Chapter 4

Between Joy and Enslavement: Negotiations of Motherhood among Women Students, Their Teachers and the Text

Tamar El-Or

Women merit [the world to come] for three things: for taking their sons to synagogue (to study], for causing their husbands to study *Mishna* with the rabbis, and for waiting for their husbands until they return from the homes of rabbis.

—Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 17a—

Sometimes the question comes from a college student in a women's studies class, sometimes from a journalist during an interview with a feminist, and sometimes during a friendly discussion on women's rights. "It all sounds very interesting, and it does make sense," they might say, "but what about pregnancy, what about labor and breast feeding?" In one fell swoop an intellectual discussion or carefully constructed gender theory is shot down. It's like watching the breathtaking performance of a pair of acrobats who suddenly miss each other in mid-air and plunge to the safety net. Except that motherhood was never treated like a safety net in the feminist discourse. Some saw it as a snare and turned it into a trampoline from which to jump as high as possible.[1] Others took it as a substrate on which to grow.[2] In one way or another, every one of them bounces time and again onto the "motherhood net."

Reviews of feminist scholarship on motherhood and maternity start with the ambivalence embedded in the relationship between the scholars and the subject matter.[3] Recent research on motherhood[4] is replete with attempts to break out of the binary frames of trap-substrate, or, as Ruddik puts it, motherhood as a gender-full or gender-free phenomenon.[5] These efforts evolve into a phenomenology of motherhood, a detailed description of its varied practices and representations, a deconstruction of the universalistic perception of motherhood, and an analysis of the mother as subject rather than object.[6] At the same time, the literature brings new insights into the value of the politics of maternalism. According to Bursh,

maternalism is a discourse of entitlement, which "supports women's personhood and claims to integrity, autonomy, dignity, security and political voice on the basis of what Molly Ladd Taylor calls mother work."[7] Bursh reads it as "feminism for hard times." Whether a beneficial or dangerous political choice, maternalism (as a discourse of entitlement) comes after feminists have pointed at, described, critiqued, and fought patriarchy.

The ethnography in this paper describes a troubled negotiation of motherhood by young Jewish orthodox women in Israel with their teachers, both of whom bounce against the "motherhood net" whenever they learn about themselves. The ethnography provides an intimate glimpse of the "net" in a specific context, woven from national religiosity, modernism, fundamentalism, and feminism as students and teachers confront canonical Jewish texts. Being part of a democratic society, these women do not need maternalism as entitlement for civil rights, autonomy, and the like. This civil power, given to the women by the state, is acknowledged by their national religious community and used in order to attain political goals. Yet their position as believers, knowers of the Torah, and practitioners of deeds is constituted via mothering (see the head quote, "Women merit, etc.") The discourse of maternalism as one of entitlement is offered to them by some chosen texts and reproduced by the teachers.

While the industry of reproducing "home" as women's site and motherhood as their natural role requires unveiling in Western postmodern discourses, it stands out clearly in most conservative discourses.[8] The efforts expended on ferreting out the "taken-for-granted woman-mother" assumptions hiding in television series, literature, and advertising are not needed in the Zionist-religious discourse. Like other new fundamentalist discourses, this one puts the family and traditional gender roles at the top of the list of values, and this hierarchy shapes the symbolic image of the community, especially in its negotiations in the open cultural market where it competes with other discourses. Yet, as one watches the "motherhood net" being woven by the new generation of women, the image of family, gender roles, and maternity takes on a different visage. It emerges as a mixture of acceptance and uncertainty, assurance and despair, subversion, protest, and search. Maternalism as entitlement for participation in the community of believers is questioned by the students. They read it vis-a-vis their complex experiences as full citizens.

After describing the location of this anthropological study, the paper presents two study sessions on motherhood and closes with their analysis. Ruddik's theory on maternal thinking and the dichotomy she presents between mothering as work versus mothering as identity, and Walkerdine's research on teachers as mothers, are used to unfold the ethnography. When placed side by side, they serve as guides to explore the interrelations between women as mothers, women as knowers, and mothers as knowers. The paper concludes with an attempt to shed light on the unique position of women in fundamentalist communities in democratic states, by using their experience to reevaluate the work-identity dichotomy of mothering.

THE *MIDRASHA*: A REFUGE OR A PRISON ON CAMPUS?

Bar-Ilan might have been just another university in Israel (although the only religious one), if not for the "fame" it gained in the fall of 1995 when Yigal Amir, a student in the law school and in the university's *Yeshiva,* assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for political and ideological reasons. The public attack on the religious-Zionist community to which Amir belongs[9] was directed at the community's educational institutions and especially at Bar-Ilan and its affiliated colleges of Jewish studies.

Bar-Ilan University offers a standard university curriculum and admits students regardless of nationality (Palestinian, Jewish), religiosity, or gender. Jewishorthodox faculty is preferred. All students are required to take some Jewish studies. Two institutions were established in the mid 1970s offering the orthodox students a traditional and gendered Jewish education: the men's *Yeshiva,* and the women's *Midrasha.* At the time of the research, there were 1,300 students in the *Midrasha:* 1,000 of them were students from Bar-Ilan University ranging in age from nineteen to twenty-four years; the other 300 were seventeen to eighteen year olds before their army/national service, or *Midrasha* graduates twenty-five and older, seeking to strengthen their Jewish studies.[10]

The *Midrasha* and the *Yeshiva,* which are closed to nonorthodox students, became a distinct cultural site on campus, free of academic supervision. Students who choose to study in them are offered special grants and spend many more hours there than required in the compulsory university Jewish studies program. For Bar-Ilan students, learning for the first time with nonorthodox people in a coeducational setting, the *Midrasha* and *Yeshiva* are special places on campus.

> After the weekend, when I have a big knapsack full of things I need for the week, I go to the *Midrasha* and leave it there before continuing on to my classes. The *Midrasha is* my home on campus. I sometimes go there to relax, to meet girlfriends, to be with my own. I prefer the cafeteria there, and I use its synagogue. The secretaries know me, it's kind of a home.
>
> (Ora, 21 years old)

Ora is an undergraduate student of chemistry and Jewish philosophy. In addition to the required university Jewish studies classes, she takes courses at the *Midrasha,* as do many of her girlfriends. They are part of a new generation of women who look for, and if need be, fight for more Jewish education. Behind Jewish women's right to general and Jewish education lies a history (or several of them) that is beyond the scope of this chapter.[11] The expanding opportunities for Jewish higher education for religious Zionist women are part of a steadily growing revolutionary movement. Women's claim for more participation in the craft of "learning Torah,"[12] and the men's apparent cooperation with it, are creating powerful change—religious and cultural—with which the community is endeavoring to cope.

Once meant to reinforce traditional Jewish education and culture among young orthodox women on a "western campus," the *Midrasha* has become, as Ora says, a home. Paradoxically, this conservative institution is turning into a home for the

raising of "new women,"[13] reminiscent of what happened to the seminaries for women founded at the beginning of the century in the United States.

The canopy of Jewish studies has not shielded the women students from themselves. The home it created vacillates between being a shelter and a prison, and neither is fully acceptable to the students. Like most "homes," this one is also a conflict-ridden zone in which one constitutes herself. Motherhood is a major battleground, as the traditional practice of Torah study and the struggle for gender revolution collide. The following two pieces of ethnography describe this confrontation and the ensuing negotiations between the students, their teachers, and the texts. The teachers choose texts that address the troubled times the students are going through as they try to imagine their future as orthodox women (most are unmarried and therefore regarded as vulnerable), fully involved in the larger society. In a classical and traditional Jewish act of learning, both the teachers and students search antiquity for a lens through which to view the realities of today.[14] The process brings little comfort.

The field study was carried out from 1992 to 1995. I went to the *Midrasha* once or twice a week, participated in several courses, and together with an assistant held over fifty in-depth interviews with students. At that time the Labor Party and left-leaning parties were in power after fifteen years of right-wing leadership. The peace process between Israel and the P.L.O was moving forward rapidly, severely straining the ideology and practice of the Greater Israel.[15] The following sessions were held during the 1994-95 academic year which, following the Oslo accords, was a very stressful year.

RABBANIT MEIR—MOTHERHOOD IS HAPPINESS

At the end of the summer, before university classes begin and while the men's *Yeshiva* on campus is still in recess, women students flock to the *Midrasha* for a special course held every year during the month of Elul (September), the summer month of preparation for the Days of Repentance. The course meets four days a week, six hours a day for four weeks. Any woman who can handle this schedule does not have to pay; her studies are funded by a donation from a philanthropic family. It also excuses her from three, yearlong courses at the *Midrasha*.

There were few women when I entered the lecture hall at 8:45. I sat down in the right-hand corner, from where I could see the whole room. The slight chill left over from the night was magnified by large, quiet air conditioners. The room slowly filled up. A few faces were familiar from my three years as a participant observer in the *Midrasha*. Some girls looked young and turned out to be just out of high school, earning credit before starting national service, the alternative for military service for orthodox women. Others just "came to listen." There were excited greetings, hugs, and calls from one end of the room to the other.

I can't believe it, I'm in shock, every second someone else, it's been so long since I met so many girls.
You? I'm in shock. I don't believe who I'm meeting here [turning around to someone who has just entered the room], and you—you're a liar, you said you weren't coming. To what do we owe the honor?
Two women sitting near me are talking:
This is a great place. You have no idea what material there is here, so many girls.
What do you mean?
Oh, didn't you know? I do a bit of matchmaking. It's worked a few times, and this is truly a terrific place.

Some seventy women have gathered by the time that the class begins, most of them young and unmarried. Only about ten have their heads covered,[16] and three of these are women around forty or older. At 9 AM Rabbi Laufer strides in. This man, who is about thirty-five years old, is a doctoral student in Jewish philosophy. He was appointed deputy director of the *Midrasha* to raise the academic level following complaints by the women students. He introduces the woman standing next to him.

Rabbi Laufer: I don't know when you first set out this morning, but Rabbanit Meir left home very early in order to get here from Kiryat Arba, and that's how she asked me to introduce her to you—the Rabbanit from Kiryat Arba.

Dressed in light colors, a narrow skirt, a white shirt with sleeves that covered her elbows, and a scarf on her head topped by a small straw hat, Rabbanit Meir stood behind the lectern (actually a stander, the adjustable lectern used *by Yeshiva* students to hold their books during study), and began:

Rabbanit Meir: What merit do women earn? I looked for sources that stress the special value and power of women, and I decided that we will devote our four sessions to the merit and special character of the "generation of Egypt," especially Miriam [biblical sister of Moses], and to the merit women gain by studying Torah. I want us to become better acquainted with ourselves. Aside from our being Jewish people, we are more specifically women. Just as the poet Rachel said: "Only of myself do I know to tell."[17] I also wish to know the Creator and myself. And to do so with the powers that I, and not others, have, and without comparisons between men and women. Each woman is something special, but the aspect that sets us together here is the fact that each and every one of you is a woman. Let's study this aspect, and if we come to know it and internalize it and serve the Creator with it, we will draw on great strength to confront problems. We are in a difficult situation, perhaps confused, perhaps on the verge of a breakthrough. Let us draw strength from the Bible, from the women of Egypt, in order to build a road, to cope, and to serve God. As for Torah study, here I feel at home, within our own community. We know that the people of Israel cannot survive without the Torah. If something is wrong and things are going badly around us, it is because our [study of] Torah is weak. What can we do to strengthen it, and what can I as a woman do?

Student: Two things bother me. One, anyone who is sure he can make a contribution and does so, doesn't look in the Torah for a justification for contributing; and second, not all women are the same, even if that is what we have in common.

Rabbanit: Thank you for the question, and for asking. I don't know whether I'll be able to

answer it, but I want all of you to ask questions. At this point I am asking why the *Gemara* asks the question, "What is women's merit?"

The student sitting next to me, the "matchmaker" says in a low voice: Why? Because men wrote it.

Another student, out loud: Why doesn't the Gemara ask, "What is men's merit?"

Another student: Because the women are at home and no one can see what they are doing.

The matchmaker again softly: Given the number of children she has it's pretty clear what she's doing there.

Rabbanit: A good question, and I hope, with God's help, that after these classes you'll understand a little more and you won't have a trace of a sense of being inferior or exploited, because I don't find in the sources any reason to feel inferior.

Another student: The very fact that we occupy ourselves with it at every opportunity, time after time, shows that we have a problem.

The student next to me, quietly: It's inferiority disguised as ideology. Instead of teaching us to be equal, they perpetuate our inferiority.

Rabbanit: In the meantime, the Gemara asks the question, and for me that's enough. Let's see what the Gemara says, and it should be clear that I don't intend to teach Gemara here. I don't know Gemara and you'll forgive my Aramaic because I don't understand Aramaic.

[The Rabbanit reads the text that appears as the epitaph on the first page of this paper. She reads it fluently and translates it without difficulty].

Women merit the world to come, according to this *Gemara* in *Berakhot*,[18] for three things: for taking their sons to synagogue to study, for causing their husbands to study Mishnah with the rabbis, and for waiting for their husbands until they return from the homes of rabbis, sometimes for many years.

Rabbanit adds immediately after her translation: I interpret this according to today's reality and not that at the time of the *Mishna* [1st and 2nd centuries AD]. I have no intention of talking about years of devotion, but rather about a day, about hours in which wives don't ask their husbands to do one thing or another, to help them here or there, but allow them to study. In our generation we are provoked and tempted with other things, with equality in study, saying the "little woman" doesn't exist any more. But that same woman who brings up her children joyfully, sends them to study, and allows her husband to study, is complete, she has meaning.

Student: And a woman without children, without a husband, she has no meaning?

Rabbanit: Why talk about a pathological situation? About the abnormal?

Same student: Why isn't it normal? There are situations like that, and what about a single woman, she has no meaning?

Rabbanit: Then she's on the way to . . . she hasn't yet fulfilled herself.

Same student: What does that mean, at the stage she is at she is a person, isn't she? If she doesn't give birth, then she's nothing?

The matchmaker quietly: You can fulfill yourself very well without a bunch of children. My sister, every year, pop! She whelps, a kid. Pregnant from the first night after the wedding. From the first day she's allowed to sleep with her husband,[19] pop! Another one.

Her friend giggles and says, "Stop it!" *but she continues*: It's true, you know, I mean what I say—she whelps.

Older student: Giving birth is something all women share, something they have, and if they don't give birth they miss something, they haven't fulfilled themselves in that respect, but this is one respect, major, but one.

Rabbanit: On the way here I gave a nonreligious soldier a ride and we talked, you know, about his plans, and thank God he's got plenty. But a wedding and children he still doesn't see on the horizon, so I know that with the nonreligious the home and children are not such a great challenge.

Student: Why do people always talk about the nonreligious as if they are some other kind of people? I'm very much involved with nonreligious society through my work, and they all want a home and children, just like we do. People are always saying "the nonreligious, the nonreligious."

Older student: What about their divorce figures?

The matchmaker to her neighbor: And what about our unhappy couples?

Rabbanit: Girls, why talk first about the exceptional? Let's talk about the normal. After all, when it comes down to it the majority of women are married with children. Let's see what Rav Kook[20] says about it.

Rabbanit reads from a photocopied page of sources a selection without a reference: Rav Kook explains the great promise God made to women in that he promised them in accord with nature, that is, he gave them duties compatible with their human nature, while men were given a purpose that requires them to fight their human nature. Women naturally assist men to learn, to do the unnatural.

You already understand what Rav Kook wanted to tell us. The combination of our character and our purpose is more natural, harmonious and easy. My natural purpose is identical with my spiritual purpose. I can reach God's throne with internal integrity so I do not need *tefillin* and 613 *mitzvot*. I naturally love my children and husband, and help them study Torah.

Student: *So* why don't men want to be like women, why is it the opposite? If it were that

way everyone would want to be in our place. And here, in the blessing "that he did not make me a woman," they even give thanks every morning that they were not made women, they're glad.

The matchmaker next to me, softly: How much can people go on about that? Someone wrote a mistaken prayer, just didn't think enough and it got taken up, just taken up, and now they're splitting hairs over it. "That he did not make me," "that he made me," enough already! To split hairs over a mistake!

A young, married, pregnant student: Excuse me! Men were also created to love their children and their wives naturally, that naturalness applies equally to women and to men: to love their homes.

Rabbanit: Yes, but with you it's your work, and with him it's not. So for you it's easy and for him it's hard. At work you think about the children all the time and he doesn't.

The married student: So for whom is it hard? For me or for him? Besides, let me tell you that when I come here I don't think about anything, not about the children I left at home and not about the work I left there. Nothing! I come here to learn, to think, to enjoy myself. Children are for the home, for both my husband and me. Not here and not at work.

Rabbanit: We're talking here about a primary, immediate, natural feeling that mothers, or grandmothers, have. When I see my grandchildren, I'd be embarrassed to let you hear the way I go crazy over them. That's something that women have and you can't dispute it. The *midrash* we'll read today about Miriam and the midwives shows us what great spiritual powers lie in this motherly love, it is love that includes self-sacrifice. Allow me one word about politics and then I'll get away from it immediately. Today also we will not be able to carry on the struggle for this land and this nation if we don't know here [pointing to her heart] what we actually are. The values have to be clear, otherwise from where can we take the spiritual strength? And I'm defending the nation here, because I am really full of anger, frustration, sorrow, I don't know what, because the situation is terrible. But these people [the nonreligious] don't know what they are, they don't understand, they have reached the point that Zionism has taken them to and their batteries have worn out. Where will they find spiritual strength? Only someone for whom values and spirit are clear can. And since we can't do anything practical right now—and I'm sorry that that sounds like despair—we have to strengthen our values so that when the day comes we'll have something to support us, and our support as women is the power and happiness of motherhood.

[The class erupts in noise as the students talk among themselves. The Rabbanit lets them talk and does not try to impose silence. My two neighbors continue their conversation.]

The matchmaker's friend: So, what do you say? Isn't she a little extreme for you?

The matchmaker: Her? If you lived for two years in Kiryat Arba, your mind would close too.

[Rina Halevi, an elderly woman, is a very popular teacher at the *Midrasha*. On my third and last year of research there, everybody told me that I can't leave the place without taking one of her courses. Halevi gave a yearlong course on Halakha and morality, one of two courses (the second is more advanced) she has given for many years in the *Midrasha* and elsewhere. She was methodical, thorough, and had a profound agenda which she developed, and even published a book on. She rejected my request to join her advanced course, insisting that I start with the younger students, at the beginning].

Rina Halevi: Motherhood is enslavement. . . . I would like to return to the principle we noted in the last class, and which we will apply throughout the year. It is [she writes on the blackboard]:
"Understanding the status of women begins with
Understanding the status of mankind
Moral equality-personal difference"

I will not address the difference between men and women—the feminist literature does that exhaustively, while the Rabbinical literature provides us with a large number of texts on the character and essence of women that I have no intention of dealing with, because they are thoughts and stereotypes and not necessarily Torah principles. As far as I am concerned, the only difference between the sexes is pregnancy and birth. A man and a woman have intimate relations and only she becomes pregnant and gives birth, and whether that is good or bad is open for discussion. I do not intend to argue that women and men are equal in every way as the feminists did, and which they are now retreating from, because this matter of pregnancy and birth cannot be denied.

Our discussion of the law that states that women are exempt from the performance of time-dependent *mitzvot* must take place in this context. Various societies around the world have relegated women to the kitchen, to the children, with a kind of contempt that makes this occupation an inferior one. These roles are, after all, routine, unending. Washing dishes and floors are jobs that have to be repeated over and over. Children get things dirty, cry at night, take control of us, and upset our schedules. Allow me to say that a woman's jobs are connected to time and everyone who raises children knows that it does not go according to the clock. When a child cries you can't leave him crying. There have been many mornings that I've thanked God that he exempted me from putting on *tefillin.* He understands me, while modern society many times does not understand me, is not considerate of me. True, today we have solutions, day care centers, playgroups, and so on, and I'm in favor of those solutions, but they don't invalidate the principle of pregnancy and birth, and the halakha is determined according to principle. From here on out we will learn good judgment, how to arrange priorities, so that we as women can do more.

Shirli: So maybe the halakha has to be changed to say that a person who is caring for children is exempt from time-dependent *mitzvot,* not necessarily just women. For instance, I see my brother-in-law standing outside the synagogue with the children while his wife prays. The law just has to be changed, because you said that a man who is performing a *mitzvah* is exempt from another *mitzvah,* and here he's responsible for the life of the children.

Halevi: More than that, Shirli—you didn't mention girls before they are parents, or older women and so on.

Shirli: Exactly. It simply has to be changed—when you are not involved in raising children you are obligated [to follow the *mitzvot*], and whoever is occupied with raising children, whether it's the man or the woman, is exempt.

Halevi: I see that men are taking on more and more jobs in the home and that's good, I'm in favor, but he can't nurse and it all begins from there. Not all of you know, for example, that a woman can perform a *Kiddush* for her husband on Friday night, but I would nevertheless recommend that the fathers continue in that role, because research has proven that the more the father functions within the family, the more family life improves, but it's important that you know that you can.

Shirli: I want to second what you said. When there's a group of girls they always look for a boy to make a *Kiddush* for them, and it's so ridiculous, because they can, too, but they still look for a boy. They should do it themselves.

Halevi: The father's role in the family is very important, for the other side of the exemption from the positive time-dependent *mitzvot* is the positive *mitzvot* that are not time-dependent, and with those the women have the same obligation as men, with three exceptions: "be fruitful and multiply," Torah study, and the redemption of the first-born.

Osnat: What do you mean? Women are exempt from "be fruitful and multiply?" A woman isn't required to reproduce?

Halevi: Look, that requires organized study and there is a dispute about it, since it says "and God said to them: Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it" [Genesis 1:28], using the plural [form of the verb], but the ruling is that it's his *mitzva*. That's the law, although it is a subject of debate.

Yael: Okay, that's because you can't command a person to do something that often results in death.

Halevi: That's also disputed, but perhaps it's worth emphasizing that there's no point in commanding her to do something that she wants anyway. You have to command him, the man, and to that is attached the commandment to provide for the children's needs, to care for them, to teach them. There's no need to command her, for her it's self-realization. Jean-Jacques Rousseau ordered the French nobility to raise their children themselves, but he sent his own five children out of the home. This already brings us into a moral discussion of imposing a commandment on another only if you observe it yourself. Perhaps that is why women are not commanded to be fruitful and multiply.

Efrat: Maybe there are women who don't want children, or who want to do other things, or who maybe can, and that's their business, manage with all the *mitzvot* and with their children. By exempting them from the time-dependent *mitzvot*, which are important, and especially from study and from *Gemara*, when all our lives are based on that, on study and prayer, and it belongs to everyone and affects everyone, that's what brings about inequity.

Halevi: Look, Efrat, you are raising the matter of study and that's a subject unto itself that we will talk about, and of course on its own could be the subject of a course or several

courses, but anyone who tells you that it's possible to manage with everything isn't telling the truth. Raising children is giving up control of your life. You have to look at the Torah's principles. The attitude towards you is in principle one of equality and personally as a woman there is a difference, just as there is a difference between a lay person and a priest. In Judaism it is the value of mankind that determines. Even if there were a pattern of a father outside and a mother at home, there would be no division of prestige here, outside being good and the home inferior. Raising children is not considered a lesser matter, that's unambiguous, it is a role that has superiority in it. I'm not saying that that solves the problems and answers the questions. After all, people say, it's wonderful that you've raised children, but what about you, you haven't realized your own potential. If I'm a nurse or a teacher who does it for others, that's okay and creative, but if I do it for my own children, it's not? It is a great matter to raise children, after all to raise a girl is to raise yourself.

BETWEEN IDENTITY AND WORK: THE TEACHERS' PRESENTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD

These two ethnographies can be analyzed from different angles. The shifts in the discourse from orthodox literacy to pop science to actuality to poetry, which are characteristics of both ultraorthodox and Zionist-religious talk, invite a literary discussion which is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, the ethnography will be read for the major voices as they revolve around the theme of mothering.

When mothering is construed as work rather than "identity" or fixed biological or legal relationship, people can be seen to engage in mothering with differing expense of time at various periods in their lives, and in various and often changing sexual and social circumstances.[21] A close reading of the ethnography shows two streams of thought. Rabbanit Meir presents mothering as a joyful calling that stems from the inherent identity of women, while Halevi tends to present it as work.[22]

Rabbanit Meir's opening words—"I wish to know myself and the creator and to do so with the powers that I and not others have, and without comparisons between men and women"—could have been said in any number of feminist circles. And the context resembles other feminist settings: women who have come to study amongst their own, women who wish to enlarge their zones of participation in their own society by knowing more and acting differently. But, the context is also a women's college in a religious Zionist institution dedicated to educating a nationalistic community. The college is well integrated into the general society, yet is orthodox.

Rabbanit Meir had a curriculum that she planned to spread over four meetings with the students. In the first session here discussed, she laid out her general viewpoint in which the representation of motherhood is central, and stands, like in most orthodox discourses of women, face to face with knowledge, learning, and power.[23] Motherhood, she tells her listeners, is natural to women; it is their designation on earth and earns them a place in the world to come. Being a mother is being oneself, and therefore easy and joyful. Motherhood is a source of morality, of national strength (which is currently under threat), and an all-encompassing identity. The goodness of motherhood evolves from its inherent naturalness for women. It accompanies them wherever they go, whatever they do. Motherhood is

gender full, filled only with women.

Rina Halevi gives her listeners a different presentation of motherhood. She reduces it to a biological fact: "A man and a woman have intimate relations and only she becomes pregnant and gives birth, and whether that is good or bad is another matter." According to her interpretation, the practice of mothering is slavery, made up of never-ending routines that get the doer nowhere but growing someone else up. Halevi does not speak of merits. She promises neither fun nor joy, only sleepless nights and dirty floors. The object—a fully-grown up child—turns into the subject, and the subject—the woman—turns into an enslaved object ("raising children is giving up control of your life"). The Torah is considerate of that process, she says, and exempts the mother-doer from time-dependent mitzvot. This exemption elevates the enslaving practice of mothering and puts it in the category of any other major deed specified in the Torah. Motherhood is gender-full of women, due to a biological fact. The Torah is built according to facts and principles with which one does not argue. Whereas Meir presents motherhood as an identity, a source for entitlement in the community of believers, a base for moral standing, joy and fulfillment for the women mothers, Halevi describes it as a biological reality, an endless routine targeted at the child. Whether "identity" or "work," both presentations are gender full (of women).

These representations reproduce mothering vis-a-vis learning and allow for no feelings of inferiority, exploitation, or anger. According to Halevi, feeling exploited as a woman-mother will mean that the Torah is mistreating women, and that an aspect of the Torah, which stands for absolute truth and virtue, is wrong. According to Meir, anger is simply unnecessary since motherhood is actually fun. As for the position of knowers, Meir's quote from the Talmud tells that a woman learns by not learning, thereby allowing her men (husband and boys) to study. The mother, as Walkerdine puts it, is the facilitator of the patriarchal pedagogy. "It is masculine sexuality, to the point of violence, which is validated by this pedagogy. It is the female teacher who is to contain this irrationality and to transform it into the symbolic violence of mastery, the law."[24] As Meir puts it, she does not need to alter her nature in order to do what she has to do; it is the man, the father, who has to discipline himself to sit and study on his way to fulfillment.

According to Halevi, the mother is exempt from learning Torah because it is a time-dependent deed. Since she is occupied with educating others, being her own many children's teacher, she has no time to study. "The cost is borne by the teacher, as it is borne by the mother. She is passive to the child's active, she works to his play. She is the servant of the omnipotent child, whose needs she must meet at all times."[25]

Between the mother who facilitates men's cultural selves by her natural character, and the mother who simply functions as a servant, there is no room for men in the work of mothering that Ruddick would like to see. No room for a woman who is anything but a mother in identity or because of an arbitrary biological fact. Such women are either an aberration (according to Meir) or bad mothers (according to Halevi).

The audiences of both these teachers are students. Some are mothers who have come to study Torah-one quarter at this particular summer course. Almost all of them will end up mothering and working outside the house, sharing with their husbands the burdens and joys of rearing and sustaining a family. Those who are already mothers share child rearing with their husbands (as related in the interviews). Their experience tells them that combinations are possible. Their choice to come and study texts, which most of their mothers never dealt with, is but one of those combinations. Paradoxically, it is met by conservative teachers and curricula that aim at reproducing the "womb-mind" binary.[26]

Neither representation was new to the women. It is what they have always heard in their religious schools. But some of them had already had different experiences reading canonical Jewish texts in other institutions or in private circles. They know that somewhere there are ways, legitimate by religious standards, to interpret these texts in a more empowering way. Other students came to search for those new ways, but got, as they wrote in the feedback sheets (which I read), "the same old crap from high school."

The Zionist religious pedagogy has been forceful. It succeeded, with the support of the youth movement Benei-Akiva,[27] in producing a generation of committed people, a vital community, and political achievements. At the same time, the pedagogy left very little room for self-criticism, a phenomenon very much discussed following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by one of those committed youngsters.

In order to meet the high standards of the community—that is, to remain orthodox in a nonreligious environment and adhere to the Greater Israel dream—one has to be an active participant in public life: to learn more, to know, to do. This basic expectation, which is aimed at one's identity as a citizen and a believer, apparently clashes with one's gender. The women are caught between these two expectations: they have to change the gender ideology in order to become part of the very community that produces that ideology. To a degree they already have. They learn more Jewish studies, and learn it differently than did their mothers and grandmothers. The married ones have jobs and share mothering and household chores with their men. This reality is not echoed in the two sessions described here, or (in Halevi's) is presented in a reductionist manner.

Thus, the students, who challenged their teachers, the texts written by the male sages, and the realities they portrayed queried both representations. In what appeared to be an attempt to keep from falling back into the old motherhood trap net, they commented, questioned, ridiculed, and created such havoc in the classroom that Rabbanit Meir told them to submit their questions in writing.

THE GREEK CHORUS-STUDENTS' REACTIONS

Was it luck that I sat next to the "matchmaker" and was privy to her vehement remarks? Perhaps. Sitting somewhere else might have given me only the public discourse, or might have exposed me to another critique going on in another part of the room. Having been at the *Midrasha* for three years, and having conducted interviews with more than fifty students, I learned that there is a significant

difference between what is said in class and what is thought and said privately.[28] The matchmaker's conversation with her neighbor is not unusual, although her outspokenness and blunt language were rare gems an ethnographer only dreams of stumbling upon.

The subversive act was initiated by another student who, from the outset, refused to go along with Rabbanit Meir's agenda: "Anyone who is sure he can make a contribution and does so doesn't look in the Torah for justification. . . . Not all women are the same." This student rejected the basic premise, which she knew from previous experience was aimed at comforting the women for not doing the "important things." She did not want to go out and look for her worth or merit because people who are sure of their contribution do not seek solace in the texts. The open discussion turned quickly to the inevitable joining of woman and mother. The students challenged several edicts: a complete woman is one who is a mother, women always think about their children, men are not built to love and care for their children and homes, nonreligious Jews do not cherish family and children as much as religious Jews do.

The Rabbanit seemed unprepared for such an onslaught. She welcomed the first question, but at the beginning of the second meeting she asked the students to write down their questions and hand them in at the end of the lesson. Her sweet opening and pseudofeminist declarations were met with such a rapid barrage of protests that she was forced, sooner than she planned, to reveal her "true stand." "Excuse me," said a pregnant young woman, stretching her legs to get more comfortable. "Men were also created to love their children and their wives naturally," hinting that if it's nature we are talking about and not ideology, let's stretch the facts to include men as well. When the Rabbanit admitted that men might love their children too, she added that for them it's work because they have to prime themselves for it, while for her it's easy because children are her constant occupation. "So for whom is it hard, for me or for him?" The student doesn't give up. There's work to be done, and nature has nothing to do with it, although, as her body tells her, motherhood is not gender free.

The matchmaker (twenty years old and not married) is well aware that motherhood is not gender free, and religious life makes marriage and children the ultimate goal. In fact, she is part of the industry, and views the *Midrasha* with relish—as a gold mine with lots of "material" for practicing her trade. She just doesn't want to be told wrong, to have the business of work sugarcoated with romance. Her words are a running commentary on the main drama, a Greek chorus. Men wrote the texts; that's why they ask those questions. The conspiracy is clear, she says to her embarassed listener, while deftly knitting a man's *kippa*. Suspicious of everything being said, she listens to the Rabbanit with belligerence, not letting a statement go by without comment. Her sister may give birth to too many children, but that doesn't stop the matchmaker from helping produce more brides. Kiryat Arba may be a militant place that makes people closed-minded, but that doesn't stop her from attending a class (for no credit) held by the rabbanit of that settlement. The matchmaker proffers a vulgar version of the attitude shared by most of the

students, who do not break the frameworks of family, orthodoxy, or nationalism. At the same time, like most of those who participate in the frameworks and desire to participate more, she speaks from their common experiences, practice, and knowledge. They develop a standpoint that a priori accepts (in this case) motherhood and child rearing, but professes knowledge of the current meanings of maternity.

Halevi's session evoked less aggression, but the protest was no weaker. The motto of her agenda was repeated almost every lesson: "Moral equality-Personal difference," and with it Halevi cut through most of the pressing issues in women's lives in order to trace the basic attitude of the Torah. The Torah, she claims to prove, endows women and men with the same value as human beings, while being considerate of their personal differences. The students in her class exhibited no hostility to her ideas or personality; they told me in the interviews that they liked her kindness, her seriousness, and knowledge. But they challenged her thesis with their everyday reality and demanded formal recognition of both the extant and possible realities.

Shirli talked about her brother-in-law, who watches his children in the synagogue courtyard while his wife prays. She criticized young women who always look for a man to make a *kiddush* when they can do it themselves. Effrat is ready to give up the considerate patronage of the Torah in order to participate in the important deeds from which women are exempt. Both these women demand a formal change in the halakhic law that "helps" them as mothers, in order to do more as women. They describe current realities in which men are ready to do, and actually do, a lot of mothering work.

Halevi does not deny these realities—she is the one who points out the opportunities to enlarge their participation in religious life by conducting a *kiddush* and other rituals—but at the same time she discourages them. She reduces the opportunities to their bodies time and again by mentioning pregnancy and breastfeeding, and she uses popular psychology about the importance of preserving the role of the father in the family. The possibility of a woman blessing the Sabbath at her dinner table is dismissed not because of a halakhic law, but because she is busy with children and the responsibility to reproduce the patriarchal status of her husband for those children. The possibility of bringing Halakha into line with current realities, as suggested by Shirli, is not even picked up. Halevi goes deep into the essence and paths of the Torah and shows the women that much can be done and changed without jeopardizing their orthodox religiosity. At the same time she is afraid of what she finds. "After all," she says to Effrat, "people say it's wonderful that you've raised your children, but what about you, you haven't realized your own potential. If I'm a nurse or a teacher who does it for others, that's okay and creative, but if I do it for my own children it's not? It is a great thing to raise children, after all, to raise a girl is to raise yourself."

Between the natural joy offered by Meir, and the psycho/biological duties put forth by Halevi, the women are left under the trap net of mothering. Both teachers reduce options of identity and work to a calling, a divine calling which materializes in one's body or one's piety. A mismatch is created between the women's current

life or the one they wish to live, and the one envisioned by the teachers. Sensing that the trap net of mothering is about to ensnare them, they try to throw it back at their teachers and at the texts.

FROM MOTHERS TO KNOWERS (AND BACK?): CONCLUSIONS

In "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth," Ruddick talks about her motivation to deal with mothering: "I was moved to speak about mothering partly because of a feminist desire to challenge the dominant culture ideology of mothers as naturally loving and necessarily female. But feminist thinking was of limited use in forging a representation of mothers as thinkers."[29] Ruddick constructs a theory in which the practice of care evolves into a standpoint. Walkerdine showed how the practice of teaching (done, like childrearing, mostly by women) has turned into an ideology of making room for and availing the growth of omnipotent children. When their works are put together, they stand against the dominant culture ideology where mothers do not think, and feminine thinkers (professional teachers) should only "mother."

The dominant culture ideology of Jewish orthodoxy is not the sole one locating feminine issues in and around maternity. But the centrality, meanings, and practice of childrearing in Jewish Israeli society are quite singular. Beyond the "Jewish mother" cliché and the impact of this myth in contemporary Israel,[30] the community under study takes for granted family and children in the lives of every adult. The students in this ethnography are women. Some are married, some are mothers, most are waiting anxiously to become wives and mothers of large families (with an average of five children). Yet they experience family and children as dynamic, varied, and multifaceted. They know they differ from their mothers in many ways: most of them are more educated (in Jewish and secular learning), they practice more religious deeds, and they wish to participate even more in religious life. At the same time, they see themselves as career women and involved citizens. They know these aspirations are time-consuming, but by making adjustments in their lives some of them can be realized. Looking at their own families and others around them, they see that child rearing can be turned into "work" performed by both sexes, and that beyond children's needs there are adult men and women who wish to conduct meaningful lives side by side. Their women teachers and the readings of the canonic texts they offer refuse to acknowledge the students' experiences and aspirations. The teachers make no room for alternative readings of the texts or for possible halakhic changes. Rather, they push the students (and themselves) away from the position of "knowers"—women who can know the canonic texts, and can read them differently. Whenever texts are offered, they tend to deal with women as wives and mothers, or are interpreted in that vein. At the same time, their knowledge of themselves as women and as mothers or mothers-to-be is denied.

Had the students been offered the status of "knowers" and potential knowers and doers of more, they might have accepted the taken-for-granted position of "mothers." Because they are kept from knowledge by their motherhood, they claim

the position of knowers. They know themselves better than do either the teachers or the texts, and have thus become a restless audience. Had the women been offered the status of Torah learners that went beyond their bodies, maternity might have been left unattacked. From the position of knowers, they could sustain the symbolic meanings of mothering, family and home, and their traditional values. They might even have interpreted them as power. From the position of biological nature and/or destiny, they refuse to see mothering as their main claim for entitlement. The literal interpretation of motherhood, the romantic harp of care, is perceived by most of the students as a limit put on their potential participation as believers, based on invented realities. The institutional refusal to accept the position from which the women speak, its denial of their everyday reality and the future they see ahead, generated detachment, suspicion, and alienation. In response, the students created chaos (especially in Rabbanit Meir's lessons) in which nothing was meekly accepted.

The conservative community, from which this ethnography was drawn, usually does not see revolutions, student riots, and public protest. But these women students circulated a petition during my second year of observations, asking the administration to elevate the standard of learning. They criticized many of their teachers on the feedback forms and succeeded in establishing a program in the *Midrasha* in which sixty women a year out of three-hundred applicants can take intensive Jewish studies (twenty hours a week on top of their regular university schedule). They asked for and got more young academic women on the teaching staff. The change grows slowly from within because its major driving force is the women's will to participate in the community of believers and not to depart from it.

How does the experience of these women fit in with the theory of maternal thinking and polarization of mothering as work or identity? The subjects in this ethnography belong to a community where women accept their role as mothers a priori. The national religious society in which their parents and grandparents grew up gave them a route to "modern times" by joining the Zionist revolution. Today their community has chosen national activism and zealotry, and under that canopy there is a lot of room for women as citizens, political thinkers and doers, and astute students of Torah. Other modern religious communities that turned towards the fundamental or rigid pole have had to acknowledge women's power as citizens (vis-a-vis the state) and as believers (vis-a-vis the community itself). The inevitable recognition of women's full citizenship and piety calls for realignment in gender relations. Faced with this threat, the dominant forces in those communities rally around the old bond between mothering and knowledge (or thinking), magnifying and mystifying motherhood in order to draw the outward-moving women back into the fold. They try to ignore women's experiences and thoughts, to limit their expectations. But, when possible, social realities are coated with sweet talk about motherhood as identity, national call, or mere biology, the students detect the patriarchal forces at work, come face to face with their taken- for-granted maternity, and deconstruct its industry. The very power of critique in this conservative

community is fueled by the democratic, relatively open atmosphere in which they exist.

There is still another power of critique in these orthodox-fundamental communities. I suggest that most of the women do accept mothering as part of their identity. As religious women, they even see this identity as a holy calling (which they tend to emphasize when talking with nonreligious and Western feminists). At the same time they are not ready to reduce their identity to mothering, or to base their personal/social entitlement on their womb alone. The combining of mothering as identity and mothering as work is practical—and profound. The identity pole serves as a source of personal/social/historical recognition while the work pole represents the practices of mothering, both current ones and possible future ones. They approach this "work" with certain presuppositions but do not want those presuppositions to define the work.

The subjects in this study know that women and men participate in the practice of care and know that mothering is a complicated physical and emotional task that is beyond joy, gender, or subjection. The key word here is "beyond." The pedagogical sessions they had to go through were preoccupied with reductions to either work (best done by women) or identity. The women's reluctance to be pushed to either pole or to choose between them should be borne in mind when dealing with feminist thinking. One may not necessarily have to choose between identity and work; rather, one can share and expand them both. Expanding identity makes room for mothers to be more than the work of care they perform and gives them room to be not only mothers but also "knowers," "learners," and "believers." None of these identities contradict their acceptance of motherhood as a salient part of their identity, nor do they stem only from the practice of care. Sharing the work of mothering makes room for everyone to participate in the practice of care.

GLOSSARY

Gemara	Rabbinical discussions and interpretations of the *Mishna*—the collection of oral laws edited in about AD 200 by Rabbi Judah Hanassi. Together they form the Talmud.
Halakha	The Jewish law drawn from the Talmudic literature, an interpretation of the laws of the Scriptures.
Kiddush	The traditional blessing and prayer recited over wine on the eve of the Sabbath or a festival.
Kippa	Head covering worn by a religious Jewish male.
Kiryat Arba	A Jewish settlement near Hebron, known as a hawkish center of zealots.
Midrash	Any of a group of Jewish commentaries on the Hebrew Scriptures compiled between AD 400 and 1200.
Midrasha	A place to learn, usually refers to colleges and teacher training schools. In the orthodox melieu, it denotes women's educational institutions as opposed to the men's *Yeshiva*.
Mishna	The first section of the Talmud, a collection of early oral interpretations of the Scriptures compiled in about AD 200.
Mitzvot	The 613 commandments of the Jewish law; also worthy deeds.

Rabbanit	Feminine form of rav (rabbi), usually a title designating the rabbi's spouse.
Tefillin	Phylacteries worn during morning prayers.
Yeshiva	A religious seminary for boys and men.