayanim* seem to care what the convert's dress is just before and after the *mikvah*, but at the time of the *mikvah*, clothes just don't seem that important to them."

## Beit Hillel, *continued from page 11*

*beit midrash* group will consist of fifteen members, including women, from Beit Hillel who will meet ten times a year to learn the relevant *sugiyot* in depth and to suggest halakhic solutions that take into account the values, demands, and culture of modern society. The group will publish *piskei halakha* on behalf of Beit Hillel, based on the discussions and other comments received from the entire membership of Beit Hillel.

A similar *beit midrash* for Jewish thought will be operated by Beit Hillel. It will publish collections of articles in halakhic and Jewish thought on topics concerning Beit Hillel's mission statement. The publications will include materials produced by the *batei midrash* and members of Beit Hillel, and will be distributed in *shuls* across Israel before the various *hagim*.

- **National think tank:** Beit Hillel is creating partnerships with communal leaders in Israeli society—something that is less common in Israeli culture than in American culture, where true partnerships between spiritual leaders and lay leaders exist. We will facilitate a think tank and action center for the production of new initiatives and for the advancement of tolerant religious Zionist values in communities and educational systems.

- **Media/communications/technology core competencies:** Beit Hillel plans to have a strong presence in the media and the press, both in the general media and the religious media. The goal is to make our voice present, relevant, and accessible to our target audience.

- **Social networks:** One of the most effective ways nowadays to have an impact on the public discourse is to create a social network of supporters and followers that will serve as an interactive platform for discourse between Beit Hillel leaders and the public. We will strive to connect tens of thousands of people to the rabbinic network of Beit Hillel.

***How has Beit Hillel been received in the Israeli press?***

Beit Hillel has been received very positively. Israeli society is craving for a voice of reason within Religious Zionism.

***How is Beit Hillel perceived in the mainstream Orthodox community?***

Our target audience is the 65 percent to 70 percent of the Orthodox community who comprise the mainstream silent majority. People have been in despair, and when we speak, there is a great sense of relief that finally someone is finally giving voice to their thoughts.

***What kind of relationship would you like to have with Jewish communities in the United States?***

I think the American community is facing similar challenges to those of the religious community in Israel. My dream is to form an international Beit Hillel spiritual leadership, with spiritual leaders from the United States as well as Israel, to create a strong coalition of people who think alike, can strengthen one another, and together lead the Jewish world to a better place with stronger commitment to halakha and maximal integration into contemporary culture.

There are a number of halakhic solutions to the present problematic situation. One suggestion is to rely on the opinion that women can immerse fully clothed, thus minimizing the vulnerability issue. A second is to follow those (minority) opinions that allow the *dayanim* to be outside the room at the time of immersion, and to rely on the female attendant to observe the immersion. What these suggestions have in common is that they begin to address the vulnerability issue frontally. I don't believe that either one, on its own, will at present pass the halakhic viability test, but together, they provide a platform that should at least engage halakhists.

**ITIM seeks to make living a Jewish life fully accessible to women.**

The challenge for ITIM is not only to provide the precise halakhic constellation to enable the policy to change, but, in addition, to ensure its implementation within the national conversion system. To this end, we have published opinion pieces about this issue, and at the most recent national conversion convention (yes, such a thing exists in Israel), an ITIM staffer raised the question to rabbinical court judges in an open forum. Gradually, ITIM is both educating people about the problem and seeking solutions on a systemic level.

At the same time, ITIM has participated in an initiative to help support women converts and to accompany them to the *mikvah* during the conversion process.

Unfortunately, we are discovering that, perhaps because they are inured to the practice, the policy makers (generally, the rabbinical court judges) don't feel that watching a woman immerse under a bathrobe or a large cloak is an infringement on her privacy and modesty. They argue that since this is the normative opinion in halakha, by definition it cannot conflict with the rules of *tzniut*. I would argue that the rules of *tzniut* have changed to a large extent over time, and women need to be consulted on these issues. In my opinion, the present situation is not acceptable, and new solutions must be sought.

### Women Participating in Burial Services

In another area of endeavor, ITIM has been very involved in the issue of women's participation in burial services in Israel. Before addressing the general issue, I would acknowledge here—particularly for a North American audience—that women can now deliver eulogies in most cemeteries in Israel. Many American Jewish families now choose to bury their loved ones in the Eretz HaHayim Cemetery near Beit Shemesh, which is privately operated and which, in the past, prevented women from speaking there. ITIM negotiated a settlement with the directors and owners of that cemetery enabling women to speak publicly within the funeral parlor located in that cemetery.

On the national level, I participated in the Prime Minister's Roundtable on Women's Exclusion during the discussions related to women's roles at funerals. At ITIM, we continue to receive complaints from individual women who have been prevented from delivering eulogies at funerals, and we continue to seek systemic solutions to these problems. This past winter, some progress was made on the issue, and the press reported that the chief rabbi of Israel had issued a *p'sak halakha* suggesting that there was no basis for preventing women from delivering public eulogies at the time of the funeral. The press further reported that Israeli *hevra kadishas* would henceforth have their licenses issued conditional upon their agreeing to allow women to deliver eulogies.

However, a report submitted by ITIM to the Knesset in the spring highlighted that the directive of the Ministry of Religious Affairs enabling local *hevra kadishas* to allow women to deliver eulogies did not go far enough. Rather than conditioning the issuance of a license to bury the dead on the willingness of the burial society to permit women to speak, the Ministry's directive ultimately left the issue open, allowing the local *hevra* to decide. Because of these lacunae, some *hevra kadishas,* such as the one in Petah Tikva, still refuse to allow women to speak at the ceremony. ITIM continues to lobby against this policy.

There are a host of other policies of local *hevra kadishas* that denigrate women, and ITIM has launched small-scale campaigns to eliminate them. These range from insisting that women "sit in the back" at funerals to not letting woman anywhere near the plot during the burial service. I recently witnessed a burial where the *hevra kadisha* representative told the daughter of a deceased man not to come near or look at the plot, as it would be "bad for the deceased."

These practices, while perhaps rooted in kabbalistic sources, create a *hillul hashem* and have no place in the modern Israeli funeral. The same can be said of the prevention or dissuasion of women from saying Kaddish, either during the funeral or at the burial.

### Birth Ceremonies

Finally, in the area of birth rituals, the *simhat bat* ceremony has become a fairly normative rite among the Modern Orthodox. ITIM's website now supports, in both English and Hebrew, a build-your-own-ceremony section that enables new parents to develop their own rituals and print the descriptive text with a click. More and more families are adopting this ritual and developing new family customs based on the material available on the web.

In many respects, there is greater awareness now than ever before of the opportunities available for women to celebrate the Jewish lifecycle. Yet particularly in the areas in which there is institutional control, women are held back from playing a full role in Jewish ritual life, and in some cases, continue to be humiliated because of their gender. ITIM expends considerable resources to end such practices and seeks to make living a Jewish life fully accessible to women.

***Rabbi Seth Farber,*** *a Modern Orthodox rabbi and historian, is the founder of ITIM.*

# Tzohar's *Hadrakhat Kallot* Program: Restoring the *Simhah*

*By Jordana Schoor*

Imagine walking into city hall to register for a marriage license and being asked when your last menstrual cycle was. As much as many *olim* embrace these "only in Israel" moments, this particular integration of religion and state is one that has traumatized the secular Israeli community for decades. The requirements to be married by specific state-appointed rabbis and to be trained in *hilkhot niddah* (laws of ritual impurity) by select *rabbaniot* (rebbetzins) were some of the most off-putting experiences nonreligious Israelis had to endure—until Tzohar began its premarital programming.

In 1996, recognizing the potential repair of ill feelings that it could accomplish for couples preparing for marriage, and as part of its mission to bridge the divide between religious and secular Israelis, Tzohar began the Jewish Marriage Project. Rather than running off to Cyprus to get married or resenting their ceremony, these secular couples were enabled by Tzohar to choose an officiating Orthodox rabbi who would be more in tune with their wishes for their wedding. Five years later, the need for improved *hadrakhat kallot* (preparation of brides) programs has been met by volunteer women who spend time with brides before their weddings, learning with them and preparing them to integrate Torah values and *hilkhot niddah* into their married Jewish lives. To date, more than 35,000 couples have been married by Tzohar rabbis; in 2011, 3,000 couples worked with Tzohar-trained *madrikhot* (instructors/counselors).

**A joyous couple, alumni of the Tzohar *Hadrakhat Kallot* program, is married.**

The experience that women have with Tzohar *madrikhot* is meaningful and personalized. The curriculum for training *madrikhot* is uniform, rigorous, and intense, but Naomi Ansbacher, director of the Tzohar *Hadrakhat Kallot* Program, notes that each meeting with a couple is entirely different and develops spontaneously, based on the couple's interests and goals. "Our *madrikhot* are trained to listen well, ask the right questions, and empathize to ensure that the couples get the most out of their evening with the *madrikhah,* connecting them positively to Torah values and Jewish identity at this momentous point in their lives," she says. "For so many couples, this is basically their only encounter to connect with *dati* [religious] people and to forge their own Jewish connection to their marriage. So we make sure that the experience is as deep and personal as possible."

A bride who came to Tzohar recently described the effect the Tzohar volunteers had on her:

> I come from a totally secular background, and I was afraid I'd have to learn things I did not like to hear or some religious coercion. The atmosphere was actually very pleasant and comfortable—almost a family atmosphere, like sitting in the living room of old friends, an open and accepting atmosphere. ... I felt that the meeting encouraged us to think about issues that we hadn't confronted, to embrace the fact that the relationship could not exist without mutual work and to look at the relationship in the context of Creation. ...
>
> Since I come from the secular world, it was important to me that my marriage was through Tzohar, which was open to the world of *hilonim* [secular Jews], and [they] held my hand at every step in an open and loving educational role.

The selection and training of Tzohar *madrikhot* is the key to the success of the program. Months are invested in planning courses and selecting the "right" women to serve as *madrikhot.* Most of the volunteers are professional women with families and communal obligations who nonetheless take on the additional responsibility to meet with at least two brides a month, opening up their homes and their hearts to *hiloni* couples. After the initial eighty-hour course, which spans six months, *madrikhot* also attend seminars and workshops to keep themselves refreshed and inspired to continue educating couples.

"They are my inspiration," notes Ms. Ansbacher. "To make the experience relevant for the brides, we look for women who are bright, curious, and empathetic. They cannot simply relay information or teach—they need to be the type of person who connects easily and meaningfully to others and is truly open and nonjudgmental. They have three hours basically to affect the future relationship a couple will have with their Jewish identity, and somehow these wonderful women manage to do so, again and again."

There are currently 400 trained *madrikhot,* ranging in age from 30 to 60. They are doctors, engineers, professors, lawyers, and therapists. They work in the secular world, and their "normalness" in the eyes of the secular couple

**A bride meets with a *madrikhah* in the Tzohar *Hadrakhat Kallot* program.**

is a very important factor in making the evening relevant to the couple. "Because we could theoretically meet in the professional workplace, what I say takes on an additional level of relevance to the bride," notes *madrikhah* Hadassah Fortinsky. "We connect, not on a religious level, but because they see me as representing the tradition they are choosing to connect with at their wedding. I also get a lot in addition to giving—I care about the subject I am discussing and the person with whom I am discussing it."

Rav David Stav, the chairman and cofounder of Tzohar, fondly recalls the evolution of the program. What began as a "Band-Aid" to repair some of the negative experiences has been transformed to a "game changer" in Jewish identity. "We began teaching *hilkhot niddah* in a nonauthoritarian way, and even that was a great improvement," Rav Stav recalls. "We then added the dimension of what a Jewish marriage is and how Torah can help couples struggling with the concept of family in a postmodern, secular world. We now have grooms requesting to join in the discussion—not because they want to ensure that their brides aren't being brainwashed by some religious figure, but because they too want to grow and develop as a couple through a positive Jewish lens. Can we accomplish all we need to in terms of strengthening Jewish identity in one meeting? No—but the positive experience opens the couple up to more positive Jewish relationships. Couples have admitted that when choosing between traditional or secular schools for their child, the positive *hadrakhat kallot* experience was a major force in their deliberation and decision."

The growth of the Tzohar marriage program in general, and the popularity of the *madrikhot,* have made 2012 an intense year for Tzohar. Eighty-five additional *madrikhot* completed their training, and a new course is being scheduled. "הזמן קצר והעבודה מרובה אך הפועלים ממש לא עצלים"—"Time is short and the work is much, but the workers are definitely not lazy," notes Ms. Ansbacher with pride.

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*Jordana Schoor, formerly a Jewish educator and communal worker in New Jersey, made aliyah with her husband, Kalman, three years ago and is living in Modi'in with their six children.*

# *Talmud Torah* for Women—Where Is It Going?

***By Rachel Keren***

*Talmud Torah* has become part of the lives of many women, sparking one of the greatest revolutions in religious Jewish life. What began as a personal quest has become a broad social phenomenon. Each year hundreds of young women cross the thresholds of *batei midrash* and devote a year or more to study of Torah *lishma*. At many of the recent celebrations of the *Siyum HaShas,* women took part—not only as devoted learners, but also as leading teachers of learning groups.

The result of such a large movement should have been an infusion of a significant number of *talmidot hakhamim* into the different fields of halakhic and religious leadership. As we all know, however, this is not yet the case.

In the following, focusing primarily on Israel, I will suggest some perspectives on the last three decades of women's learning, their achievements, and dilemmas and questions that have arisen.

One important observation should be noted from the outset: Most *midrashot* in Israel do not aspire to teach Torah in depth to women and to encourage them to pursue wider knowledge of Torah. Rather, they endeavor to teach young women to become good religious wives and mothers, directing their Torah lessons to a view of women as spiritual, responsive, adaptive, and, most importantly, an *"ezer kenegdo."* Thus, the process of the expansion of Torah learning has been contained within a "safe and solid" territory, away from the critiques of its opponents.

Only a minority of *midrashot* today are taking the more progressive approach to women's Talmud Torah—the so-called Talmudic *midrashot*. This definition refers both to the subjects being learned—Gemara and the *poskim,* along with in-depth study of Jewish philosophy, and to the much higher level of learning. It also reflects the relationship between teachers and students, which is less about the authority of the all-knowing rabbi and more about mutual respect, appreciation, and a sharing of the *beit midrash* world.

For the past twenty years, I have been the head of such a *beit midrash* at Midreshet Ein Hanatziv. The following reflects my thoughts, as well as those I hear from the many graduates I have known.

Torah learning is intended to bring its serious pupils to the level of *talmidei hakhamim*. A *talmid hakham* is defined as one whose Torah knowledge determines his status as an arbiter, commentator, judge, and community leader. In a community where leaders are chosen on the basis of their Torah expertise, women scholars must therefore also be eligible for leadership. The implications of their inclusion are of great magnitude. Currently, as there are more and more *talmidot hakhamim*, the process of acceptance of scholarly and learned women

*continued on page 16*

**Talmud Torah,** *continued from page 15*

hasn't happened. Most religious communities do not acknowledge women's advanced Torah learning when determining the positions of these women, and grant only limited opportunities to learned women to lead. Only a few communities in Israel, even fewer than in the United States, have acknowledged that *talmidot hakhamim* are qualified to lead the community alongside male scholars.

Furthermore, within the *midrashot* themselves, even among the Talmudic *midrashot,* there is a lack of discussion of the future place of learned women within the religious establishment and communities. Most of the *midrashot* are headed solely by rabbis. To the best of my knowledge, only at Midreshet Ein Hanatziv do we expressly approach the lack of gender equality in the religious world as a subject for learning and discussion.

Another issue with regard to women's learning is that, in many cases, women tend to limit themselves to specific areas of study that are labeled as appropriate for their discourse—"women's issues" or aggadic, rather than halakhic, matters. These self-imposed limitations may reflect either a lack of confidence on the part of these women as to their Torah-knowledge status or an internalization of societal messages and those conveyed by some rabbis in *midrashot,* even in some of those with serious and demanding learning.

The familiar explanation for the reality described here is that a much longer time is needed to create a real change on a deep level. Still, the absence of a professional roadmap for the graduates of the many *midrashot* results in their scattering in different directions and deepening the gap between their Torah world and that of men. A very learned and serious graduate of a leading *midrashah* expressed her thoughts on this situation as follows (my translation):

> I don't want to base my religiosity on cracks in the wall and peanuts thrown at me by rabbis. I want to be fully religious and want my *talmud Torah* not to be based on clever interpretations of a *sugya* in order to allow me to study Torah. The more I have learned, the more I know that my major question is not whether my quest to learn Talmud is acceptable. My major quest is to be counted equally. Sometimes I feel that to have peace of mind about issues of lack of gender equality in the religious world, one should not care at all about halakha. Nevertheless, my real desire is to be part of this world, to learn and know that I will be considered equal in the world of Torah, just as I feel equal in the academic world, where I now belong.

The desire to belong to the society of Torah learners falls on deaf ears, and the lack of consideration for this need leads many former *midrashah* students to go into other fields, where they will be accepted and appreciated. These learned women grapple with the gap between their deep knowledge and connection to the world of Torah and their lack of recognition and respect as *talmidot hakhamim*. Furthermore, they know from their own learning that this marginalization is not the way of Torah, but rather, it is the way of most of religious society. Women's Torah learning is not a guaranteed vehicle to bring about a major change in the position of women, but must it be a dead end?

### Some Recent Developments

Three major recent developments are examples of the dilemma:

- At Matan, the Women's Institute for Torah Studies founded by Malke Bina, women are studying Talmud in a unique, high-level program. However, as announced recently, this program is under threat of closure because of lack of support from the community at large.
- The *to'anot rabbaniot*—halakhic advocates in rabbinical courts—have led to a major change in the attitudes of *dayanim* toward women. Still, it has become more and more difficult to attract women to these demanding study programs, and many of the trained *to'anot* do not practice in their field anymore.
- The *yo'atzot halakha,* educated by Nishmat to answer *niddah* issues, speak to both sides of the dilemma. They have acquired the same knowledge of the laws of *niddah* as do rabbis who are examined in this area for *semihah,* in addition to acquiring wide and relevant knowledge of biology and medicine. The numbers of women seeking their halakhic advice is impressive. Note, however, that these women present themselves as *yo'atzot,* advisers. They don't challenge the sole role of men as halakhic *poskim* (arbiters), although, in my opinion, they are *poskot*. What does it mean to be acting as a *poseket* but to deny it?

Despite the deep-seated concerns identified in this article, there are clearly positive developments. The number of learned women has increased tremendously. Some will argue that it represents the failure of the process, because the gap between the numbers and the lack of roles for women shows that there has been no real breakthrough for learned women. However, these very facts demonstrate results in other ways. Most of the Talmudic *midrashot* graduates acquire high levels of academic achievement as well. One of the major changes that should be emphasized is the growing number of educators with rich Torah learning backgrounds as well as academic credentials who now lead many of the best girls' high schools in Israel. As a result, in those schools and for the many pupils there, *talmud Torah* in depth for women is not a question anymore. Furthermore, these educational leaders have created a meaningful and important change in the level of Jewish studies in these schools, where Torah and academic learning go hand in hand, and they have created a change in the atmosphere in these schools regarding aspirations of women for different roles within Jewish life. Will these innovating

# *Tefillin* in the Tank: American and Israeli Cultures of Religious Identity

*By Elana Maryles Sztokman*

Netanel, a forty-year-old father of four living in Jerusalem, told me that he had never skipped a day wearing *tefillin*. "Even when I was fighting in my tank on the Lebanese border, my *tefillin* was always there in the tank with me," he said. I thought to myself, there is something you won't likely hear an American Jewish man say to describe his religiosity: wearing *tefillin* in a tank.

The "*tefillin* in a tank" story is one of many poignant images that emerged from my research on Orthodox men that went into my book, *The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World* (UPNE, Hadassah Brandeis Institute, 2011). From my interviews with 54 men from Israel, North America, and Australia who belong to partnership synagogues, I found that despite contextual, linguistic, and historical differences among the communities, there are also common dynamics and tensions within Orthodox communities around the world. Indeed, although cultural differences—particularly between Israel and North America—find expression in sometimes surprising ways, I think that, when we dig beneath the surface of these differences, we may find more commonalities than we would expect.

## The Centrality of Army Service in Religious Zionist Identity

The "*tefillin* in the tank" narrative, for example, on the surface illustrates the unique centrality of army service within Israeli religious identity. Army service has always been a significant component of religious Zionist identity and a major motif in the Israeli life narrative, filled with emotional, spiritual, and nationalistic associations. It also injects a culture of obedience, hierarchy, and power, which is deeply enmeshed with beliefs about national loyalty and religious Zionism. Religious identity and masculinity become interwoven with a profound sense of personal sacrifice, obedience, and responsibility to the national collective.

At the same time, a three- or five-year army stint for men also represents a potential challenge for religious cultures that increasingly pressure youth to marry young and build a large family fast. This can put army service in conflict with other religious-nationalistic goals. There is a growing trend of young couples starting out their marital life while the man is still in uniform, and often away from home for long periods of time—which, in turn, puts pressure on young religious women to go to work as soon as possible (hence the advent of new programs in Ulpana, enabling girls to take a fast track for college degrees or teaching certificates, and to work full-time before they turn twenty). This pattern was the subject of a troubling and impassioned lecture by Torah scholar Malka Petrekovsky at the 2011 Kolech conference. She implored the community to rethink the pressure-filled life trajectory being promoted by the religious world, and to enable young people to study, build their own careers, and engage in active family planning.

Certainly, the army experience has no real equivalent in the typical American Orthodox life. However, the issues raised by an examination of the role of army service find expression in Orthodox communities around the world. The pressure on young people—women as well as men—to marry early and to start large families quickly,

*continued on page 18*

schools point the way to change for their students' generation?

In my view, the result of these developments is that an entire regiment of women scholars no longer will be content with predefined roles. Consequently, religious society and the "Establishment" will no longer be able to ignore their demands. The first signs of this evolution are already evident, in the genesis of an upper echelon of learned women who take part in some halakhic discussions. (See the article on Beit Hillel, on page 10.)

To face the challenges described here, a major step must be taken. Its basis would be the recognition that excellence in *talmud Torah* is deserving of respect, regardless of the gender of the learner. The *midrashah* I head, in co-leadership with rabbis—as well as some other *midrashot*—are heading in that direction, the goal being the creation of a real dialogue between the Torah worlds of both genders. The voice of women scholars should be heard not only in their separate *batei midrash,* but also in learning environments that include both men and women. Both must strive to develop an ongoing, open dialogue among men and women scholars, according due validity to the female voice in the Torah world. Women's *talmud Torah* can gain significance only if this dialogue takes place, and it won't happen if women remain in their own corner. This dialogue will strengthen not only the inner world of those involved, but also the Torah world at large.

Women scholars challenge society and demand change. However, I believe that the biggest change is still to come. The many dilemmas and difficulties mentioned in this article are the triggers to create more Torah study institutions for women and to develop advanced programs for women that will lead to the appropriate and deserved recognition of women scholars.

***Rachel Keren** is the head of the beit midrash in Midreshet Ein Hanatziv. She is a doctoral student in gender studies at Bar-Ilan University.*

## *Tefillin* in the Tank, *continued from page 17*

combined with an education that promotes personal sacrifice and decision making based on what is best for the collective rather than one's own emotional, physical, and spiritual health, arguably reflects worldwide trends. I believe that the "*tefillin* in the tank" story is about a religious person saying, "My religious observance is immutable." Understood thus, the story crosses cultures. It is about encouraging people to carry out the religious dictates that they have been taught, perhaps without considering the potential consequences.

### The Tension between Religious Commitment and Societal Consequences

This tension between obedience to religious prescriptions and the acknowledgment of their real-life consequences finds expression in a multitude of ways in the religious world. I often think about this dilemma when traveling on airplanes to and from Israel. When I was younger, I remember watching the clusters of men in the back wearing *tallit* and *tefillin* with a certain pride, appreciating the enormous commitment it must take to keep admittedly strange-looking practices in a public space, given considerable physical discomfort. Like the action of wearing *tefillin* in the tank, these actions are, to my mind, demonstrations of an unwavering commitment to religious observance.

Image of Israeli masculinity: an armed soldier davening with his *tefillin*.

However, more recently, the pendulum has shifted, and the most blatant act of religious commitment on airplanes has now become refusal to sit next to a woman. The same uncompromising, absolute determination that once was embodied in prayer has evolved into egregious views of women's presence in the world. If religious people were once undeterred by the idea of appearing strange, today many religious people are undeterred by the idea of hurting others. Thus, the tension between commitment and consequences seems to have taken an unbalanced turn toward absolute commitment—often at the expense of women's feelings and well-being.

Thus the iconography of *tefillin* in the tank—of the man who does what he believes is expected of him regardless of the dangers, real or imagined, that surround him—seems to have spread around Orthodoxy, not only in Israel but around the world.

### Differences in American and Israeli Religious Cultures: Real or Imagined?

In my research on partnership synagogues, I encountered many claims of differences between American and Israeli religious cultures. These included claims of differences around punctuality, conversational style, definitions of community, role of the synagogue, patience, humor, and more. Certainly, the prevalence of such claims demands granting them a certain credence. However, the insistent claims of cultural difference echo Jacques Derrida's theory of difference, whereby he describes the human tendency to ascribe otherness to those only slightly different from ourselves in order to help us form our definitions of ourselves. How much of the difference is real and how much is constructed remains an enduring question.

The blurriness of claimed difference is especially resonant when considering the history of the partnership synagogues in general. Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, established in 2002, was ascribed to be the first such synagogue, although Darkhei Noam in New York began around the same time in a completely separate process. Of the twenty-five or so partnership synagogues that currently exist around the world—at least one-fourth of which are in Israel—Israelis have been active in many of those in North America, and Anglos have been active in many in Israel. According to research by William Kaplowitz,[1] these *minyanim* are a function of the mobility of the culture of these synagogues—each started by someone who had been active in a partnership congregation in another city or community.

Indeed, in my research, I found myself interviewing many people who had been in more than one partnership synagogue: someone in Jerusalem who was a founder of a *minyan* in Chicago; someone in Los Angeles who was active in one in New York; someone in Modi'in who migrated from Jerusalem; and so forth. I also found myself interviewing friends and relatives in various locations: a man in Australia and his cousin in Jerusalem; brothers-in-law, one in Jerusalem and one in Modi'in; childhood friends, one in Boston and one in Zikhron Yaakov. This pattern is also a reflection of globalization and a more mobile, connected world in which people move around and communicate internationally with ease. Many of my informants have lived in different places around the world—including Israelis who have lived in America and Americans who live in Israel. When people move that much, who is to say to which culture they belong?

For these reasons, I find it difficult to distinguish something called "American" and something called "Israeli" in this religious culture. The entire Orthodox world is composed of traveling cultures that blend into one another and continuously influence each other.

Even claims of cultural differences around liberal ideology are difficult to maintain. Israel, for instance, is often said to be a generation or two behind America in terms of developing a civil rights consciousness. (The recent violence in south Tel Aviv over the presence of African migrants is a case in point.) There is certainly evidence that Israeli social policy lacks sensitivity to issues

# The *Agunah* Problem and Its Solutions in Israel: A Descriptive Analysis

*By Rachel Levmore*

In the search for universal solutions to the *agunah* problem, one must keep in mind that although there may be various halakhic solutions, because the problem arises under varying conditions, the approaches and application of solutions differ vastly from locale to locale. Therefore, it is instructive to understand the similarities and differences between the conditions, most importantly, in the United States and in Israel.

## Similarities

The bottom line in Jewish divorce is that the writ of divorce, the *get,* must be given by the husband to the wife by his own free will. That is *d'oraita*—biblical law.[1] On the level of a rabbinical ordinance, the wife must also agree to the divorce.[2] However, it is the *d'oraita* absolute need for agreement by the husband that has given rise to extortion or stubborn *get*-refusal on the part of husbands and has created victims of *get*-refusal, *agunot*. The fear of pressuring a husband to the point that the *get* will be considered forced *(me'useh)*, which may cause it to be invalid, with terrible consequences,[3] has led to rabbinic hesitancy and, at times, even paralysis.

Moreover, even if a rabbinical court (a *beit din*) today—anywhere in the world—were to rule for coercion of a *get* against a recalcitrant husband, it could not use physical coercion for fear of being charged with assault and battery. Although the halakha may allow the rabbis to beat or whip a disobedient person, human rights, societal norms, and, most importantly, civil law do not allow anything of the sort. On this point, civil law ties the hands of rabbinic judges.

For Orthodox Jewry the world over, it is crucial that any divorce that takes place includes the arrangement of a *get* under the auspices of a recognized Orthodox rabbinical court. To maintain the minimal unity between communities around the world so that members may unhesitatingly marry one another, these courts *(batei din)*

*continued on page 23*

of equality and civil rights, as evidenced by some overtly racist statements made by Israeli government ministers over the years. In fact, Israel Prize laureate Professor Alice Shalvi said in an interview that there was no real civil rights movement to speak of in Israel during the 1970s, and that feminism did not really arrive in Israel until the 1990s. Orthodox feminism, in particular, started in Israel some twenty-five years after it was born in America.

## Are Israelis Less Feminist-Conscious?

For this reason, it may be reasonable to assume that Israeli interviewees would be less equality-conscious or feminist-conscious than American interviewees. But that assumption was not confirmed in the interviews. Some of the most liberal, open-minded men, the ones most committed to feminism and equality, were Israeli. Even without the civil rights upbringing, even if they were "late" in discovering Orthodox feminism, some of the men most unwavering in their commitment to equal rights were Israeli. In fact, Netanel, the man who donned *tefillin* in his tank, arrived at his feminism while in the army. "I don't want to be the one with all the power," he said. "I've been that man, the domineering man who is in charge over other people's lives. I don't want that."

The religious feminist movement probably had a lot to do with this blurring of differences. In an interview earlier this year, Dr. Hannah Kehat, founder of Kolech, stated that when she attended the first JOFA conference in 1997, Orthodox feminism did not exist at all in Israel. Her experience with JOFA was a major impetus for starting Kolech (see article, page 1), and she has since been a tireless advocate for changing consciousness on women's issues in Israel. Perhaps, then, Professor Shalvi's observations about a time lag may be in need of revision, as Israeli and American religious communities evolve on parallel tracks toward a greater appreciation of equality, feminism, and human rights.

Trying to make some sense out of all this, I have concluded that cultural differences between Israelis and Americans are not as clear-cut as one might have originally thought. Perhaps the perception of difference is a psychological tactic: it is easier for us to dismiss challenging ideas by citing cultural differences. We say to ourselves, "That's not *me;* that's *them.*"

Discussions of cultural differences are useful in helping us contextualize our own behaviors and beliefs, to locate ourselves within the broader framework of humanity. Ultimately, however, when we look closely at what we believe to be cultural differences, we are likely to find that human beings are more alike than we are different. We are all walking the same journey, trying to make meaning out of the life we are given. Jewish men in Israel and America are doing that, too, building meaningful religious practices as they develop their own identities as men. Whether they speak Hebrew or English, serve in the army or don't, finish Shabbat davening at 10 AM or at 1 PM is less significant. What is most powerful is the common language of humanity and life.

***Dr. Elana Maryles Sztokman** is the author of* The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World *(UPNE, Hadassah Brandeis Institute, 2011), and currently serves as the interim executive director of JOFA.*

[1] Kaplowitz, William, "Partnership *Minyanim* in the United States: Planning Theory in Action," MA Thesis, University of Michigan, 2008.

# Women Complete the Talmud, Teach at *Siyum*

If anyone is looking for proof that women's advanced Talmud learning has come of age, the August 6 Modern Orthodox *Siyum HaShas* was it. The packed crowd at Congregation Shearith Israel (the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue) in New York was full of women and men from different backgrounds learning together in a colorful array of classes and sessions taught by both women and men. The celebration, which was coordinated by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, and proudly co-sponsored by JOFA along with many Modern Orthodox institutions, marked the completion of the twelfth cycle of *daf yomi*—the practice of learning a folio of Talmud each day so as to complete the entire Talmud in 7.5 years—and, arguably, the first time that women were included as full and equal partners in the process.

The event, which began with parallel classes including four or five options, had female teachers in every time slot, something that entailed thoughtful planning and a sincere commitment to gender equity and women's learning. Classes were on a range of topics, such as *Berakhot,* approaches to learning Gemara, authority of the Babylonian Talmud, Talmudic methodology, and Talmud in a contemporary idiom.


"I was very moved by the inclusion of women as participants in the evening," commented JOFA board member Belda Lindenbaum, "and by their role as a significant group of those who presented *shiurim* [classes]." Indeed, when the facilitators asked those who had learned the whole Talmud to stand, there was an inspiring mix of men and women, young and old.

"The crowded classrooms and corridors, the superb teachers, the outstanding interchange and exchanges between student and teacher—all of this made for a thrilling evening," added JOFA board member Zelda Stern, who attended several classes with her husband, Stanley Rosenzweig. "Perhaps, for me, the most astonishing aspect of the evening was that the prominence of women in all aspects of the programming seemed totally natural. Learning from women and among women, women as teachers of Talmud—has this really been such a recent phenomenon? Yes! But it felt to me as if women had been *misaymot* [completing the Talmud] and *magidei shiurim* [Talmud teachers] for centuries."

Rabbi Hayyim Angel, the rabbi of the synagogue, called this a "historic event" for the community. Rabbi Linzer said that a commitment to *daf yomi* is about making

Robert Kalfus

**Wendy Amsellem addresses a session at the *Siyum HaShas.***

Jewish learning the foundation of one's life, and spoke of the importance of allowing both Torah and the wider world to engage each other in conversation rather than compartmentalizing them. Yedidah Koren, a Torah scholar and student of Talmud at Matan, spoke about the powerful experience of *daf yomi.* "The Talmud is always there for you and there's always another *daf,*" she said. She added that learning *daf yomi* forces a person to combat the ego's desire for perfectionism, as one needs to keep learning and keep going, even when possibly falling behind.

Other women scholars who spoke included Wendy Amsellem (Drisha faculty and JOFA Advisory Council member), Elana Stein Hain (Community Scholar at Lincoln Square Synagogue), Yardena Cope-Yossef (*yo'etzet halakha* and director of the Advanced Talmudic Institute at Matan), and Pnina Neuwirth (former Judaic Studies professor at Stern College and founding member of Beit Hillel).

"The event was really great," said JOFA President Judy Heicklen. "I loved the diversity of the learning, the exploration of style differences, and the meta-analysis of the texts. Elana Stein Hain's discussion of differences between the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds was brilliant. It was just great to be with so many like-minded people."

"It was really nice to see how many people there are who are so deeply committed both to serious Torah learning and progressive thinking," said JOFA board member Allie Alperovich. "It was a good moment."

The event left many feeling a strong and renewed commitment to Jewish learning. There was a buzz of excitement that women teachers, learners, and facilitators were standing equally alongside men.

"The best moment for me was the realization that women are really sharing the space as equals—not as tokens or afterthoughts, but as equal participants in a community celebrating people's accomplishments," reflected Rachel Lieberman, JOFA's program manager.

"I am very pleased that JOFA was one of the sponsors," Belda Lindenbaum concluded.

To learn more about advanced Talmud study for women, visit the Education section of JOFA's online library, www.jofa.org/Library/Page.aspx?tid=103079215922.

# New JOFA Initiative: Project Esther

*Megillat Esther* can be an important entry point for women's involvement in Jewish ritual. Sometimes, before embarking on regular monthly or weekly *tefillah* groups, or before taking on a skill as potentially daunting as learning to *leyn* from the Torah, women take the first step of joining a women's *megillah* reading group. The women's *megillah* readings are in many ways easier than other prayer and ritual groups because there are fewer logistics involved: no *sefer Torah*, no entire *tefillah* to master and organize, and it is only once a year as opposed to weekly or monthly. Furthermore, the *halakhot* around women's *megillah* reading are fairly permissive, even according to the most traditional adjudicators, making it potentially easier to recruit participants. As such, *megillah* readings have become a vital gateway to empowering women's ritual inclusion in accordance with halakha.

JOFA takes very seriously the mission of encouraging women's participation in *megillah* readings as part of the overall goal of promoting women's ritual inclusion. This year, JOFA is launching Project Esther, which aims to provide all the tools, information, guidance, and support that women need to successfully build women's *megillah* reading communities. JOFA is creating resources for individuals to learn to *leyn*, such as a brand-new custom-made *Megillat Esther* downloadable app and halakhic resources about *megillah* reading. JOFA is also starting a database of locations of women's *megillah* readings. In addition, JOFA will be supporting the organizers, the women who are dedicating their energies to encouraging women's ritual inclusion via women's *megillah*-reading groups, by offering a basket of services to help facilitate the process of building these groups. In addition to all of the preceding items, this basket of services includes a guide for *gabbaiyot*, helpful tips for community organizing, and the option of providing mentors.

In addition, JOFA will use this as an opportunity to build networks among the organizers—that is, the change-agents—to build a Community of Practice for women's ritual inclusion, and thus support one another in our efforts to bring change to our communities. Project Esther is thus not only about women's ritual inclusion, but also about empowering religious Jewish women as leaders.

To become part of the Women's Megillah Reading Database, to receive a basket of services, to download the *Megillat Esther* app, to sign up for the Community of Practice, or to learn more about Project Esther, contact Rachel Lieberman, JOFA program manager, at rachel.lieberman@jofa.org.

**Rena Bannett, *Jerusalem, surrounded by the mountains* (Psalm 125), 2011, 2"x2", ceramic tile, high-fire clay.**

## JOFA Campus Fellows Join the Team

*Mazal tov* to our incoming cohort of JOFA Campus Fellows. These bright and talented young women will be joining the JOFA family in the upcoming academic year. We expect great things from them.


1. **Jackie Cohen**, Barnard College
   (Mentor: Lisa Schlaff)
2. **Serena Covkin**, University of Pennsylvania
   (Mentor: Yoella Epstein)
3. **Yehudit Goldberg**, Stern College for Women
   (Mentor: Robin Bodner)
4. **Dina Kritz**, Brandeis University
   (Mentor: Sylvia Barack Fishman)
5. **Esther Nehrer**, University of Maryland
   (Mentor: Chava Evans)
6. **Karen Layani**, University of Michigan
   (Mentor: Shoshanna Lockshin)
7. **Sarah Orenshein**, NYU
   (Mentor: Michelle Sarna)
8. **Rebecca Schlussel**, Yale University
   (Mentor: Sydney Perry)
9. **Chana Tolchin**, Barnard College
   (Mentor: Wendy Amsellem)

JOFA wishes to thank all the JOFA Fellows' mentors for generously giving of their time and wisdom in order to advance young Jewish women's leadership.

For further information about the JOFA Campus Fellows program, contact Rachel Lieberman, JOFA program manager, at rachel.lieberman@jofa.org.

# Meet the JOFA Staff

*We are pleased to welcome a number of new staff members and to introduce our readers to the JOFA team.*

**Elana Maryles Sztokman, *Interim Executive Director***

Elana is a writer, researcher, educator, and organizational consultant who has been active in Orthodox feminism for the past seventeen years. She holds a doctorate in gender and education from Hebrew University, and is the author of *The Men's Section: Orthodox Jewish Men in an Egalitarian World*. Elana lives in Israel and commutes regularly to New York. Elana can be reached at elana.sztokman@jofa.org.

**Ali Kaufman Yares, *Associate Director***

Ali is a professional information manager specializing in education institutions and nonprofit organizations. She holds a doctorate in communication design and has experience in design, social networking, web development, database administration, and project development and management. Ali can be reached at ali.yares@jofa.org.

**Rachel Lieberman, *Program Manager***

Rachel graduated from Princeton University with an AB in Religion and a certificate in Judaic Studies. Her senior thesis, "Reaching Across the Mechitzah: Feminism's Impact on Orthodox Judaism," was awarded the Isidore and Helen Sacks Memorial Prize in Religion for outstanding work in Judaic Studies. She has studied at Yeshivat Hadar, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, and the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies. Rachel can be reached at rachel.lieberman@jofa.org.

**Heather G. Stoltz, *Office Manager***

Heather is a talented fiber artist and Jewish professional who was named as one of the *Jewish Week's* "36 Under 36" for 2012. Heather was an Arts Fellow at Drisha, and holds a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and Jewish studies. Her work is inspired by social justice issues and Jewish texts. Heather can be reached at heather.stoltz@jofa.org.

**Deborah Wenger, *Publications Manager***

Deborah is a freelance editor and JOFA member living in Teaneck, NJ. She is an officer of the Teaneck Jewish Center, where she coordinates the women's Simhat Torah and Purim programs. Deborah can be reached at deborah.wenger@jofa.org.

**Miriam A. Cope, *Online Library Consultant***

Miriam is a feminist scholar who recently completed her PhD in geography at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She studied at the Anne M. Blitstein Institute and at the Claremont School of Theology, and also initiated the first women's reading of *Megillat Esther* in the Denver community in 1998. Miriam can be reached at miriam.cope@jofa.org.

***We would also like to welcome to the Board of Directors:***

**Rena Donin Schlussel**

Rena is an attorney and trained mediator who has worked as an instructor of Bioethics at Einstein Medical School. She is a member of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Teaneck, NJ. Rena is a graduate of the Berrie Fellows Leadership Program through the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey, and has served on the Berrie Innovation Grant Committee. She is also a Board member of the Frisch Parents Association, a former board member and chair of the Israel committee at Congregation Netivot Shalom, and is a member of the JOFA Engaging Families committee. Rena lives in Teaneck with her husband, David, and their three children.

***We also wish to thank our two dedicated summer interns for their hard work and commitment to JOFA over the summer months:***

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**Dahlia Herzog** is a rising junior at Brandeis University majoring in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies. She is excited to be involved with JOFA and our initiatives to expand the role of women in Orthodox Judaism.

***Thanks to all our dedicated professional and lay leaders. Together we are strengthening the vital JOFA mission for the benefit of the entire Jewish community.***

## The *Agunah* Problem, *continued from page 19*

must be able to rely on one another, whether they are located in Israel or the Diaspora.

### Differences

In Israel there is no separation of religion and state. In fact, by law, it is the State of Israel that pays most rabbis' salaries and appoints them to their positions, including both community rabbis and the *dayanim* (judges) in the official *batei din*. Whereas rabbis in the United States are private employees of their communities, and thus must be sensitive to the needs of the people who pay their salaries, in Israel the rabbis are public employees, part of the establishment, while not serving as community rabbis.[4]

There are advantages and disadvantages to the rabbinical courts being part of the Israeli legal establishment. By law, the *beit din* has sole jurisdiction over divorce. Thus, any Jewish person must arrange for a *get* if he wants to be recognized as divorced by the state. Under civil law, the *beit din* has the power to haul a litigant into court or to levy sanctions against a husband who does not obey its order to divorce his wife. These powers include, among others, invalidating the man's driver's license or professional permit and closing bank accounts. The rabbis of the *beit din* may even incarcerate a man for refusing to give his wife a *get*.

However, these rulings are not as common as one would think. In fact, when comparing the rabbinical courts in North America to those in Israel, it can be observed that the severity of the rulings of the Israeli *batei din* is inversely proportional to their actual power. Even though a rabbinical court in the Diaspora has no legal power over a given individual,[5] rabbinical courts do regularly obligate husbands to divorce their wives. Not so in Israel, where the *beit din* can actually summon a litigant with a police escort. In Israel it can take years, if at all, to reach a ruling of "obligation" to give a *get*.

Furthermore, in Israel, not only Orthodox women can become *agunot*. Because the state-administered marriages and divorces are conducted in accordance with halakha, every Jewish citizen—whether religious, traditional, secular or atheist—who divorces under the auspices of the State of Israel must arrange a kosher *get*. Thus, secular women are in need of protection from *iggun* as well.

The absence of civil divorce in Israel necessitates a different approach to divorce and to the *agunah* problem. While in the United States a divorcing woman must contend with both the state court and the rabbinic court when it comes to the actual dissolution of her marriage, in Israel they are one and the same.[6] Moreover, when comparing divorce proceedings in the U.S. family courts to the *beit din* in Israel, there are two major inherent differences between civil law and halakha.

The first difference is the option in the United States of a no-fault divorce.[7] In no-fault divorce proceedings, the spouse who has initiated the divorce proceedings is not required to prove fault or blame or mention the other's negative traits or acts. However, when suing unilaterally for a divorce in the Israeli *beit din*, the suing party *must* convince the *dayanim* that a divorce is necessary by proving fault on the part of the spouse. Fault must be proven to the degree that will cause the rabbinical judges to issue a ruling that the spouse must give or receive a *get*.

The second inherent difference between the two systems lies in the power, or lack thereof, of the judge in his respective legal system to change the individual's personal status. Whereas a U.S. family court judge has the authority to rule that the parties in question must divorce, he or she also has the power to issue a decree that transforms both individuals' personal status from married to divorced (or "remarriageable"). The judge may do so even against one of the spouses' wishes. However, although a *dayan* has the authority to rule that the parties in question must divorce, he does not have the power to change the individual's personal status through the vehicle of divorce. That power lies solely in the hands of the two parties themselves. A rabbinic judge cannot rule that a wife is divorced in the absence of action by the husband.

The combination of these two circumstances in the Israeli *beit din*—the necessity to prove fault before the court and the inherent inability of the *beit din* to effectuate a ruling of divorce—gives rise to a Catch-22 situation for women suing for divorce. Providing evidence of fault leads to angering the husband, whereas lack of evidence leads to the refusal of the rabbinical court to arrange the divorce. The plaintiff is forced to act against her own interests. The husband against whom negative claims have been made feels either that lies about him were told to the rabbis or his secrets were exposed. As an angry husband, he may be more likely retaliate with the ultimate tool he holds—a tool more powerful than the rabbinical court itself—refusal to grant the *get* to the wife who has dared to mention his faults before the court.

### Solutions

Attempts to deal with the *agunah* problem in Israel take place on various levels, including counseling of individuals, education, dialogue with various sectors of society, representation in court, trying to persuade government ministries and functionaries, lobbying in the Knesset, proposing bills, and influencing rabbis and rabbinic establishments. As described, the Israeli rabbinical establishment is less diffuse than in the United States. On the one hand, there are clear addresses to engage. On the other, a negative reaction on the part of the rabbinate can be all-pervasive and very difficult to overcome. Similarly, actions can and must be taken on a governmental level, but political dealings are extremely difficult. As compared with community members generally in the United States, certain sectors of the Israeli public are more educated in Jewish law, which may make change easier or prove to be a stumbling block.

A wide variety of Israeli organizations—social-change groups, academic, rabbinic and women's organizations—have been active for more than a decade. Among these, the

*continued on page 24*

## The *Agunah* Problem, *continued from page 23*

International Coalition for Agunah Rights (ICAR) has seen success in influencing the selection of *dayanim* (until recently),[8] passing a property-relations law, and other campaigns; the Agunah Prevention Project of the Council of Young Israel Rabbis (CYIR) is active in the dissemination of the prenuptial Agreement for Mutual Respect, which has reached hundreds, perhaps thousands, of marrying couples, and the CYIR has influenced rabbinic leaders and academics through scholarly discourse and writings; Yad La-Isha's representation of *agunot* in the *batei din* has freed hundreds of women; and Bar-Ilan University's Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women has produced innovative academic conferences, reports, and watchdog publications on Israeli family law and rabbinic court rulings. All these organizations and others combine forces within ICAR, influencing political movers and shakers while also promoting preventive solutions to the *agunah* problem for individuals.

### Educating about the Use of Prenuptial Agreements

One major push has been toward educating the Israeli public about the use of prenuptial agreements for the prevention of *get*-refusal. It is recognized that the prenuptial agreement is a first necessity, after which it is possible to proceed further. Among the Israeli public in general, and within the rabbinic community specifically, the attitude toward prenuptial agreements is one of naiveté. Even the concept of a purely financial prenuptial agreement was virtually unknown only a decade ago. Add to that the reactionary instinct of Israeli rabbis, and the ongoing educational challenge becomes clearer.

Innovative halakhic solutions have originated in the United States, from within the rabbinic establishment itself. In the United States the development of prenuptial agreements began in the 1950s, and Rabbi Michael Broyde recently proposed the Tripartite Agreement.[9] Meanwhile, Israeli scholars and activists follow these trends from outside the official rabbinic establishment.

Over a decade ago, a prenuptial agreement was developed in Israel by individuals well-versed in halakha. "The Agreement for Mutual Respect"[10] is in widespread use in Israel and proving to be successful in preventing *get*-refusal.[11] As one young woman said, "The Agreement for Mutual Respect saved me." In her case, as in others, the signed agreement was enough to propel the initially stubborn husband to enter into divorce negotiations that brought him to the *beit din* to give the *get* in a cooperative manner within a few months, avoiding long litigation and the Catch-22 situation described earlier. A variety of Israeli religious organizations and many individual rabbis[12] recommend the agreement for use by marrying couples, although, to date, no establishment rabbinical organization has made a policy statement recommending the use of prenuptial agreements for the prevention of *get*-refusal.

Ongoing efforts are being made to educate not only the public in *get*-refusal prevention, but also rabbis, the government, rabbinical courts, and civil family courts. Indeed, initial inroads have been made in preventing the *agunah* situation from arising, while actual cases get resolved piecemeal through the court system. Undeniably, the *agunah* problem in Israel is multifaceted, as is the campaign for its solutions.

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1 TB *Yevamot* 112b; Rambam, *Hilkhot Gerushin* 1:1.

2 *Herem d'Rabbeinu Gershom,* circa 1040, Ashkenaz. See *Shulhan Arukh, Even ha-Ezer* 119:6. However, the results of the transgression of the two laws are not parallel.

3 A coerced divorce or *get me'useh* may lead to adultery and *mamzerim* born to the still-married woman, but these consequences do not occur in the case of a male victim of *get*-refusal.

4 This fact, among others, gives rise to many differences in approach to solutions to the *agunah* problem in the United States and Israel. Due to space constraints, this matter lies beyond the scope of this article.

5 Other than the power of persuasion or community pressure, unless a binding arbitration agreement was signed.

6 Although there can be a power struggle between the rabbinical court and the family court, where both can have jurisdiction over the matters to be settled in any divorce. Thus the battle between two types of court cases can be similar to that in the United States.

7 Although waiting periods and other requirements may vary from state to state in the United States, no state still requires ascription of fault beyond irreconcilable differences.

8 Because of politics, the State Committee for the Appointment of Dayanim no longer includes any female members. As a result, there is no member of the committee who is in complete sympathy with ICAR's policies.

9 The Tripartite Agreement differs from the Prenuptial Agreement of the Beth Din of America in that it is not a monetary agreement. Rather it makes use of a series of halakhic constructs to solve a situation of *iggun* through a *get* and annulment. See Broyde, Michael J., "A Proposed Tripartite Agreement to Solve Some of the Agunah Problems: A Solution without any Innovation," *Jewish Law Association Studies XX,* 2010, pp. 1–15.

10 *The Heskem L'Kavod Hadadi*—Agreement for Mutual Respect—was developed in Hebrew by a team of three: Rabbi Elyashiv Knohl, Rabbi Dr. David Ben-Zazzon, and this writer, Rabbinical Court Advocate Dr. Rachel Levmore, in consultation with experts, ranging from High Rabbinical Court judges to jurists, academics, feminists, and psychologists.

11 An international clause, developed by the Council of Young Israel Rabbis in Israel together with the Beth Din of America, was added, in essence giving international jurisdiction to the Beth Din of America for couples who may live in Israel and in the Diaspora. The agreement can be found in English, Hebrew, Russian, French, and Spanish at http://www.youngisraelrabbis.org.il/prenup.htm.

12 Some "establishment" rabbis have voiced their opposition to prenuptial agreements in general.

# A Soldier's Story

*By Rina Schiffmiller*

On the eighth of Adar, the day before my birthday, I celebrated in a café in a suddenly snowy Jerusalem with friends from Midreshet Lindenbaum and my army group. Even though religious talk is taboo among the latter, I gave myself a "birthday girl license" and shared a *d'var Torah*. As I spoke, some eyes met mine with fascination, as I shared an approach to the world that they had never known. Others expressed a silent but aching discomfort, because I had violated what they saw as a pact to avoid religious topics.

Moments after I finished, we returned to our festive munching and gabbing. As we eased back into conversation, a close friend from my base turned to me and said, "There's something I don't understand about what you said. Who is Yehoshua bin Nun?" I was shocked. How on earth could a soldier in the Israeli military ask such a question? If he doesn't know who Yehoshua bin Nun is, then how can we be fighting for the same cause?

So what am I fighting for? To explain, I'll give a little history. I made *aliyah* from Brooklyn eight years ago with my family. Having spent my elementary school years at the Yeshivah of Flatbush, I had been indoctrinated with religious Zionist values. I later studied in the Israeli program at Midreshet Lindenbaum and subsequently joined the military as part of the seminary's *garin* (unit).

***Hayelet*** **Rina Schiffmiller has found the army to be an eye-opening experience.**

Joining the army as part of this *garin* meant that I had at least one other seminary girl with me on base, and teachers from the seminary came to visit my base and give a *shiur* (lecture) once every two weeks. In addition, *garin* girls are always released for special Lindenbaum *shabbatot* and *hagim*. One would assume that serving in the IDF as part of the Lindenbaum *garin* would create a picture-perfect framework for expressing my religious Zionism. However, in my case, "harmony" is the last word I would use to describe my time in green.

When I began serving on my current base, in January 2011, I was introduced to a great group of religious soldiers. I was sure that I had found my close friends for the upcoming two years; however, I was quite mistaken. They were all great people—but we just didn't "click." Instead, I found my social group elsewhere.

We met on Lag Ba'Omer, when I was invited to a beachside bonfire. There, on the sand, I discovered a vibrant collage of oddballs. There is Hen, who lives in a dingy artists' colony in Haifa. He plays piano and about five or six funky instruments. Ben is from a very upscale neighborhood in Jerusalem. His parents are strictly European, and he lived in Switzerland for a few years. A more mischievous troublemaker I have never met! The list goes on and on.

Together, we represented a treasure trove of cultural backgrounds. We really had little in common, except a raging curiosity that kept us from ever blinking. Needless to say, these people really got my motor running. Before I knew it, they were my whole world. We hiked together, danced together, and made countless bonfires. Hen helped me compose and perform my first song. What a joyous time I had making personal discoveries with them!

The only problem was that I didn't always want to explore the exciting and the unknown with my friends. Sometimes I wanted to share what was already part of my identity. Sometimes (dare I say), I wanted to share my religious experiences with my friends. I didn't want to run out for a *shiur* and then come back for a good time. *These* were my friends, and I wanted them to be part of my religious life.

Except, they weren't really. On my birthday I didn't want to be asked, "Who's Yehoshua bin Nun?" I don't want to hear that making a salad on Shabbat would violate the *issur* (prohibition) of *boneh* (building) more than opening an umbrella does. Because my friends have meager religious backgrounds and zero religious commitment, I find it difficult to give their Jewish opinions credence. When it comes to Judaism, I can't truly relate to these friends.

This conclusion shocks me. I now understand that my close friends reject my core values—and I am not any more accepting of their core values. The culture that defines *their* identities is only an adolescent experiment for me, something I am dabbling in now. I don't share a worldview or values with my closest friends in the army. How then can we stand side by side to defend the State of Israel?

I have come to believe, though, that there is really no huge dissonance here. If I claim to be fighting for *Am Yisrael* (the people of Israel), then I need to connect to all of *Am Yisrael,* not just to those who identify with Modern Orthodoxy. I would be arrogant to assume to protect Tel Aviv's safety without having ever been in a nightclub. I would be remiss to guard Haifa without having been at a multicultural jam session. This is *Am Yisrael* today. This is whom I'm protecting.

Look around in *shul* Shabbat morning. Not all of *Am Yisrael* is there. Some of us are doodling in a sketchbook on the way to the Golan. Some of us are taking a morning run. Some of us are just watching TV. It has been a privilege to have connected with these people for a time. When I go back to my desk tomorrow, I go back knowing *Am Yisrael* a little better. I go back knowing a bit more about what I'm fighting for.

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*A native of Brooklyn, NY,* ***Rina Schiffmiller*** *has lived in Ra'anana, Israel, for eight years and serves as a soldier in the IDF's 8200 intelligence unit.*

# My Daughter the *Hayelet*

*By Abigail Klein Leichman*

We made *aliyah* in 2007, when our youngest child and only daughter had just graduated from the Frisch School in Paramus, New Jersey. Elana was eager to move to Israel and felt strongly that the army would be the best place to absorb Israeli culture and language.

For girls who have grown up in *dati leumi* (national religious) neighborhoods, the decision to serve in the military rather than in *Sherut Leumi* (National Service) is neither simple nor common.

There is growing acceptance of religious girls in uniform—with a skirt, if they so choose—and a voluntary organization available for moral support. Female *hesder* programs are popping up here and there for women who want to combine Torah learning with military service.

Elana Leichman receives the IDF "Outstanding Soldier" award.

However, many rabbinic leaders and educators argue that the army exposes young women to people and situations that could compromise their carefully nurtured values. One rabbinic opinion holds that a woman carrying a rifle violates the Torah prohibition against dressing like the opposite sex.

For Elana, who came from a coed school and a liberal Orthodox viewpoint, such concerns were irrelevant. We fully supported her decision to serve in the army, although we had no idea how it would affect her religiously—especially because rather than receiving an assignment with the canine unit or the IDF spokesman's office, as she had hoped, she was sent to a remote tank base in the Negev, after training as a human resources coordinator.

Because Elana wears pants, she looked no different from the other recruits. However, she was the only *shomeret-Shabbat* and *shomeret-kashrut hayelet* (soldier) on her training base, and the sole English speaker. Unhappy at first, she soon earned the other trainees' respect. This manifested itself when two other *hayalot* walked her to a neighboring base for Friday night services and on Purim to hear *Megillat Esther,* just so she wouldn't be alone. The base's rabbi also lent her Akiva Tatz's excellent book, *The Thinking Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life,* which gave her spiritual strength in a decidedly nonspiritual environment.

Elana Leichman (front row, holding packages) and her IDF friends.

On her work base, where she slept during the week, Elana met one of the only other *dati* soldiers on base at the end of the fast of the seventeenth of Tammuz, because they were among a handful of personnel for whom the dining hall had to be opened at that late hour. (Their friendship, incidentally, provided a fascinating window for her into Moroccan-Jewish customs and culture.)

She also became close with three *hiloni* (secular) comrades, who danced at her wedding last year. I believe that sharing close quarters with someone who kept kosher and Shabbat, but who was otherwise much like them, made these girls feel more comfortable with the notion of religious Jews—which is not to be taken for granted in Israeli society.

My husband and I experienced a tremendous sense of parental pride when our daughter was chosen as an "Outstanding Soldier"—twice. The first time she was chosen by popular vote of her fellow HR-coordinators-in-training. The second time, for which we traveled to a Southern Command ceremony in Beersheva, was a tribute to her job performance. Strangers could not have discerned that Elana was any different religiously from the other awardees, but those from her base certainly did. My husband and I, therefore, felt that the award was both a personal triumph and a *kiddush Hashem*.

In addition to the *Tanakh* each soldier receives when sworn in, Elana received a siddur as one of her parting gifts from the IDF. To me, it was an apt symbol of her two years in the military. I believe that her service offered her a lab in which to test her religious mettle outside the narrow world she had inhabited through high school. She went in holding a Bible and came out holding a prayer book, her commitment to *Yahadut* no worse for the wear.

***Abigail Klein Leichman,*** *a freelance writer living in Ma'ale Adumim, is associate editor of ISRAEL21c.org.*

# Kolech's Campaign against Sexual Abuse by Religious Authority Figures

*By Ayelet Wieder Cohen*

On June 28, 2010, the Knesset passed amendments to the Law for Prevention of Sexual Harassment by Figures of Authority. The amendment, to include spiritual and religious leaders as legally constituted figures of authority, was initiated by Kolech. This legal victory by Kolech had great significance to me personally, as a clinical psychologist and a Kolech activist. The question I grappled with was: Who were the silenced victims on whose behalf we were acting?

## How I Came to the Issue

As a psychologist for Bat Ami (a division of Sherut Leumi, responsible for some 3,000 religious national service female volunteers), I encountered my first client, an Ethiopian girl who had been violently raped. She faced me, unable to speak, tears silently streaking her face. I remember another woman, a pretty, smart, inspiring mother of young girls who had been admitted to the hospital following a suicide attempt. My question as to whether she had been sexually abused in the past unleashed a painful story of rape by her father since she was five years old. When her own daughters neared this age, she broke down. Three times a week I sat with her, listening to her loud sobs and trying to reconstruct the silenced memories. About two years after my leaving the hospital, I found out that she had jumped to her death.

I first encountered sexual abuse perpetrated by a religious leader in the case of Yitzchak Cohen in 2002 (discussed later). I had received accusations against him from two victims, who subsequently refused to say another word about the incidents. Several months later I heard that Cohen was to be appointed head of the board of directors of Bat Ami, where I was working at the time. I was shocked to think that he would be in charge of an organization responsible for 3,000 girls ages 18 to 20, and I understood that I must take action. I approached a member of the board of Bat Ami and told him what I knew, insisting that it was inconceivable that Cohen should get the job. "I will check it out and let you know," he said. When two weeks went by with no news, I asked what he had found. "Our people at Bar-Ilan checked and found that nothing happened," he said. Knowing the inquiry had been swept under the carpet, I replied, "I want you to know that if he is appointed chairman of Bat Ami, I will contact the media." The next day he summoned me and told me that Cohen would not get the job, but not for the reasons I had suggested.

At the same time, the Ze'ev Kopolovich affair was being publicized in the media. Rabbis and educators (Rabbi Mordechai Elon included) hurried to testify as to Kopolovich's good character. Reading about this in the newspaper, I was unable to sleep. I wrote an opinion piece for the now-defunct *Hatzofeh* newspaper expressing the pain I felt: Who was caring for the victims? I asked. My words were published on the inner pages of a weekday paper.

Two weeks later, I gave birth to a son. In the maternity ward I met Hannah Kehat, founder of Kolech, holding her own son. "I read your article," she said. "We have to talk and decide what to do." I demurred: "Hannah, let's give ourselves time to raise the babies; when they're older, we'll talk."

**Kolech has become a trailblazer, bringing the subject to public attention.**

Hannah asked me to speak at the second Kolech Conference about our work at Bat Ami in treating sexually abused girls. I described the processes typical of the abusive relationship: silencing, blaming, aggression, dehumanization of the victim, splitting, and confidence crises. These processes are replicated on a wider societal scale as well, including splitting factions into good and bad, sowing distrust between factions, persecutory delusions, and convergence of the powerful around the abuser.

## Kolech's Actions on Sexual Abuse

Several months later I was dismissed from my job at Bat Ami, which claimed that the termination was due to a reorganization. I approached Kolech with a proposal for a program to provide information and to prevent sexual abuse.

When the Shlomo Aviner affair (which involved emotional abuse and sexual harassment) became public knowledge, Aliza Lavie placed the topic on Kolech's agenda. We met with support organizations and legal specialists. These meetings resulted in a decision to focus on two courses of action: helping victims and engaging in educational and preventive activities. Kolech submitted formal accusations against Cohen to Bar-Ilan University, where a committee was established, headed by Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, and the accusations voiced were substantiated. This became the model for the forum's work. What was remarkable was that this was the first time that accusations of sexual harassment by a rabbi were subject to an organized inquiry, which provided exposure of such incidents.

Since then, Kolech has become a trailblazer, bringing the subject to public attention. We have spoken about it repeatedly at conferences in Israel and the United States, written, lectured, and given interviews on the subject. Following the Cohen and Aviner affairs, the related community realized that it was necessary to continue

*continued on page 28*

## Kolech's Campaign, *continued from page 27*

our exposure of abuse, as there was little likelihood that victims of authority figures would approach the police or seek justice against their abusers.

### The Takana Forum

About eight years ago, Rebbetzins Chana Henkin and Gila Rosen launched a forum on the subject of sexual harassment and abuse, enlisting a number of organizations and rabbis. Emunah was in the initial stages of establishing a forum of its own, and the rebbetzins made an effort to connect Kolech with Emunah. Rebbetzin Yehudit Shilat also enlisted rabbis in the forum, which became known as the Takana Forum.

For two years the forum worked to formulate a code of ethics for dealing with sexual abuse perpetrated by figures of authority. The code was conceived and written by Riki Shapira, the legal adviser of Kolech. The forum's deliberations led to the establishment of procedural methods to ensure proper and efficient treatment of accusations of sexual abuse and harassment, from both a moral and public perspective. After two years, the forum began to take on specific cases of abuse.

Kolech's presence in the Takana Forum was not a given. Throughout its existence, several members have been ambivalent about our participation. For some of the rabbis in the forum, we were outliers in the group. Conversely, we felt that being part of such a broad-based forum required us to accept therapeutic norms incompatible with our own. We tried to be cautious, to voice our opinions and accommodate our views within the forum.

Over the past few months, this ambivalence became even more conspicuous. Wishing to maintain a broad coalition, the forum could not accept us as authentic partners. I first learned of the Elon affair only two hours before it appeared on the news, from reporters who asked for my comments. Eventually the leadership of Kolech decided to withdraw from the Takana Forum and resume independent action on this important issue.

### Why So Many Sexual Abuse Cases?

The public exposure of the Elon affair led to the discovery of several other past scandals. Indeed, so many affairs are now emerging that we must ask ourselves: How is this possible?

Prof. Mary Gail Frawley, in her book *Perversion of Power: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church,* on sexual abuse by religious leaders, distinguishes between two types of rabbis: those who see themselves as messengers of God, entitled to honor and veneration by virtue of their high status, and those who see themselves primarily as community service providers, spiritual leaders who model themselves on the image of Moses, the humblest of men. The former perceive of themselves as an elite and constantly strive for greater adoration. Disciples worship their rabbi, develop idealizing transference, and see the rabbi as a personification of God, flawless and exulted.

This idealization is a ticking bomb; the rabbi must be aware of it and neutralize it.

In the absence of a systematic educational program to develop the rabbi's consciousness of these processes and to facilitate coping with them, this idealization assumes a potentially dangerous form. The rabbi soaks up the adoration transferred to him, responds to it, and begins to feel superior, intoxicated by the power ascribed by his minions. From here, it is a short way to abuse, exploitation, and disregard of all authority and limits.

### The Development of Spiritual Leadership

Notwithstanding the current criticism of the rabbinate, we must exercise caution in our critique. One of the most hurtful and dangerous responses is to say that "all religious people, all rabbis, are hypocrites." It would be wrong to obliterate and crush *all* religious authority. The world of the rabbinate includes the spiritual treasures of the Jewish people, traditions maintained and handed down for thousands of years. We must hesitate to denigrate this tradition, and we must continue looking for ways of making them accessible to all who are interested, including people of all genders, affiliations, and ethnic groups. We are now in the midst of this process, as attested to by the revolutionary emergence of secular *batei midrash*. In the next few years we must further the process: The rabbinate must gradually come to include women as well. This process presents risks and opportunities, concerns and hopes, as does any change, and it would be premature to predict its conclusion.

From a wider perspective, though, the issue is the development of spiritual leadership. To prevent sexual abuse by religious authorities, we must undergo a cultural shift in how religious authority is perceived. We can no longer continue to view religious leaders as semi-gods. Rather we must recognize spiritual leaders as human and vulnerable, aware of their powers and strengths, but also of their weaknesses, and taking responsibility for them. As individuals and as a society, we are charged with directing this transformation, hearing the victims, and acting out of a sense of responsibility toward them—helping the past and current victims and preventing future ones.

***Ayelet Wieder Cohen,*** *a clinical psychologist, is the chairwoman of the Kolech Board of Directors.*

## Kolech—Your Voice, *continued from cover*

### "Let me hear your voice"

Kolech was founded initially around the idea of legitimating religious feminism. As the name suggests, Kolech was committed to serving as a platform for women to express their thoughts and religious beliefs, inspired by the verse in Song of Songs, "Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet." In choosing this name, the founders also expressed their protest against the ever more prevalent silencing of women, often justified by the dictum, *"kol b'isha erva"* ("the voice of a woman is sexually arousing") *(BT Berakhot 24)*.

**Our aim is to be a vehicle for change—within the rabbinical courts, Israeli law, and social conventions among the religious community.**

The organization, which started with thirty founding members, was like a magnet, drawing, in its first months of existence, hundreds of women who "came out of the closet" as religious feminists. Kolech's first conference in the summer of 1999 drew 1,500 attendees who came from all over the country, yearning for a place where they would be heard and understood. The enthusiasm and excitement that filled the air at that first conference was proof of the fervent need for a movement such as Kolech within the religious community.

Much like its American sister JOFA, Kolech focused, in its early years, on issues related to the advancement of the status of women in religious life: in the synagogue, in the observance of *mitzvot,* around lifecycle events, and in Torah study. Activities revolved mostly around educational efforts: publishing monthly newsletters to be distributed in synagogues across the country, holding seminars and teacher training sessions, and writing curricula and other Jewish feminist publications.

### "Hold back your voice from weeping"

Not long after the founding of Kolech, we in the leadership began to hear female voices of a very different kind. We started receiving calls for help from religious woman in various situations of distress: *agunot* and *mesoravot get*, victims of domestic violence who had no one to turn to in their communities, and victims of sexual violence, particularly from figures of religious authority.

These difficult topics, which landed on the doorstep of Kolech, were not part of the organization's original vision. The founding group of women, who largely came from *batei midrash* and academia, were unaware of the extent and intensity of the problems Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox women face, as these issues were often swept under the carpet in a false idealization of religious society. However, once called on for help, Kolech realized that it must expand its mission to include a social action agenda to fight these dark and difficult problems. The words of the Prophet Jeremiah captured this new direction:"Thus said God, hold back **your voice** from weeping and your eyes from tears: for your work will be rewarded" (31:16).

### "Lift up your voice with strength ... Raise it, be not afraid" (Isaiah 40:9)

Kolech has now entered a new stage. Our actions are characterized by thinking within the widest categories of *tikkun olam*, making the world better. We recognize that we cannot be satisfied only with personal support and aid to victims of violence or to women denied a divorce (e.g., Kolech's hotline for women in distress), but we must also strive to make a difference on a larger social scale. Our aim is to be a vehicle for change—within the rabbinical courts, Israeli law, and social conventions among the religious community. We seek change that will ultimately prevent these situations from happening in the first place and will promote a more egalitarian and just society. We pursue this goal fervently through extensive lobbying, promoting legislation, and making efforts to change policies. For example, in an effort to reduce the incidence of *iggun*, Kolech successfully promoted passage of a law for the division of property regardless of the status of the divorce, and of a "sanctions law" that authorizes the courts to impose extensive sanctions on husbands who refuse to grant a divorce. Today we are promoting the *Kiddushin* expropriation law, which requires that eighteen months after a *beit din* has decided that a husband must give a *get,* if he has not done so, the Knesset would retroactively strip him of the property of the marriage, such as the wedding ring.

Along with these legislative endeavors, Kolech engages in educational work on multiple levels to raise public awareness and strives to maintain a constant voice in the Israeli media. For example, most recently we have been engaged in the fight against the attempts by the ultra-Orthodox community to exclude women from the Israeli public arena and to segregate public spaces, such as buses and cemeteries. (See article by Riki Shapira, p. 30.)

### Working to Change the System from Within

The two aspects of Kolech's vision—advancing the status of woman within Orthodoxy and fighting against the oppression of women within the religious community—demonstrate the commitment that Kolech members have to Orthodox society and their religious way of life. Rather than opting out in face of inequality and injustice, Kolech strives to bring about change from within and to create a society that is true to its religious and humane convictions and abides by high ethical and moral standards.

Despite Kolech's dedicated base of avid supporters, its bold actions and statements often bring on waves of criticism and disparagement from the religious community, particularly from those factions uncomfortable with the idea of religious feminism. Ironically, Jeremiah's words, "Hold back your voice from weeping," have been (mis) quoted by this opposition, in its efforts to silence Kolech and what it represents. In face of these challenges, we find ourselves responding on two levels: by building and strengthening relationships within the religious com-

*continued on page 30*

# Giving Voice to Silenced Women: Kolech's Actions on *Mehadrin* Bus Lines

*By Riki Shapira*

In 1997, Israel's public transportation companies (particularly Egged) began running bus lines designated for the Hareidi community. At first, only two such bus lines were operative, in Jerusalem and B'nei Brak. In addition, a public committee was formed to explore possible expansion of this service. On these bus lines, women would board the bus at the back door, while men would board at the front. Likewise, seating on the bus was segregated, with men seated at the front and women at the back.

In 1999, the Israel Women's Network (IWN) appealed to the Supreme Court regarding the discrimination against women practiced on these bus lines. Although these bus lines were in contradiction of Israel's Basic Law of Human Dignity and Liberty, enacted in 1992, the Supreme Court recommended that the IWN withdraw its appeal. The reasoning of the Supreme Court was that the segregated bus lines were a pilot project aimed at exploring the needs of the Hareidi community, and the court's interference should not be sought in this matter. Accordingly, the IWN withdrew its appeal.

By 2007, there were about thirty bus lines with segregated seating for men and women. This situation had evolved without any discussion in the public committee created for this purpose, and without any fundamental decision being reached. Extremist members of the Hareidi community called these bus lines "*Mehadrin* [strict observance] bus lines"; the transportation companies adopted this name, although no observance of religious ritual was involved, nor, of course, any extra-scrupulous conduct, or *hidur* (from the same root as *mehadrin*).

In general, *Mehadrin* bus lines are faster than "regular" bus lines. In addition, the bus fares on *Mehadrin* bus lines are substantially cheaper than those on non-*Mehadrin* bus lines. Women who resist the segregation rules on these bus lines run the risk of being subjected to harassment and threats, and at times, even physical violence.

How did Israel's publicly funded transportation system reach a situation in which it is violating the basic rights of women and acting in contradiction to Israeli law, in a short period of ten years? How could all this have been permitted with no fundamental deliberation by the government institutions that gave their consent? The philosophical underpinnings of the Supreme Court's recommendation that the IWN withdraw its appeal seem to have been the status of Israel as a multicultural state, which must allow its minority groups to live according to their beliefs. Professor Susan Okin insisted that the multicultural approach is prejudicial toward women, as it allows traditional patriarchal societies to abuse the basic rights of women.

## Kolech—Your Voice, *continued from page 29*

munity and by building bridges to those who do not necessarily agree with our positions. At the same time, like the prophets of old, we raise our voices unabashedly for what we believe is right.

### Kolech and JOFA

Throughout its existence, Kolech has drawn strength from its peers and colleagues in America in dealing and thinking about the relationship between feminism and Orthodoxy. As we have become a voice for religious woman on so many fronts, we gain much from connecting with women from other places who are facing similar challenges. Although some issues remain uniquely Israeli (for example, debates as to whether to allow women soldiers to sing at official army events), many of the issues with which Kolech is involved have general implications throughout the Orthodox world. The many parallels between the agendas of JOFA and Kolech—reshaping leadership roles for women in the religious realm, thinking about female ritual celebrations and feminist Torah study, and pursuing social justice on the difficult issues of *agunot* and sexual misconduct—show the importance of our maintaining close contact and paving paths of collaboration.

JOFA served as the initial inspiration for the formation of Kolech in Israel, and we hope to see the relationship between these two sister organizations continue to flourish over the coming years. As evident from the decision to dedicate this issue of the *JOFA Journal* to Israel-related issues, the two organizations are committed to increasing awareness among their constituencies of the issues and actions transpiring in the other country. We plan to hold sessions at the upcoming Kolech and JOFA conferences (in the summer and fall of 2013, respectively) dedicated to the common agendas of the two organizations. Most importantly, we are hoping to develop joint projects and collaboration around certain causes that are close to our hearts. Our combined voices, raised from both sides of the ocean but stemming from similar places, will truly bring about the fulfillment of the second half of Jeremiah's prophecy, "… for your work will be rewarded" (31:16).

***Dr. Hannah Kehat*** *is the founder, first chairwoman, and current executive director of Kolech. Dr. Kehat holds a PhD in Jewish Philosophy and serves as a full-time faculty member at two Israeli colleges.* ***Dr. Elana Zion Golumbic*** *is a neuroscience researcher at Columbia University Medical Center. Originally from Israel, Dr. Zion Golumbic has launched programs for Kolech's young leadership in Israel and currently is strengthening the collaboration between Kolech and JOFA.*

## Kolech's Efforts to Combat Segregation

In this article I describe Kolech's efforts to combat the segregation of men and women on Israeli buses. Gender-based segregated bus seating is one example of discrimination against women in the name of halakha, although it lacks any real halakhic basis. The role of Kolech in such cases is to represent the minority group within the minority group: Hareidi women, many of whom are unable to voice their discontent with the radical trends within their minority community, which the court allegedly wishes to honor.

In 2007, the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC), along with several women who were mistreated while traveling on *Mehadrin* buses, filed an appeal against the Department of Transportation and Israel's public transportation companies. Among the petitioners were Naomi Ragen, a religious author, and Hannah Pasternak, a member of the executive board of Kolech and its former CEO. Ragen and Pasternak appealed as private petitioners. The appeal sought to substantially reduce the number of *Mehadrin* bus lines, to initiate alternative bus lines, and to ensure the safety of female passengers. The appeal did not seek to cancel all *Mehadrin* bus lines.

The IRAC, which was one of the petitioners and represented them, arrived at the conclusion that, in the interest of pluralism, it must allow the Hareidi community to run segregated bus lines within Hareidi areas. The response of the Department of Transportation to the appeal was that the *Mehadrin* buses are a voluntary arrangement, and therefore the department did not intend to intervene. Egged's response was that the Hareidi community is a religious minority whose values must be respected within the framework of a multicultural state.

The Supreme Court, which debated the appeal in January 2008, voiced criticism of how gender-based segregated bus seating is implemented on buses and recommended that the Department of Transportation appoint a committee to discuss the issue. The committee that was subsequently established received hundreds of letters from men, women, and organizations against the gender-based segregation, and thousands of letters from Hareidim supporting it.

Kolech submitted a position paper to the committee, citing Jewish sources and halakhic rulings indicating that segregated seating on buses is incompatible with halakhic sources. For example, Kolech presented a halakhic ruling by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein regarding travel on the New York City subway system. According to Rabbi Feinstein, there is no impediment to traveling on a crowded subway, where women and men might brush against each other unintentionally. In his opinion, as long as one has no sexual intentions, there is no reason for concern.

The committee submitted its conclusions in October 2009 and concluded that the *Mehadrin* bus lines were illegal according to Israeli law. The committee even determined that any arrangement involving public transportation and including segregation in general, and specifically the separation of men and women, contains coercive aspects of force by its mere existence.

The major suggestion of the committee was to create a temporary arrangement on previously segregated bus lines. Both doors would open, such that any passenger—male or female—could board the bus and sit wherever he or she chose. The committee reasoned that, in this way, Hareidi passengers would be able to sit where they wished, but there would be no involuntary gender-segregated seating, and that no such arrangement would be imposed coercively, either explicitly or implicitly.

The conclusions of the committee were unequivocal, even exceeding the aims of the original appeal. The appeal sought only a reduction in the number of *Mehadrin* buses and the introduction of alternative bus lines with no segregated seating, whereas the committee determined in its conclusions that *Mehadrin* bus lines in their current state were illegal. Nevertheless, in spite of the unequivocal conclusions reached by the committee, its recommendations for a temporary implementation were quite mild: The back door would still be used. Thus a strong concern remained that the coercion would continue, and this eventually proved true. This was also the opinion of the petitioners. However, by exceeding the boundaries of the initial appeal, the committee reduced any further aid that could be sought by the petitioners.

## "Friend of the Court" Appeal

At this stage, Kolech began to consider joining the appeal as a friend of the court. The "friend of the court" institution in Israeli law allows expert organizations to participate in a legal procedure and to express their position before the court by virtue of their expertise. In this instance, Kolech requested to join the appeal by virtue of its being an organization that acts on behalf of equal rights for women—in the religious community in particular and in Israeli society as a whole. The goal was to make a broader demand than that encompassed by the appeal—that is, to seek inclusive elimination of segregated bus lines and to bar boarding by the back door. In this course of action, Kolech acted on behalf of observant religious women fighting for equal rights for women.

Prior to reaching a final decision on whether to join the appeal, Kolech waited to hear the decision of the Minister of Transportation, following the conclusions and recommendations of the committee. Remarkably, the Minister of Transportation decided not to adopt the conclusions and recommendations of the committee at face value, but instead notified the Court that it intended to place signs on the buses recommending that women sit at the back and men at the front. The Minister of Transportation stressed that the information contained in the signs was only a recommendation and did not constitute coercion. The Court expressed its surprise at the decision of the Minister of Transportation: Obviously, most people see information on a publicly displayed

*continued on page 32*

**Giving Voice,** *continued from page 31*

sign as an instruction, not as a recommendation. It was not clear how this recommendation would prevent the enforcement of gender-based segregated seating, which had been forbidden by the decision of the committee. At this point, the Court issued a conditional order to the Minister of Transportation, ordering him to justify his decision and to explain how it was compatible with the recommendations of the committee.

Kolech submitted a request to join the appeal on behalf of four Orthodox organizations: Kolech, Ne'emanei Torah Va'Avodah, the Yaakov Herzog Center, and Yerushalmim. These are all social organizations that endeavor to advance values of social justice, equality, and human dignity from a Jewish perspective, guided by halakha. The organizations represent a Modern Orthodox, Zionist community, concerned with signs of extremism emerging in the Hareidi community, as well as gaps between different groups within Israeli society. The Modern Orthodox sector seeks to serve as a bridge between different sections of Israeli society, and to preserve the features uniting the Jewish community of Israel, through respect for the basic values of halakha, Judaism, and democracy. The radicalization that we have been witnessing in recent years within the ultra-Orthodox community is claimed to have a direct effect on the Religious Zionist community as well, as the norms of the Hareidi community have rapidly permeated non-Hareidi religious institutions: schools, social and professional gatherings, and, of course, shared public space. Thus, the decision of the Minister of Transportation had an immediate, direct effect on the sector represented by these organizations.

The decision of the Minister of Transportation endangers the very existence of a shared public space in Israel. There is also a risk of creating closed ghettos, within which women will be unable to walk about freely without suffering discrimination and repression.

Kolech joined the appeal as a friend of the court *(amicus curiae)* and was given the opportunity to present the claims of both religious Hareidi women and of the liberal Modern Orthodox community, which perceives the dangers inherent in religious radicalization. This position was of great significance in the appeal, in light of the fact that the court found itself deliberating between the need to consider the Hareidi population in the name of multiculturalism, and the need to safeguard liberal, egalitarian values in the public domain. By presenting the perspective of a community adjoining the Hareidi community and giving voice to Hareidi women, the court was able to enrich its scope of considerations, avoiding bias toward the multicultural argument.

### Creation of a Hotline

To better establish its claims, Kolech opened a hotline for women on the topic of segregation, called *Hashmi'ini* (Let Me Hear). The hotline was advertised on buses that pass through Hareidi neighborhoods. Calls to the hotline were made by men and women from the Hareidi sector who objected to gender-based segregated seating on buses. For example, one Hareidi woman explained that the option of boarding by the back door facilitates compliance with *Mehadrin* bus lines. Once a woman boards a bus from the back, she will not dare sit at the front of the bus. Once both doors of the bus are opened and women are instructed to board from a certain door, no woman can object to the segregated seating arrangements. However, if only one door is opened, and a woman boards the bus, she can decide where she will sit.

Kolech brought these and other testimonies before the court, and maintained its position on the risks associated with further back-door use. Finally, the court determined that *Mehadrin* bus lines were illegal and in violation of Israeli law. The court accepted the suggestions of the committee and allowed boarding by the back door as a temporary arrangement, but transportation companies were ordered to display signs on *Mehadrin* buses clarifying that any man or woman is entitled to sit anywhere on the bus. Any harassment related to this issue would be considered a criminal offense. The court further stated that, for any case of involuntary segregation on a bus, a claim of damages may be submitted, as well as criminal charges. These options were offered to combat the expectation that permitting back door boarding would result in further involuntary segregated seating.

As a result of the court's decision, Kolech has continued to operate its hotline. Women reporting segregation enforced by bus drivers are told that they can submit a minor charge of illegal discrimination and receive compensation. Several such cases, resulting in compensation totaling thousands of shekels, have already been submitted to the court. These charges are intended to intimidate the transportation companies and to emphasize that violation of the Court's ruling and of the law is not worthwhile.

The appeal of the matter of Israeli *Mehadrin* bus lines constitutes an important precedent in light of its outcome: the Court's unequivocal statement forbidding the operation of these bus lines. The course of action taken by Kolech is important in and of itself: Kolech, as an organization of Orthodox women, gave voice to Hareidi women who have no voice within the Hareidi community, where decisions are made by the rabbis and by extremist interest groups. In Israel's emerging multicultural dialogue, Kolech, in its role as a religious women's organization, has a major responsibility to stop society from reflecting the values of extremist religious sectors, denying women the right to be heard, and turning a blind eye to the price they pay.

***Riki Shapira** is the legal adviser and a board member of Kolech. She represented the four Orthodox organizations in the appeal to the Supreme Court.*

# Religious Women Take Up the Arts in Israel

*By Karen Miller Jackson*

How many religious girls or women do you know who aspire to dance or to sing? Interestingly, although one would hardly expect such a trend in Israel today, more and more young women are blazing a trail to follow their dreams of becoming artists. Religious women are dancing, singing, painting, and acting; what is more, they are using their religious roots and deep Jewish knowledge to shape their artistic work. Thus, they are creating a unique Jewish aesthetic experience. Some perform for women-only audiences, others for mixed audiences. Each is finding her own way. The following is a taste of some of the established, as well as up-and-coming female stars, who are using their identity as religious Jewish women to influence their work.

## Bat Kol Ensemble

A combination of Hasidic storytelling, song, and dance is performed by a group of Orthodox Jewish women for women- and girls-only audiences. Bat Kol is a product of the *beit midrash* of Matan Hasharon and has been performing for more than eight years. The ensemble includes the well-known Torah lecturer Oshra Koren (director of the Ra'anana branch of Matan), singers Gabie Sykora and Holly Dinur, and dancers Maayan Koren and Leora Damlin. The combination of *divrei Torah*, dancing, and singing presents a powerful experience for the audience.

## Midrashir

Dr. Pnina Neuwirth and Hagit Kfir combine their individual talents to create a powerful and inspiring experience. Dr. Neuwirth, a professor of law and lecturer on Jewish topics, delivers a *shiur* with intermittent songs sung by Kfir. Kfir, who holds an MA in musicology, sings selections from Jewish liturgy, including Kol Nidrei, as well as more modern musical adaptations of Jewish sources. The songs enhance the message of the *shiur* for the listeners. The duo perform for either women-only or mixed audiences.

## Ruchama Ben Yosef

Singer Ruchama Ben Yosef weaves her life experiences into her music.

Ruchama Ben Yosef, age 27, just put out her first album, "יהיה לך עוד," "For You There Will Be More." Her music contains a combination of styles, including soul, ethnic, and rock, yet it has a gentle sound. The lyrics are based on Jewish sources as well as modern Israeli poetry. Ruchama felt the need to start composing music and singing while she struggled with infertility for five years before having her first child. For a long time, Ruchama did not consider singing publicly, but now she feels that God has directed her toward this calling. Her songs can be sampled through her website, ruchamabenyosef.com (Hebrew).

## Nechama Golan

Nechama Golan is a prominent Israeli religious artist. In one controversial piece of her art, she created a high-heeled shoe made out of photocopied pages of the Talmud tractate *Kiddushin*, which she glued together. Rabbi David Sperber analyzed the shoe as follows, "Juxtaposing the uncomfortable shoe that limits women and regulates their image as objects of desire with the Talmudic text on marriage and its traditional view of it as ownership, the work is a metaphor of the rules and tenets imposed on women by the patriarchal culture—both religious and secular."[1] Her work was recently part of the *Matronita* exhibit at the Museum of Art in Ein Harod, the first major exhibit in Israel of Jewish feminist art produced by women from traditional backgrounds.

Nechama Golan's shoe made from photocopied pages of the Talmudic tractate *Kiddushin*.

## Raise Your Spirits Theater

This group of women from Efrat and Alon Shvut began performing in 2001, during the difficult days of the second intifada, to raise people's spirits and to mark the memory of the victims of terror attacks. Raise Your Spirits has produced shows about several biblical heroes and heroines, including Joseph, Esther, Ruth and Naomi, Noah, and Michal. Raise Your Spirits is an entirely by-women for-women production.

## Etti Ankri

The cover of Etti Ankri's latest album, *Beshirei Rabbi Yehuda Halevi*.

Etti Ankri is an accomplished Israeli singer and songwriter, with a beautiful, moving voice. Ankri produced her first album in 1990, and in 2001 she became a *ba'alat teshuvah*. This change in her personal life had an effect on her music. Her spirituality is expressed most clearly in her latest album, *Beshirei Rabbi Yehuda Halevi*, in which she puts to music the poetry of medieval poet Yehuda Halevi. During concerts Ankri also shares moving Jewish stories with her audiences.

*Karen Miller Jackson is a member of the JOFA Journal Editorial Board and served as a liaison in Israel for several stories in this issue.*

[1] Sperber, David, "Feminist Art in Traditional and Religious Judaism," *Zeek, A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture,* April 4, 2012.

# The Campaign Against the Exclusion of Women from Public Spaces

*By Roni Hazon Weiss*

The following conversation took place one evening last Sukkot in Jerusalem:

*"You can't cross. Here there is separation of women from men."*
*"Why?"*
*"You are in Mea Shearim."*
*"And it is a part of the State of Israel."*
*"This is a Taliban state. Welcome to Afghanistan. OK? Is that what you want to hear?"*
*"I want to cross."*
*"No, you may not cross."*
*"This is a part of the State of Israel. I want to understand what is happening."*
*"No, I won't give you an answer. Please leave the area."*
*"Who gave you permission to do this? In the State of Israel it is forbidden to do things like this."*
*"So we have heard. It is also forbidden to make [gay] pride parades here. It is forbidden to dig up graves and take out the dead from their resting places. And that's what you do every day. You can't pass here."*
*"Did the police give you permission?"*
*"Don't mention that name here."*

The State of Israel, from the time of its founding, has been defined as a Jewish and a democratic country in which there is no separation of religion and state. Thus, the State of Israel endeavors to establish the values of equality and justice as the basis for its actions, laws, and way of life. However, given the wide spectrum of peoples and faiths within Israel, these values are difficult to balance with sensitivity to all. This article focuses on the Orthodox Jewish sector of Israeli society and on the place of women within it.

One of the challenges to democratic values has been the exclusion of women from public spaces, which is not a matter for the religious alone. Although segregation of women does not occur only in Jerusalem, and although it developed gradually, within the last year there has been an increasing awareness of this problem, which began in Jerusalem and continues throughout Israel.

## Elections for the Jerusalem Municipality

Elections were last held for the Jerusalem municipality more than three years ago. As a young Jerusalem resident, I remember those elections as fateful for me personally, for the pluralistic community in the city, and for the Hareidim. For us in the pluralistic public, it seemed that Jerusalem's better days were past well before the eve of the elections. Due to the *hareidization* of the city, the shortage of labor, and the high cost of living, many couples and many young families chose to leave the city, leaving it old and poor. For precisely these reasons, we saw the campaign of Nir Barkat, who is currently serving as mayor of Jerusalem, as a reason for hope.

In those elections, two parties were formed to bring about the desired change: Yerushalmim, headed by Rachel Azaria, and Hit'orerut [Awakening], led by Ofer Berkovich and currently headed by Meirav Cohen. These three leaders, young residents of the city, are now members of the Jerusalem Municipal Council. Yerushalmim emphasizes young families with young children, both religious and non-religious. Hit'orerut seeks to keep young people in the city, through the creation of entertainment venues and places of employment.

Their very entrance onto the council was no trivial matter. To succeed, the two factions needed to join forces and work together diligently to awaken and mobilize whatever part of the Jerusalem public had not given up hope. The two factions sought to revitalize the city that many had already eulogized, and, with hard work, they managed to cross the electoral threshold and win seats on the city council.

## The Exclusion of Women from Public Spaces

The struggle against the exclusion of women from public spaces began in Jerusalem with Rachel Azaria's campaign for the city council. Like all candidates, Rachel sought to put up her picture on public buses, but her request was rejected by the Canaan advertising company, which claimed that it does not display pictures of women on buses. Despite Azaria's argument that she is Orthodox, married, and a mother, they insisted that women's images should not be posted on the buses—not even a child of three or an eighty-year-old woman. Azaria then turned to the High Court. Although her struggle made waves, the subject of exclusion of women was not yet news,

and she found herself alone. It appeared that the issue was forgotten, and that the pro-pluralism public had gotten used to—and tacitly consented to—religious extremism and, in the name of pluralism, had agreed to forfeit its values.

In many cases exclusion was accepted as a necessary sacrifice to religious claims, in order to facilitate coexistence. But the phenomenon appeared to be growing more extreme, reflected in a number of public spheres, including the boycott by religious soldiers of a military ceremony at which women sang, presenting awards and honors to women only through men while the women sat in the stands on the grounds of modesty, and so forth.

Preoccupation with religious restrictions occurs among not only the Hareidim, but also the National Religious public. In the Bnei Akiva youth movement (in which I grew up), the movement's band, Tzevet Hava'i, was disbanded, with the explanation that there was insufficient demand for it. Today I can say publicly the real reason is clear: not to allow boys and girls to sing together. A youth movement whose goal was to bring students together to educate them to love mankind and to love the land, along with a commitment to halakha, turned into a movement of rabbis. The preoccupation with modesty became obsessive (and, thus, immodest in itself), as, for example, with the prohibition against fathers attending parties and other events of their daughters within the framework of the *mamlakhti dati* (state religious) education system.

### The Battle for the Billboards

In Jerusalem, the beginning of the public struggle was against the censorship of women's images from billboards in public spaces. Last summer, Conservative Rabbi Uri Ayalon initiated a major campaign against this type of exclusion. This struggle was with Jerusalem City Hall, the advertising companies, and public opinion. To change public awareness, most of the activity had to be directed not at the Hareidi public, but rather at the pluralistic public. In light of the power of the media, Rabbi Ayalon started a Facebook group called "Not Censored—Fighting against the Exclusion of Women from Public Spaces." In a short time, more than 3,500 individuals joined the group from across the country, with activity taking place partly online and partly in the real world.

**In Jerusalem, the beginning of the public struggle was against the censorship of women's images from billboards in public spaces.**

In light of the difference between ads in Jerusalem and in the rest of Israel (the same campaign would feature images of women elsewhere in Israel, but not in Jerusalem), I joined with Rabbi Ayalon and the Yerushalmim as we rolled out our first campaign, in which we sought to hand out posters with images of women on billboards across the city. The advertising company tried to dissuade us from doing so on the grounds that some people would tear down the billboards, but they did not prevent the publication of the posters. Of 140 ads, a total of four were mutilated. The advertising agency was surprised, but

*continued on page 36*

## The Campaign, *continued from page 35*

it now understood that advertisements with images of women were indeed possible. In the cases where the ads were severely damaged, we demanded that the city and the police enforce the law.

There have been many partners in the effort to prevent a radicalized approach to public spaces: individual men and women, Orthodox organizations such as Kolech and Ne'emanei Torah Va'Avodah, the Israel Religious Action Center (affiliated with the Reform movement), and organizations not identified with any religious stream. Cooperation among these groups and the establishment of a joint coalition generated great impact in the eyes of the pluralistic public. Among the positive results were parliamentary activity, recruiting members of Knesset to take action and change legislation, and filing joint petitions before the High Court against companies that exclude women—and winning those cases.

This determined, long-term effort delivered results. As I write today, a court has ruled for the first time that a bus company must provide financial compensation to a young woman who was asked to sit at the back of the bus by the driver. Just today, the state informed the Egged bus company and the Canaan advertising company that they are not allowed to refuse to display an ad in which an image of a woman is shown. Similarly, there have been court orders against an attempt by a *hevrah kadisha* (burial society) to segregate women at funerals and to prevent women from offering eulogies. (See the article by Rabbi Seth Farber on page 12.)

The efforts to raise awareness among both the adult population and the youth in the framework of various educational programs are bearing results. No longer are isolated individuals fighting personal battles, but rather an entire public is refusing to surrender its values when confronted with religious extremism. The result: The public sphere is returning to the public, and we have been transformed from a silent majority to a winning majority.

A struggle that began with restoring the presence of images of women on billboards in Jerusalem continues across the country by seeking equal representation for women and men in ceremonies, in positions of leadership, and more. From time to time, efforts are made to undermine the progress that has been made. Nevertheless, it is our role as a public to show the advertising companies and to remind legislators, elected officials, local authorities, and law enforcement agencies of their responsibilities with respect to illegal activity.

I see my role as an activist, and as a religious woman living and working in Jerusalem, to be part of the Zionist enterprise. These days, as the success of our activities in strengthening pluralist society is evident, I have no doubt of the early realization of the prophecy of Isaiah: "כי מציון תצא תורה ודבר ה׳ מירושלים" ("For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem") (Isaiah 2:3). I am proud to be a part of it.

***Roni Hazon Weiss** is a feminist, teacher and educator, social activist, and Jerusalemite.*

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*Brandeis University Press/HBI Series on Jewish Women, 2012, $39.95*

***By Deena Zimmerman***


In *Fertility and Jewish Law,* Dr. Ronit Irshai provides a scholarly and comprehensive review of the halakhic literature on the fertility-related topics of contraception, abortion, and artificial reproductive technology (ART). Her clear analysis and explanation of the key issues in each of these sources is commendable. So, too, is her desire to analyze these issues from the female point of view.

Her analysis, however, is, at times, hard to reconcile. Dr. Irshai describes a man's situation as one where "personal interests ... are balanced against the obligation to procreate in a way that allows for fairly broad freedom to the point that his ability to shape his life as he sees fit within the context of his religious obligations is almost unimpaired." A woman, on the other hand, Irshai continues:

> is not bound by the commandment to procreate or by the commandment to study Torah and is certainly not regarded as the primary, or even secondary, breadwinner. At first glance, her freedom would appear to be absolute. In practice, however, she is bound by cultural presumptions that take an unfavorable view of her remaining unmarried, she is subordinated to her husband's obligation to procreate... and she is denied almost all recognition of her presence as a subject where abortion is a relevant consideration (p. 193).

These claims are perplexing because: (1) Men are bound by halakhic considerations (not only the commandment to procreate) that take an unfavorable view of remaining unmarried. (2) If a wife is only the vehicle for her husband's obligation to procreate, and he has freedom, does she not have freedom as well? (3) When abortion is permitted, it is justified on the basis of the threat to the woman's physical or mental health; why is this not recognizing her needs? When abortion is permitted in the case of a severely disabled child, it is the impact on the family (both the father and the mother) that is the reason.

Dr. Irshai's presentation of artificial reproductive technology is an important one. She correctly points out that the halakhic discussion to date has focused solely on the implications on parentage, without examining the potential risk to women from the procedures. It would have been helpful had Dr. Irshai enumerated what these risks are. As risk to health is a halakhic consideration, discussion of the impact of halakhic rulings on women should be not only on the impact on their educational freedom and career development, but on their bodily health as well.

One topic is surprising in its absence. Though mentioned in passing, artificial insemination for unmarried women does not receive full treatment. Although there are few written responsa on the topic, there are even fewer that permit this phenomenon. It would seem that a complete feminist analysis of fertility needs to engage this topic, as it might be argued that this is an example where concerns of public policy take precedence over the purported claim of procreation at all cost.

The book would have benefited from a clear definition of what constitutes a modern responsum. The examples quoted range from the mid-1900s to the present. At times, Dr. Irshai quotes writing that was meant as a commentary, not as a responsum. For example, Rabbi Dr. Avraham Steinberg made the comments quoted in his name as part of an encyclopedia entry. While Dr. Irshai states at the outset that she is going to stick to public proclamations and not private conversations, she does not at all tap into the large world of halakhic rulings on the Internet. Had she done so, she would have found a number of rulings that are far more permissive than the ones she quotes.

Analysis of modern responsa should also reflect modern phenomena. There needs to be acknowledgment that in the National Religious community of Israel, large families do not preclude a career on the part of the wife. There are many mothers of families of six and beyond in which the mother has at least one advanced degree, if not more, and uses it professionally.

I would answer Dr. Irshai's call for assuring that the feminist viewpoint be taken into consideration in halakhic rulings by striving to ensure that women be Jewishly educated. Halakha is case-based. The more questions that are asked by women who know the sources, the more the female point of view will be taken into account. This has certainly been my experience as a *yoetzet halakha.* In my experience in answering thousands of questions on Nishmat's Women's Health and Halacha website (www.yoatzot.org), women's reproductive choices are more often limited by their insufficient knowledge or lack of realization that they have a right to ask questions than by the answers they are getting.

In summary, this is a book that should be read by all those who find the topic of fertility in Jewish law to be of interest. It can be the first

*continued on page 38*

step in the increased education I proposed above. However, the presentation of the issues in the book should be taken as food for thought that requires further digestion rather than just being swallowed whole.

*Deena Zimmerman, MD, is a* yoetzet halakha *and a pediatrician at Maccabi Health Services and TEREM-Immediate Medical Care in Israel.*

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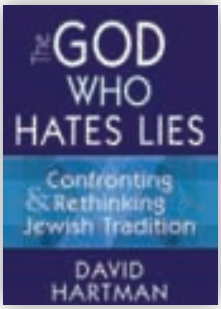
***The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting and Rethinking Jewish Tradition***

***By David Hartman with Charlie Buckholtz***

*Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011, $24.99*

***By Israel Drazin***




David Hartman, a noted Orthodox rabbi and founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, insists that Modern Orthodox Judaism is, in some respects, frozen in suspended animation. It refuses to grow, despite new circumstances, moral imperatives, and logic—and, consequently, many people are hurt. A prime example is its failure to solve the problem of the *agunot,* wives of husbands who refuse to give a Jewish divorce. The rabbis uphold the view that the Bible allows only husbands to initiate marriages and divorces. This gives husbands the power to demand hundreds of thousands of dollars for a divorce, or spitefully refuse divorce under any circumstance, leaving the women unable to remarry, while their husbands can under certain conditions.

Hartman writes that the Torah teaches love of neighbor and stresses love of the stranger thirty-six times. Yet, he asserts, the rabbis of the yeshiva world worship halakha, the Jewish legal system, instead of God. They teach that the further removed Jews are from Mount Sinai, the weaker their intellect and their ability to understand truths. According to this view, Jews must never reject the views of earlier rabbis, and must unthinkingly accept what they demand.

This thinking leads to many human tragedies. Thus, a Russian immigrant who always thought he was Jewish and followed Jewish law, served in the Israeli army as a commander and was killed defending Israel, but was not allowed to be buried in a Jewish cemetery because a rabbi discovered that his grandmother wasn't Jewish. Thus, a middle-aged Jewish man, a *kohen,* a descendant of the priestly line, was refused permission to marry the woman he loved, who had long ago converted to Judaism out of love for the religion, because of the ancient rule that a *kohen* cannot marry a convert. Thus, women are still excluded from many Jewish practices, forcing Hartman to lament, "Could I worship a God who considered half of the Jewish community to be not fully human?"

Hartman writes that Maimonides, unlike the rabbis who worship halakha, taught: "Halakha plays an important, but secondary, role in the religious process." Halakha is not the goal; it is the means to attain the goal of individual and social growth. Maimonides stressed that God placed eyes in the front of faces to encourage people to look forward, not behind. Thus, humans must assume "the role of interpreting God's law for our time and place," and stop hurting people.

Hartman's worldview is accepted by many, though certainly not all, Orthodox rabbis. Readers will find his ideas eye-opening and very persuasive.

*Dr. Israel Drazin is the author of eighteen books, including a series of five volumes on the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, which he co-authored with Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, and a series of four books on Moses Maimonides.*

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***Keep Your Wives Away from Them: Orthodox Women, Unorthodox Desires***

***Edited by Miryam Kabakov***

*North Atlantic Books, 2010, $16.95*

***By Rachel Lieberman***


*Keep Your Wives Away from Them* is a compelling anthology/collection of stories by fourteen women who have come out as lesbian or transgender in a variety of Orthodox communities. The anthology's greatest strength is that it allows the reader access to the authors' personal thoughts as they negotiate the complex intersection between homosexuality and a hetero-normative Orthodoxy. The variety of styles and experiences create a compelling patchwork quilt and give texture to the LBTQ Orthodox experience.

The anthology doesn't stick only to the personal, but also includes an examination of some of the Talmudic and halakhic sources—what contributor Elaine Chapnik calls *"hilkhot lesbiut."* Two essays explore rabbinic discussions concerning women's bodies and lesbianism. These chapters are an abrupt break in the anthology, pulling the reader back from the haze of personal experiences and

forcing the reader to examine the halakha. Even though these essays do disrupt the flow of the anthology, they add an important dimension of halakhic discussion.

It is essential for the Orthodox community to examine both the personal and the halakhic aspects of this issue, and to explore: What are the prohibitions (if any) against lesbianism? Are the concerns surrounding lesbianism social or halakhic? Is there a prohibition, or just an assumption? Discussions around homosexuality in Orthodox Judaism generally focus mostly on men; this anthology significantly forces us to include women in that discussion.

How do we, as Orthodox feminists, address the topic of homosexuality? Do we choose to shy away from the topic because we are afraid that it will bring us further under attack, or do we embrace women who have been marginalized by the Orthodox community? This anthology supports the value of inclusion and encourages Orthodox communities to reexamine the LBTQ Orthodox experience.

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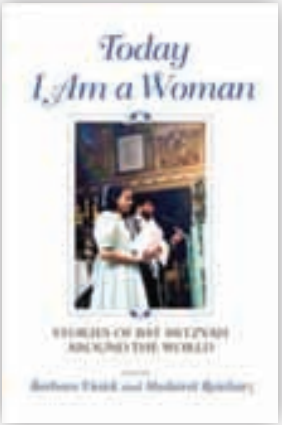
**Today I Am a Woman: Stories of Bat Mitzvah around the World**
***Edited by Barbara Vinick and Shulamit Reinharz***
*Indiana University Press, 2012, $29.95*

***By Roselyn Bell***

If ever you needed evidence of how global the Jewish people are and how ritual is one of the ties that bind us, this anthology of first-person accounts of bat mitzvah observances around the world provides it movingly and in spades. The editors give us both the history of bat mitzvah—which is relatively short—and its geography, which covers every continent except Antarctica.

Many readers will know that the first bat mitzvah in the United States was that of Judith Kaplan, the daughter of Rabbi Mordechai M. Kaplan, in 1922, but he got the idea from a ceremony he had previously observed in Italy. But even earlier, the book documents, there were group *b'not mitzvah* ceremonies in Croatia in 1918, and as early as 1814 the Copenhagen community held an annual *bat chajil* celebration for girls coming of age on a Sunday morning in the spring.




Many of the stories will tug at our feminist and Jewish heartstrings: In Bulgaria, a small group of Jewish women launches an adult bat mitzvah study group to prepare for the ceremony they never had under Communism. In Libya, Malaka Bublil (a.k.a. Gina Malaka Waldman) goes on a hunger strike to convince her father to let her go abroad to Switzerland to study, since she cannot touch or read the Torah at home. The saddest story is of the Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan, who have no rituals celebrating womanhood; rather, at age twelve young girls begin to be prepared for arranged marriages and motherhood.

This anthology reminds us both how interconnected and how transient is Jewish life: Countries that once had large Jewish populations now have minuscule ones. Daughters denied bat mitzvah in traditional communities may have a celebration later in America.

This book is not only about coming of age, but also about coming to embrace our diverse Jewish family.

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