

2007/8: The Winter of the Veiled Women

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As far as the “veil” is concerned, linguistic laziness is not an exclusive feature of either Hebrew or Israeli discourse. Indeed, in its global travels, the “veil” has engendered various concerns, entangled debates and an assortment of locally signifying names. Some of those who employ these names are well aware of their shortcomings. However, like all symbols, the “veil” has been reduced to generalizing semantics. Moreover, in its global travels, it has been given not only misleading and reductive names, but also the status of a “problem,” or an “issue,” discussed separately and specifically within the context of each and every place – a trans-local theme that has been trickling from place to place and from country to country, thus creating a phenomenon. Within this opulence, it is clear to whoever hears of the “problem” that, in one way or another, it involves Muslim men, women and children and, furthermore, that it is associated with their attitude toward the order of things, forms of governance, economics and culture. However, the “problem” is positioned precisely on the heads of girls and women.

This essay revolves around Jewish, rather than Muslim, veiled women. It dwells upon a short period of time in winter 2007/8, when a tangential point was created between the worldwide manifestations of the global “problem” and its Israeli variants. The joining in of Jewish women to the camp of veiled women¹ may serve as a platform for various

¹ This, of course, is not the first time that Jews are affected by the veil issue. In France, for example, the ban on publicly wearing conspicuous religious symbols or garbs has a bearing on Jews and their ability to abide by their own dress codes, wear necklaces with the Star of David or yarmulkes. In January 2004, the

theoretical queries. The most recurrent subjects deserving attention can be found on a bipolar axis: on the one hand, veiling is portrayed as an act of submission to patriarchal regime, and on the other hand, it is conceived as provocative and subversive. This essay draws on international research output that moves along this axis, using the particular local case to highlight an additional issue.

The cases revealed in winter 2007/8 will serve as test cases in an attempt to grapple with the question to what extent does the State wish to see you. Or how much of your body does it demand to see, and on what grounds? I shall try to substantiate the assumption that the campaign to ban the veil is conducted in European countries in the name of women's citizenship, of their inalienable human rights as (French / Turkish / Belgians) citizens or individuals belonging to a society committed to its own set of values. In other words, the unveiling discourse claims to perceive Muslim women as citizens among citizens.² In the case of Jewish-Israeli veiled women, the control of unveiling / veiling is mediated by their nationality, and, within this framework, through a dominant gender component – motherhood. Deconstruction of the interest shown by various hegemonies in women by examining the formers' attitude toward veiled female bodies attests to the broader significance of the latter's visibility. The veiling is conceived here as symbolizing visible / invisible self-differentiation or otherness. Behind the veil lurks a proposition for parallel – albeit different – course of life to the one considered normative. Accepting the veil may therefore suggest acquiescence with an alternative scheme for

Knesset held a special session on the implications of the Stasi Commission recommendations on the Jewish community of France. The Chief Rabbi of France and other Jewish leaders from that country attended the session.

² This is not to say that issues of nationality and race are irrelevant, but at the forefront of the arguments stands the matter of the women equal status as French or Belgian citizens. In a way, this is a precondition for their becoming “real” French women. Later on, we shall look into the feminist critique of this precondition.

conducting life, whereas its rejection epitomizes a sort of resistance to the things it represents. However, the veil as clear and pronounced signifier of identity, which automatically marks headscarved woman as Muslim or Jewish, also becomes a hiding place, a refuge for identities of otherness peripheral to mainstream public discourse. Thus, it may prove worthwhile to find out when and to what extent do judicial, welfare, health or criminal law systems wish to monitor what is going on within the hideouts of “other” populations, to keep them, as it were, “on the radar screen.”³

Examination of the Israeli case against the European ones calls for a rethinking of the difference between states in which one is perceived as malleable object (citizen), and states that allegedly let one be what one is. The essay seeks to penetrate the interstices between various Jewish veiled women and their Muslim counterparts in order to discern which kind of interest is shown in their respective bodies. It may well be that certain insights can be garnered within these interstices concerning multiculturalism, cultural tolerance and citizen rights, as well as some insights into concepts such as nationality, gender, motherhood and the body. But first there is the following story that constructs these interstices.

In November 2007 and January 2008, two newspaper articles related the story of a group of women from Ramat Beit Shemesh, who covered their bodies, from head to toe, with multiple layers of cloth (Rotem 2007; Makover-Belikov 2008). Unable to see where they were going, some of them had to be led by one of their children. Focusing on the group’s

³ The American colloquialism “on/under the radar” has infiltrated the Hebrew language and is used to denote perversions, injustices and potential disasters that have evaded the scrutinizing eye of the state and the media. Usually it is employed retrospectively as, for example, in the sentence, “how could the case have escaped the radar eye?” This is a potent and alluring image since it compares the state/the authorities/the media to scanning rays that succeed – or not – to “catch” phenomena. The phrase was used several times in a discussion, in which I participated, with senior representatives of the Welfare and Social Services Ministry (see below). Simultaneously, recently English research discourse has started referring to the area of activity that eludes the “radar eye” as an area of subversive, partisan and maybe also free work.

leader, both articles mentioned, among other things, her occasional vows of silence. At first, these revelations were read like one more eccentricity characterizing the radicalization of ultra-Orthodox life. However, some three months later, in March 2008, these stories resonated loudly as the leader of the group was arrested on suspicion of child abuse and endangerment. Together with stories published around that time about two other cases of child abuse among the ultra-Orthodox, a critical mass was created. Thus the veiled women from Beit Shemesh intermingled were joined by a mother from Beitar Illit and another one from Netivot, who were seen hiding their faces behind a Book of Psalms during remand extension hearings, revealing to the camera only the top of their scarved heads. These women are the local carriers of the “problem” in our discussion. This rare spectacle of Jewish veiled women in winter 2007/8 transpired in a country in which there are quite a few religious women, Jewish and Muslim, who cover their heads in multifarious and diverse ways. Given the unique Israeli public context, it seems to merit specific deciphering within the wider context of comparable occurrences of the phenomenon elsewhere. I shall, therefore, begin with short and general comments on the state of research concerning this “problem.” First, I shall look into some of the countries in which it has surfaced (France, Turkey, Morocco, Belgium, and the USA) and, only then, I shall focus my attention on Israel. The essay will not discuss equally the world-wide and Israeli occurrences of the “problem” – this gap deriving, of course, from the differential place allotted to the “here” and “there” in this work. Drawing on secondary sources, the evidence relating to the “problem” in places other than Israel will be presented succinctly. This will provide the (by all means, unevenly colored) background against and on which local cases would be depicted. Local material will also rely on

secondary sources, rather than ethnography. However, the cases portrayed by these sources occurred within social spaces with which I am quite familiar from my previous studies of various ultra-Orthodox communities.⁴ These cases will serve as test cases. The juxtaposition of local test cases and the global handling of the covering of women's bodies as well as the attempts to manage it will be used to illuminate local politics. I shall argue here that local politics is enacted, first and foremost, through the national parameter (Jewish versus Arab) and then through the role of motherhood (good mother versus bad mother).

National affiliation (il)legitimizes the veiling, whereas the motherly role prompts the state to demand, in certain cases, the unveiling of a woman/mother in order to see her. Under national guise, ways of life, which sometimes contradict the civil good of women (their freedom of movement, education, work, etc.), may be tolerated and permitted as part of "another culture."⁵ However, under the umbrella of "normative" motherhood, this "permission" is sometimes revoked and the other is asked to behave like a "normal" mother.

Veiling, Re-Veiling, and vice versa

Research literature of the 1980s and early 1990s depicted "re-veiling" as indicative of political and cultural changes taking place **within the Arab world**, which, as aforementioned, were signified, among other things, on the head of the new Islamist

⁴ Cf. Elor 1992; 1998; 2006.

⁵ See Glaser and Abu Ras (1994) on the murder of women in Israel's Arab society and the collaboration of Israeli judiciary and Arab patriarchy.

woman.⁶ Unlike the rural headscarf, the urban veil was considered one of a variety of critical practices directed at certain Arab regimes. The new veiling has established its special place due to a combination of the seemingly conservative act of veiling and an independent choice-making (often against the will of the woman's family) as well as abandoning the course of modernization in favor of alternative courses in which religion and tradition are new/old participants in contemporary order. Quite a few social studies have examined the phenomenon, and many publications employ the term "veil" in its various derivatives and forms in conjunction with other themes.⁷ During the 1990s, the veils withdrew somewhat from the symbolic front, making room for other issues relating to the life of Muslim women. Here and there, studies kept referring, implicitly or explicitly, to various veiling practices, but other topics such as women education, religious studies, legislation, reproduction, participation in the labor market, etc. regained their centrality.⁸ Left to its own devices for a while, the "new Muslim female body"⁹ seemed to be accepted and even celebrated for its presence in "modern" sites as part of the postmodern festivity. Meanwhile, veil-related dramatic events – upon which I shall expand later – were taking place in both France and Turkey. Despite the immense differences between these two countries, at the time these lines were written, the constitutions of both forbid bodily religious marking in the public sphere including

⁶ Woman who has moved from the village to the town, first generation university-educated woman, woman working outside the household in the public sector, etc.

⁷ Prominent publications that had informed this discourse were Wikan 1982; Mernissi 1986; Macleod 1991; Zuhur 1992. Canadian scholar Katherine Bullock, who had converted to Islam during her doctoral studies, wrote a book summarizing the debate of the 1980s and 1990s (2002), and Turkish scholar Yildiz Atasoy wrote a comprehensive essay on the same debate (2006).

⁸ See, for example, Moghadam 1993.

⁹ There are, of course, multifarious ways of covering the body. Beside different ways of covering the head, hair, ears and neck, there are women who also cover their shoulders and bosom and so on, or don full head-body coverings with only small openings for the eyes, etc. All these coverings define, shape and reshape the body or, more precisely, the "female body." This essay does not presume to be ethnography of the situation of women who cover themselves and of those who watch them, but one should bear in mind that this is a field of creative, cultural and political research.

educational institutions. During these two decades, studies, researchers and activists were divided into two camps: one advocating the right of women to freely re-veil themselves as they see fit; the other rejecting the veiling as a sign for regression.¹⁰ And then the Twin Towers came tumbling down.

In the war of religions (dubbed by the West “the War against Islam”) that ensued, it was quite clear that the symbolic dimensions would become once again multilateral fields of action. Men’s headwear was not excluded from the game: in the USA, the nickname of choice for Muslim men (and women) was “towel heads” (even though most Muslim men do not cover their heads) indicating the common American image of the quintessential Muslim man as a turbaned Bin Laden. Following the tightening of travel controls, the veil was considered a security risk. Women were ordered to unveil themselves in front of border control officers, documents’ issuers, doormen, etc. The veiling and unveiling of Muslim women’s hair and faces, which were always an important component of organizing their freedom of travel, assumed different connotations than those ascribed to them by researchers in the 1980s. Instead of facilitating the movement of working women who have to traverse public spaces in a city like Cairo, or allowing Saudi veiled women to freely enjoy their shopping sprees, the veil has become an excessive weight obstructing, in various ways, their access to non-Muslim spaces in Europe and the USA; a sort of intra-Muslim billboard that was updated according to the military condition of the war of religions and the inner political situation. Nevertheless, Arlene Macleod’s observation that the new veiling has shifted Muslim women from the hegemony of familial patriarchy to that of external patriarchy (the *ulama*) was, and still is, very insightful (Macleod 1991). During the previous research wave of the veil, Macleod

¹⁰ Gilly Hammer qualifies these camps as “anti-veil” and “anti-anti-veil” (Hammer 2006).

suggested that women strengthened in their faith freed themselves of the intimate control of their male kinsmen by reasoning their new behavior in terms of religious conservatism. Due to the privileged status enjoyed by religious intermediaries in the patriarchal order, men in their families could hardly argue with these women. Hence a considerable leeway was created for many women who were now able to conduct their own life. This reading of women's motivations was indeed empowering as far as the new Islamic movement and its acceptance among women in Muslim societies were concerned. The religious intensification among first- and second-generation female immigrants in West European countries was read in ways both similar to and different from the previous interpretation. Instead of embracing the modern secular patriarchy of their adoptive countries, which allows a certain freedom of action for women (such as the freedom of education and work) and diminished dependence on one's extended family, these women opted for an alternative external patriarchy. The alignment with the new religious establishment in France, the Netherlands, Britain, etc. was construed as an act of emancipation from the conservative familial system and joining in a modern process. But instead of opting unequivocally for a course offered by the western state, there were women who chose complex routes, some of which overlapped the state's intentions (in matters such as education, work, welfare,¹¹ etc.) while others were incongruent with them (in matters such as religiosity, communality, adherence to their language of origin).

Readings such as this of the intensification of religious practices and visibility in modern public spaces (whether in the streets of Cairo or in Parisian boulevards) sustained the tolerance and understanding shown by the West towards the "phenomenon." This tolerance had been infringed every now and then, and actually the veil issue, as a

¹¹ Namely, to enjoy the assistance offered by the state and collaborate with its assistance providing bodies.

principal and symbolic problem, kept featuring high on various agendas. The issue became a subject of public dissention in Turkey and France in 1989, and was raised in Israel in 1994 (Hammer 2006). In the wake of 9/11, the discussions were recharged, as poignantly evidenced by the appointment of the French Stasi Commission and its conclusions.¹² In winter 2007/8, the veil debate had flared up in Turkey, whose pro-Islamist Prime Minister's *hijab* wearing wife was banned from university for this reason. According to Clifford Geertz (1990), societies undergoing change tend to preserve unaltered some of their significant symbols, even though their contents may metamorphose over time. Seemingly unchanged aesthetic patterns, symbols and rituals serve as receptacles that now and then are replenished with different new contents in accordance with the tides of times. The history of the Muslim veil does indeed reaffirm some of Geertz's theory.¹³ Muslim women keep covering the upper part of their body. However, that cover has somewhat changed. The shape of the wrapper, the covered areas, and the veiling ways and fashions, all have changed along with some of the meanings ascribed to them; or maybe vice versa – the meanings assigned to them have changed along with the modification of the wrapper. Following Geertz, Shokeid and Deshen (1999) have demonstrated that a similar employment of symbolism of form and content was involved in the Jewish immigration from North Africa to Israel. Thus, for example, religious leaders, who marked themselves by wearing white jellabiyas in their countries of origin, had white western suits made for them in Israel. The color signified what remained of the symbolism; the form – what had changed. Together, they preserved the

¹² The then French President Jacques Chirac set up in July 2003 the commission, named after its chairman ex-minister Bernard Stasi. The Commission reexamined the application of *laïcité* in the Republic, and focused its discussions on the issue of wearing a veil in public institutions. For the full conclusion of the Stasi Commission, see Stasi 2004.

¹³ Especially as it is formulated in his 1973 book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books).

status of the immigrant and facilitated the import of his and his community's symbolic world. In the case of the veil, it seems that the use of an old form while charging it with new contents is meant not only to facilitate the process of transition or change, but just as much to signify the problematics of this seemingly natural transition and point to possible alternatives to a default option as it were. Presenting the passage (from the village to the town, from Asia/Africa to Europe, from Muslim to Christian countries, from one social class to another, and so on) became the strategy of choice in place of concealing and blurring it. It can therefore be said that the new veils, qua signifiers of immigration and transition, became a symbol of the new social classes and communities: Anatolians living in Istanbul, villagers living in Cairo, Algerians living on the outskirts of Paris, etc.

Internal and external, class, educational and other migrations signify themselves within the public sphere instead of hiding, blurring and assimilating themselves, or erasing one identity and exchanging it for another. And if this is the case, then the veil's power becomes clearer, almost becoming the thing in itself, the signifier as well as the signified. Now it not only represents (signifies) religiosity, but it is also the substance, the presenting. The fact that the strategy of signifying migration zeroes in on the heads of girls and women and as a consequence becomes (along with a plethora of other indicators) a primary signifier of transitions is, of course, of paramount interest.

Semantically, these changes produce a multiplicity and abundance that tend to escape western taxonomies and characterizations. When this abundance becomes a political issue and requires a succinct and clear signifier, this multifariousness collapses into a simple, lean word such as the English "veil," the French "voile" and the Hebrew "*ra'ala*." These terms encompass categories as different as the Iranian *chador*, the

Afghan *burqa* and the Turkish *türban*.¹⁴ Difference/diversity-erasing discourse also seeks to join together cross-cultural and cross-national comparable phenomena and create a homogeneous generalization of “veiled” women, or “others.”

Before turning to Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Netivot and Beitar Illit, our way to Israeli veiled women will pass through several stations around the world: New York France , Turkey , Moroccoand Belgium Moving between various veiled women and between the different ways in which they are conceived, I shall examine the interest shown by the public in the quantity and quality of visible (and invisible) female body parts and attempt to discern when and how this issue relates to other parameters such as citizenship, nationality, social class and gender.

New York-Paris-Brussels

On October 3, 2007, historian Joan Scott from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton University was invited to present her recently published book, *The Politics of the Veil* (Scott 2007)¹⁵ at NYU’s Forum of Gender Studies. This subtitled book seemed to be in line with the 1980s publications and ostensibly carried a promise to provide the reader with generalized analysis of the veil(s). However, as a matter of fact Scott’s book did not deal with either the veil nor with women choosing to wear, or not wear, it.

Historian of France, Scott used the veil as a means for understanding France or actually the “Republic.” The book thematizes three separate occasions on which the issue of the

¹⁴ The Turkish word *türban* (a piece of thin cloth wrapped around the head) denotes the new headcover worn by Muslim women all over the Arab world and beyond. Becoming increasingly popular since the early 1980s, it is dissimilar to more traditional women’s urban and rural headwear.

¹⁵ From now on, all references regarding Scott relate to this book.

veil had “erupted” in France: in 1989, 1994, and 2003 (Scott 2007: 21). These “eruptions” constitute the framework of Scott’s book and underlie her analysis.

The auditorium in which she delivered her lecture was quite packed, however only a handful of veiled women were present there. At the end of the lecture, a woman presenting herself as a secular Pakistani reared and raised in Britain asked Scott why did she dissociate her subject from its all-European context and Arab influences on Western Europe. She mentioned her brothers in London who were strengthening in their religious beliefs and had replaced their traditional Pakistani outfits with Arab ones. In her eyes, this was a symbolic-political statement the meaning of which could be understood only if one transcended the borders of both Britain and Pakistan and looked into the relation between New Islam and Arabism. In her answer, Scott insisted that, although she was quite aware of these aspects, as a researcher of French history she was attempting to understand the Republic through the prism of the veil.

Scott’s shift from veiled women and their motivations to hegemonic onlookers offered fresh insights, to some of which I shall return later on. This shift notwithstanding, the author of the introduction (ibid vii-x) to Scott’s book, Ruth O’Brien, did wander to the fields referred to by the Pakistani woman in her question at the end of the lecture.

O’Brien does indeed draw global conclusions from that slender book. She maintains that the offense against the veil does not represent a struggle between East and West, between modern universalism and sectarian particularism, or a demand for separation of religion and state, although this is how opponents of veiling in public spaces sometimes portray it. Instead, the struggle against the veil is fuelled by racism and nationalism and characterizes homogeneous republics that find it hard to digest the cultural presence of

immigrants from their former colonies (ibid ix). The generalized interpretation offered by O'Brien to the cases presented by Scott within the limited scope of France was not an irresponsible one; she did follow Scott's lead in this respect.

Scott contends that the opposition to the veil has nothing to do with changes in the conduct of Muslim communities in France, and everything to do with France's internal politics, colonial history and power struggles between the political left and right.

According to her, one cannot understand how a few hundred veiled girls could have unleashed such uproar without looking into France's racist history. Scott chose to disassociate the case of France from other cases and re-associate it internally with her classical object of research (the history of France). This is a legitimate choice, even though it does focus on illuminating the Republic at the expense of blurring the faces of the girls who have caused the commotion and makes it difficult to understand why a few hundred veiled Belgian, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian and even Turkish and Moroccan girls provoke, individually and collectively, an unrest of such magnitude.

In any event, the case of France is one of the (possibly final) manifestations of the unwillingness (or inability) of the state to concede some of the public, or some of the "Frenchness." Such a concession would indicate the withering of the Republic's cultural, symbolic layout. The public visibility of veiled women and their conspicuousness in European cities (against a non-Muslim backdrop) present a challenge to the Republic. One could, of course, challenge the Republic's ethos in other ways such as undermining patriotism, historical narratives, the local language, etc. However, according to Scott, the main subversive force of veiled women lay in a different conception of sexuality than that cultivated by France: "There was something sexually amiss about girls in headscarves; it

was as if both too little and too much was revealed” (ibid 152). French beholders saw the veil as provocative concealment, erotic screening – rejection of the western sexual game and proposal of another sex-gender-passion order. Western recognition of the right of men to see was somewhat disrupted, and the acknowledgment of the overt link between sex and gender inscribed in the body acquired an alternative syntax. It was difficult to keep thinking that we were dealing here with oriental submission to patriarchal order within a democratic state: “wearing headscarf itself became an act of aggression” (ibid 158).

Claiming to be a universal order, modern western sex order recognizes the equality between sexes, and this recognition is constitutionally and culturally anchored. But these rather feeble anchors only serve to hide the discrepancy between extant and desirable practices and the continuing existence of the “Holy Trinity”: sex, gender and passion. The veil “unveils” this falsehood. Its wearer declares openly: I am a woman, I am sexual, but I manage my sexual culture differently. This otherness in managing sexuality was conceived, according to Scott, in its broader sense as reflecting a desire to manage differently individuality, democracy, secularism and freedom. Such a conception was seen as a veritable threat on France as a whole, on the Republic. The eroticism of the veil can be enjoyed uninhibitedly in oriental colonial spaces to which it belongs, but not in the postcolonial spaces it has invaded. However, a counter-argument may be made: negation of the right to wear a veil can emerge only if the disruptors are deemed significant in some way and conceived as participating in public affairs, or, at least, as creating therein a visibility that cannot be ignored. The fact that the right to wear a veil across the Republic repeatedly gave rise to public resentment is only read negatively. American

readers of Scott's book learn that just as French men (or white feminists) refuse to have the taste of their coffee and croissant changed, they don't want to see women passersby change. The book refers only fleetingly to the insistence to keep these women (and the communities they signify) in the picture.

A research approach, both similar and different, was employed by two Belgian scholars, Gili Coene and Chaya Longman (2008). France's northern neighbor has also been dealing with the "problem." Approximately a quarter of a million Muslims (mostly Turkish and Moroccans) live in Belgium. In 2008, Coene and Longman published a study subtitled "The Belgian Hijab (in) Question." The two used Belgium's unique cultural makeup, which is divided between Flemish and Walloon (French speaking) populations, in order to pinpoint the local take on this phenomenon. According to their findings, the local attitude toward veiled women is influenced by the ways in which the Belgians perceive themselves as both different from and similar to the French, and by their need to conduct themselves in the outmost subtlety with regard to diversity in general and cultural difference in particular, which underlie Belgium's makeup.¹⁶ Contrary to France, all attempts to enact a sweeping law banning the *hijab* in schools have failed. On the other hand, many public schools that enjoy autonomy in Belgium (due to the precarious ethnic layout of the country) instituted regulations of their own banning headscarves from their premises. The number of those regulations was clearly on the rise at the time they were writing their article. The tension between the will to enforce gender equality in its western sense and the acknowledgment of cultural difference, they maintained, resulted in Belgium's intricate stance regarding the veil. The committee appointed to examine the

¹⁶ The question of splitting Belgium into two separate states and the secession of Flanders was a subject of heated debate at the time.

issue did not reach clear-cut conclusions, but rather argued that the intricacies of managing a society with cultural otherness did not lie specifically on the heads of Muslim women.

As we have seen, this did not prevent most of Brussels' public schools from banning the veil. According to Coene and Longman, these schools were afraid that, as institutions absorbing immigrants, they would be marked as ethnic ghettos. The fact that the decision with regard to the veil was left in the hands of communities and schools (in which parents are part of decision-making processes) did not engender a more sympathetic view of the veil. Belgian inner cultural lines of division are the clearest determinant in the arrangement of social, civil rights, feminist and other organizations. It is hard to build up a Belgian united national front that would reach an all-embracing clear cultural decision. Nevertheless, within this complexity the negative approach to the veil is maintained on both the French and Flemish sides of Belgium.

Unlike Scott, who used the veil to clarify the principles of the Republic and underlined local racism along with the French closely guarded conception of gender and sexuality, Coene and Longman opted for a different direction, better suited to the Belgian context: they emphasized the effort to protect the difference and the unremitting attempts to create within it equal civil spaces. According to them, the veils created visibility of a minority group the majority would have rather not see. Thus a marginal group among the immigrants had invaded the public field of vision and became inevitable. In this respect, Belgian veiled women resemble their counterparts in France, whose visibility was something of an eyesore for the state. In contrast to France, here the part they wanted to veil was not conceived as threatening the republic, since church-state separation is

incomplete in Belgium. Having discussed some aspects of the complex attitude toward veiling in non-Muslim countries, I wish now to dwell a little bit on two Muslim cases.

Istanbul, Casablanca

The Turkish government's decision this week to lift a ban on women wearing head scarves in universities raised a troubling question: Is Islam starting to erode Turkey's secular democracy? (Tavernise 2008)

Elsewhere (Tavernise 2008a), reporter Sabrina Tavernise informs us that by the beginning of June the parliamentary vote of January 2008 to ease the ban on scarves worn on campuses, was annulled by Turkey's Constitutional Court . This vacillation marks one more, undoubtedly decisive, phase in the struggle on Muslim Turkey's secularism or *laïcité*. Surveying the history of this secularism in order to pinpoint its implications on the issue of veiling is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper and my purpose here. Suffice to say that the story of the Turkish *türban*¹⁷ bears great and obvious similarity to that of the French veil. In particular, this resemblance is evidenced by the negotiations over the “untranslatable” term *laïcité* denoting the explicit separation of religion and state. Similarly to France, Turkey strove to constitute itself as a modern secular state with public spheres free of religion, despite its citizens' overwhelming Muslim homogeneity. The great difference in this respect between both these countries lies of course in the fact that new Islam is an intra-state issue in Turkey rather than imported or migrating one. The debate therefore takes place domestically, within the home, even as various groups may indeed envisage models of other homes. In her “The

¹⁷ The *türban* (see n. 14 above), headgear of a new, modern and political nature, goes well with jeans as well as *hijab*. Hence, it could be that it is well suited exactly to environments such as universities and schools, into which the Turkish (and French) girls and women wanted to introduce it. And perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise that one was intent on excluding it from exactly these environments.

New Religious Women's Activism in Turkey” (Akman 2008), Turkish scholar Canan Akman recapitulated the political history of the *türban* pointing to the three waves involved in the re-Islamization of Turkey. As a whole, the re-Islamization process seems like a journey that has enabled a centripetal shift of Turkey’s wider margins. This shift witnessed the migration of the middle classes from the outskirts of cities to urban centers, of countrymen to the towns, of Asians to Europe, of the uneducated to learning institutions, and so on. In the course of this journey, the *türban* became a symbol of border crossing, introducing the “body of the other” to areas hitherto out of bounds for him or, rather, for her. The Turkish religious right assumed the face of a turbaned woman, even though its official representatives were men. Hence, the female Muslim body was responsible – surprisingly enough, predictably enough – for this symbolic journey. The Kemalists demanded to see the female (and male) body as secular, western body. This demand is reexamined now, precisely at the same time as Turkey wishes to join the EU, where gender equality is considered a precondition for political correctness. Thus **the community of Turkish veiled women** disrupts the European dream and consequently draws so much attention. The demand to manage the body of Turkish women who aspire to integrate in Turkey’s “European” sectors (universities, workplaces in metropolises, etc.) attests to their importance, relevance and visibility.

To sum up, Akman contends that the move, which utilized women, also offered them new opportunities. In the last decade, alongside conservative Muslim women, a generation of “new religious women,” as she puts it, has emerged, women active in areas such as religious and general education and human rights. It is indeed very tempting to compare this move to the trajectory of the Shas Movement in Israel. However, I shall

resist the temptation, referring the reader to the partial description of that trajectory offered in my book *Mekomot Shmurim* (reserved places) (2006). In any case, the *mizrahi* religious face in Israeli iconography is by no means that of a woman.

Akman cannot but acknowledge that Turkey's re-Islamization has opened up leeway for women who were hitherto excluded from social and political fields of action. Her words exude, I believe, a sweet scent of hope for a possibly more powerful cooperation between secular (Kemalist and other) feminists and a generation of new religious women in the already budding coalition. From this optimistic position, Akman concludes her paper saying that these "new women" understand that too much energy is expended on the issue of the *türban*. This struggle is orchestrated by religious and secular patriarchies above and through the heads of women, rather than out of concern for their well being.¹⁸

Internal cooperation is not as simple as one might think. Often enough it ends up in splitting various organizations, and placing men and women with mutual empathy and engagement on opposite sides of the fence.¹⁹ The segmentation not always corresponds to the degree of religiosity. Needless to say, each group believes its actions promote women's interests, be it in the shorter term, or in the longer term by adhering to state values.

A researcher of Moroccan origin, anthropologist Nadia Guessous, , presents another example of inner segmentation. Her study is a broad ethnography, of which I have read

¹⁸ These "new religious women" are less akin to the Shas women than to religious Zionist women (Elor 1998). The latter have initiated in the last two decades a feminist religious move that affects internally the religious Zionist society, and externally – Israeli society as a whole. They cooperate with non-religious organizations, while leveling measured criticism at the religious patriarchy. These transformations also involve a changed attitude toward the female body. Discussions on the sanctity of woman and her place in the community of believers, on impurity and purification, the ritual of full immersion and sexuality form today the forefront of Jewish Orthodox feminism. This may indicate a self-evident linear course in which a change in one area may lead to a change in another.

¹⁹ On this complex relationship, see Elor 1993.

the part dealing with the aversion of Moroccan feminists to their compatriots who chose to wear *hijab*. Guessous discusses extensively the motivations, strategies and implications of this rejection in her PhD dissertation, which focuses on these veteran activists whom she identifies as belonging to the political left. As she herself states, she wants her work to contribute to the discussion on the relations between the feminist subject and secular culture. The uncompromising opposition of her interviewees to the veil is therefore a test case of such relations.

She begins her ethnographic journey by thoroughly examining the writings of Joan Scott and especially those of Talal Asad (2006) on this topic, but takes the Moroccan women as an authoritative source for interpreting it. In this respect, I believe, she has an advantage. She does not criticize Asad's and Scott's arguments, on the contrary: she relies, for example, on elements of Asad's argument that the resistance to the veil is not a matter of the separation of state and religion, but rather a struggle for the right of the state to mold its subjects as it sees fit. *Laïcité* is a modern mechanism meant to induce loyalties to the nation-state by means of standardized symbols (ibid). Guessous also draws on Asad's analysis of the construction of the affective world of the subject in a modern state, complementing it with Joan Scott's historical perspective. Bringing the voices of leftist feminist women, she concludes that their acute aversion to their veiled sisters stems from a sense of loss, and from the moment preceding the recognition and acceptance of the fact that the aesthetics of the modern has changed. The face symbolizing the modern and the body associated with progress are no longer unified or homogeneous. From now on, they may appear in different guises than the ones her objects of study have learnt to recognize. Namely, the forms enforced on them by the West and accepted by them as the only

possible channel of carrying and embodying progress.²⁰ Now they are confronted with other strategies of female action, which they deem undesirable. Their veiled sisters despair and fatigue them, and call in question their life work.

Guessous empathizes with the leftist feminist activists in Morocco, but also portrays them as older-generation naïve and anachronistic combatants operating in a complex sophisticated and pluralistic present that acknowledges both “this and that,” both “this way, and that way.” Modern western colonialism had a sweeping influence on the older generation of the former colonized. Willingly revealing their faces and shoulders in front of it, women of that generation consider it an act of progress. In Guessous’s work, these women are portrayed as representing western countries on the soil of North Africa. She does not read their uncompromising demand to see their sisters’ faces as asserting their entitlement to struggle for their civil rights, but rather as the enforcement of one-dimensional feminism. The fact that the state (Morocco) elects not to interfere and that the process of religionization and re-veiling enjoys there a total support does not figure much in the debate.

And what happens in Israel? Who cares to what extent an Israeli woman is revealed or covered? What is the price of covering the female body, and who pays it? Let’s begin with a sleight of hand, a game of unveiling and veiling.

Veiled in Downtown Tel Aviv

At the end of February 2008, the weekly local paper *Ha’ir: Tel Aviv* published an article by Liad Kantorovicz. The reporter conducted a social-political field experiment on and

²⁰ It should be mentioned that on the covers of many books dealing with the veil, women in traditional Muslim apparel are seen beside microscopes, computers and lab tubes. Apparently, this is the new and different image of progress.

with her own body: for a whole month, she carried on her usual business wearing a *hijab*, the Muslim headscarf which covers the woman's hair, ears and neck, leaving only the face uncovered. Like John Howard Griffin before her, who blackened his skin as he traveled for six weeks through the American South in 1960 (Griffin 1961), Kantorovicz wanted to physically understand some things:

I didn't choose to wear a *hijab* for a month in order to find out whether Tel Aviv is a racist town. The answer to this question seemed obvious to me: if even I, with all my tolerance and leftism, turn my head each time I see a woman who walks in the streets of Tel Aviv wearing a *hijab*, then racism is ingrained in us. I wanted to understand how does it feel, knowing that unless I wear this piece of cloth on my head, I won't find it out" (Kantorovicz 2008: 40).

Throughout the month-long experiment, Kantorovicz had gained quite a few insights into the people surrounding her. Based on their attitude towards her, she managed to classify her surroundings into Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, Russian and Orthodox Jews, Arabs and Jews, Christian and Muslim Arabs. As she expected, this did not lead to any significant revelations. Life beneath the *hijab* made her empathize with Jewish Orthodox women and men who are treated with derision and patronized by secular Jews in downtown Tel Aviv. She felt at ease among migrant workers in Tel Aviv's old central station, and at her Yoga class where her head cover was perceived as "trendy."

Kantorovicz presented two interesting observations: one about herself; the other projected onto her. The first observation is spelled out already in the beginning of her report:

"There isn't a single article of clothing that announces more clearly 'I am an Arab'."

Interestingly enough, the *hijab* is not Arab but rather Muslim headscarf. Muslim women

wear it in Indonesia, Iran, India, and wherever they adopt a dress code considered appropriate for religious woman. Equating Muslim and Arab is, of course, historically based and in Israel is almost a given. However, bearing in mind Kantorovicz's observation, we should be aware to what degree a rash overlapping of Arabness and Islam is associated with a symbol, a signifier, namely: the *hijab*; to what degree it is projected from without and internalized by non-Arab Muslim communities (as suggested by the Pakistani student, who mentioned her brothers' change of dress).

A gay bar provided Liad Kantorovicz with her second observation. Two Arab gay men from Jaffa asked her angrily: "Why do you insult our religion?" As a matter of fact, they have demanded of her to abide by their own distinction between the sacred and the profane, or the purity of the mosque and the "filth" (as they themselves put it) of the bar. Their demand accentuates a general conclusion that can be drawn from Kantorovicz's mini-experiment: the impact of the *hijab* lies in its displacement. At the Tel Aviv University and the Charles Clore Park, no one would have looked at her twice, but she was not supposed to make an appearance in places such as local income tax offices, downtown Tel Aviv, shops of renovated Florentin neighborhood, or Rothschild Boulevard. In these locations, the *hijab* on her head, along with her fluent, accent-free Hebrew and her self-confidence in urban public spaces produced an anomaly. *Hijab* on the Gate to Jaffa promenade or in a university classroom is in its proper place. There, it says to onlookers: "I am an Arab, and I acknowledge the boundaries of my social leeway. I don't cross or disrupt them (as do the *hijabs* in European streets, for example)." She does not expand on what she learnt about herself, about her body, about the covering and uncovering of the female body in public space. The article does not tell us how does

it feel to walk around wearing a *hijab*. One of the introductory sentences makes this lack all the more disappointing: “Everyone look at me. I’m used to being looked at, although usually I’m wearing something that justifies it: a painted moustache, stockings with garter belt, or a plastic tiara – leftovers from last Purim. But today, I’m not bearing any freakish label; I even look conservative. So what are they all looking at?” From here, she could have ventured a work on the body: try to make us understand what it felt like and how this feeling was constituted by the very objectification of her performance as an active subject by the gaze of others.

Kntorovicz, as she herself testifies, is well versed in performative plays, some of which have to do with the representation of her own sexuality. Painted moustache and stockings with garter belt are by all accounts signifiers of sexual/gendered body. In a seemingly westernized society such as Israel, or at least in certain streets of Tel Aviv, such signifiers undermine the sexual accessibility of one of the sexes. A woman wearing a moustache presents a problem to the standard male gaze, disrupts the “Holy Trinity” of queer theory: sex, gender and desire. If she is female – then she is a woman; and if she is a woman – then she must be accessible to men’s desire. But if she is a woman with a moustache, then everything falls apart. Stockings with garter belt are also a performative prank.

Ostensibly, it is a very sexual piece of clothing, but its casual context – in the morning on the way to work, instead of on the pages of pornographic magazine – exposes the backstage of the sexual-gendered-voluptuous play, killing all the fun, as it were.

And it seems that, of all things, the “western” observer perceives a woman’s choice to cover herself, to humble herself in a space that – unlike Muslim environments or the university – does not see veiling as a standardized, sexualized marker, as a sexual

provocation.²¹ This observer reads body language as signaling invitation/rejection, and Scott cites, in this context, two members of the French Stasi Commission who said: “The language of the body is that of its accessibility to the other sex” (Chafiq and Khosrokhavar, as cited in Scott 2007: 155).

As a privileged Israeli citizen, Kantorovicz can amuse herself, undermine, disrupt, surprise and trespass without being called to order. For the small prices exacted from her, she was amply rewarded. She is an active journalist, a workingwoman. Her neighbors did not scribble slur words on her door and going through security checks (at shops, the Tel Aviv central bus station, etc.) she wasn’t excessively humiliated. The journalist’s veiled female coreligionists, on the hand, are treated very differently: according to them, they want to feel like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Lea, but are often perceived as “Fatimas.”

A Veiled Women from Beit Shemesh

In November 2007, Tamar Rotem published a short article in *Haaretz* newspaper under the title: “This is not Kabul, It is Beit Shemesh” (Rotem 2007). She described a “new phenomenon” among ultra-Orthodox women, who according to her, “turned modesty into a flag, self-expression, obsession. Of their own accord, unguided by a rabbi, they pray and recite Psalms very often and believe that modestly dressed women will bring redemption” (ibid). These women, whose total number in Ramat Beit Shemesh, Jerusalem, Safad and other places is estimated at about 150, are usually associated, in one way or another, with one woman, their purported leader, who assumed for herself the title

²¹ The Israeli onlooker is especially interesting, because, unlike Scott who deals with a male (and occasionally female) French onlooker, Kantorovicz is dealing with many different onlookers: Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, Arab and Jewish and others. Thus, here, the adjective western should be put in inverted commas.

“Rabbanit.” Beside their prayers and dress codes, they also take vows of silence. Some of them opt to stay at home as much as possible, and many cover the house’s hallways with various fabrics to create an atmosphere of a tent. All keep healthy dietary regime, and the Rabbanit also practices alternative medicine.²² The multi-layered garments are meant to emulate or revive the appearance of biblical mother figures. Most of the attention is drawn to the veil-like fabric covering their heads. This external piece of cloth is thrown over another scarf or several scarves tied under the chin (and not on the back of the neck as is the custom among other Orthodox Jewish women). Several women also cover one eye or both eyes and need to be guided through the streets by their children. Rotem visited Keren in her home and joined her and her followers in some of their study sessions. The veiled women from Beit Shemesh had their “15 minutes” of media glory in winter 2008. Sari Makover-Belikov (2008) wrote about them in detail in *NRG, Ma’ariv* newspaper’s online edition, in January 2008. The numerous phone calls I had received from foreign reporters stationed in Israel indicated that the phenomenon certainly caught their attention as a potentially interesting piece of news for their readers. Taking it at face value, they might have rushed to conclude that it represented a leakage of the European “problem” to Israel’s Jewish society.

As Rotem rightly mentions, we are dealing here with independent initiative and move of women who did not consult their rabbis,²³ or asked their husbands’ permission.

Moreover, in some cases their choice even prompted their husbands to divorce them. The group’s leaders advise novices how to fend off their husbands’ objections. They tell them

²² An alternative reading of the phenomenon would interpret it in the terms of the influence of “New Age” cultures on many members of certain newly religious groups or on people who were not born in Israel.

²³ Although both she and Makover-Belikov mention Rabbi Michael Urie’s book *Worlds of Purity* (2001) and Rav Benyamin Rabinovitz as their sources of inspiration.

to avoid arguments and confrontations. Modesty, they say, is their own business, not their husbands'. They are advised to answer comments thrown at them with "all is done for the sake of God."

If we were to locate the phenomenon in the vast field of managing the Jewish-Orthodox-female body, veiled women would be at its center. Not the accepted or conventional, canonical, legitimate center, but at the eye of the storm. They are surrounded by various communities that manage their bodies and clothing in different ways and recoil from the origin of the swirl like centrifugal circles. Nevertheless, they are aware of the modesty tornado, of the vortex moving towards its new targets: tights for girls, gender-separated buses, stitching up *schlitzes* (clothing slits), wig-burning, declaring tricot fabric spawn of the devil, and so on and so forth.

Various transformations take place in the ultra-Orthodox world, opening up increasingly more options for participating in non-Orthodox arenas (work, leisure, studies, communication, etc.). Alongside these easy but rather constant breezes, rages the modesty tornado as it looks for creative responses to its self-styled challenge. Of course, it is men who control the bellows channeling the tornado and mark its route. The veiled women of Beit Shemesh only took control of one of the bellows and accelerated its pace to such a degree that seemed to outside observers to radicalize the situation *ad absurdum* or *ad obsessionem* as suggested by Rotem (2007).

The relentless imperative of "chastity" imposed upon women has been widely discussed in sociological literature,²⁴ and has become a meta-narrative of the life of women and girls. Chastity is the yardstick, the ethics and aesthetics of their existence. The veiled women resorted to the original text and appropriated the story. Actually, there is nothing

²⁴ See Elor 1992; Oryan 1994.

new about it. Women, and other weakened groups, always knew how to make the most of the oppressive component by identifying it and working through it, by surviving through the kitchen, through their children, their sexuality. The feminist attempt to identify in these tactics remnants of empowering is not new either. Identifying the oppressive element and choosing a way to deal with and resist it are certainly a kind of agency. Yet the feminist endeavor usually strives to find out where a certain conduct places women. For instance, whether ultra-Orthodox women who have increasingly more children, more than their spouses would have wished, are performing subversive act; can their appropriation of the *baleboste* icon of a perfect housewife, who also works outside her home, raises 14 children and looks amazing, be interpreted as *Haredi* feminism?

In contrast to Macleod (1991) and other scholars who perceive the Moslem veiling as a liberating practice in oppressive environment, we can safely say that the veiling did not provide the women of Beit Shemesh with opportunities to venture into new public spheres of action. The plethora of fabrics entrenched them in their castles/homes, confined to their innermost rooms, in which some of them keep their vows of silence. They are not to be seen outside, nor heard at home: thus subversiveness assumes here different connotations. These women wanted to disappear as it were, to duck all surveillance devices, to operate in the dark. But their refusal to be seen and heard was not easily accepted; many elements, both private and public, called authorities to intervene in the acts of covering and uncovering outlined by the women from Beit Shemesh. The authorities, in their turn, were not too keen to intervene. Perplexed as they were, inner authorities (local rabbis, the town's public leaders) waited for this lunatic fringe

phenomenon to vanish over time. Turning a blind eye to it, the peace of the *Haredi* public was only interrupted by occasional neighborly harassment.

Constructing the subversive stance domestically shifts the veil debate from the universal level and brings it nearer to the female body. The debates in France, Turkey and Belgium revolved around the *laïcité* of the state and its public spaces and around prohibitions and permissions pertaining to both men and women, although their main issue was with girls and women. In her analysis of Mona Jbareen's case in Israel, Gilly Hamer (2006) too claimed that it was tried with regard to the state and its institutions and away from the female body. The veiled women of Beit Shemesh deny this illusion. The "domestication" of the issue created an interface between the woman qua normative citizen and her body, sexuality, children, spouse and immediate environment. Should the state wish to intervene in Jewish women's acts of covering and uncovering, it will have to follow a different course than the one taken in France. In France, women are required to reveal their faces qua citizens, whereas in Israel, as we shall find out shortly, they are ordained to do so by virtue of their nationality and their motherhood.

"These are ways of the Gentiles, this is how Arab women walk around the Old City": The spectacles of the Nation

In front of the rabbinical court discussing the divorce case of a "veiled" woman, stood a woman who refused to bare her face and communicated with the *dayanim* (religious judges) via written messages delivered by her (female) attorney. Court-ordered personality tests refuted their assumption that she was a "mental case" (Rotem 2007).

Among other reasons, the court ordered the divorce citing that “these are ways of the Gentiles, this is how Arab women walk around the Old City [of Jerusalem].”

The discontent with the “veiled” women phenomenon is interweaved with the Arab “issue,” and this theme runs throughout the texts written about them and said to them.

The title of Rotem’s (2007) article alluding to Taliban women and reports of the women themselves indicate that the first phase of the veil’s politization and the attempts to regiment it were nationally biased. This should not come as a surprise, as this is the most significant societal-political parameter in Israel (not unlike the *laïcité* in France and Turkey, or the Belgian preservation of ethnic difference), and in the case of veiling it is, in fact, self-evident. To quote the women’s own words, as recorded by journalists:

“They called me smelly Arab and told me to get lost... they pushed me... I’m stopped at the central bus station and asked to present my papers. I don’t want men seeing my [ID] photo, so I show them my son to prove I’m not an Arab” (Rotem 2007).

“Neighbors scribbled on my mailbox ‘chuck out the Taliban,’ and address me in Arabic”; “Once I was stopped by policemen who scattered my bags all over the place”; “People say about me, ‘who is she? A Moslem? An Arab?’”; “It is most hurtful when we are insulted among ultra-Orthodox public” (Makover-Belikov 2008).

The public life of “veiled” women are far harder than those of Liad Kantorovicz. As a multi-cultural site, Tel Aviv Central Bus Station was kind to Liad. Central bus stations in Jerusalem, Bet Shemesh and Safad are less sympathetic spaces for Jewish women who cover themselves without betraying who they really are, since they do not cover themselves like either Jewish Orthodox or Arab women. It stands to reason that what makes the difference is the multi-layered tent-like outlook and the covering of the face.

Many Muslim women cover different parts of their bodies, especially in western countries but also in Israel. Sometimes they cover their entire body, including their fingers. However, their faces remain exposed, very exposed. The gaze, the eyes and facial expressions become all the more conspicuous. For the sake of argument, one may overstate and say that Moslem veiling of this kind (unlike the all-covering one current in many other places) transforms the woman into all-seeing eyes, into an onlooking being, into a camera, into someone who does not allow others to see clearly her body while she herself sees all. Such a woman reveals only her face to the inquisitive eye, as if saying, “this is me,” me, not my breasts, not my buttocks. Such an appearance might be disturbing. The woman’s covered body safeguards and enables her eyes to watch freely, since her clothes mark her as protected, identified human being belonging to a certain culture.

The veiled women of Beit Shemesh introduced a new game of (defying) visibility. Like early twentieth century *halutzim* (Zionist pioneers), they wished, as it were, to reproduce the appearance of the nation’s Canaanite forefathers/foremothers, to dress like our foremothers in their tents. They, too, relied on the orientalist assumption that the Bedouin prototype accurately represents the appearance of our ancestors. Thus they perceive the clothes of the Arab rural woman as an authentic and downright restoration of those worn by our mother Sarah. In a way, contrary to Kantorovicz, they have dissociated the “veil” from its Arabness, and thereby differentiated between Arabness and Islamism. For them, the veil is an article of clothing that had characterized the female dwellers of the tents of Kedar and has nothing to do with any decree of religious law (be it Jewish, or Moslem).

But they don't stop there. By resorting to the "desert source," they wish to accumulate power and bring it home, in order to transform the principle arena allotted to the activity of Orthodox women. This is a completely different arena from that of the Moslem female agents. The latter wish **to go out into the world** as Moslems, whereas the veiled women of Beit Shemesh want to dig entrench themselves **inside**, to dig into the walls of their homes and shake their pillars. They do it in a way familiar to women and fundamentalists – the "right" and "acceptable" way.

Their use of the code of decency should protect them from criticism: one cannot easily denounce veiling or silence, since "the king's daughter is all glorious within" (Psalm 45:13) and "a voice in a woman is licentiousness" (TB Ber. 24a). Therefore the criticism directed against them has emerged within safer locations – the national and motherly (as distinct from gendered-sexualized) arenas.

It is one thing to stand firmly against the perplexed patriarchy, and say: "I follow to its conclusion your moralization about decency;" and quite another thing to be labeled as an "Arab" and accused of stepping out the perimeters of the nation and faith and betraying the conceived duties of motherhood (we shall return to that shortly). The ultra-Orthodox world maintains a strict regime of covering and uncovering. Some of the criticism associates their "Arabness" with their marginality in the *Haredi* society and with their hallucinatory image, as is evidenced in following passage:

Several weeks ago I traveled to Rachel's Tomb. I was standing in the crowded bus by a Breslov Hasidic woman. In front of me sat two Haredi Yeshiva students and one of them said to his friend: "here comes the Nach-Nach-Nacmanit to greet the Arab woman." I could not control myself anymore. I said to them, out loud, so

that the whole bus would hear: “I don’t speak to men, but Sarah our mother was dressed like me, and Rachel our mother too, and at least you can appreciate it instead of mocking it.” I told them, “Your women’s wigs are better, right? Promiscuity is better, no?” They kept silent and didn’t answer me (Makover-Belikov 2008).

A bus traveling (probably) from Jerusalem to Beith Lehem, to Rachel’s Tomb, a pilgrimage site mostly for women. Secular Israelis don’t visit this place anymore. It is considered a dangerous place. But this bus is filled with Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews (very likely, a special exclusively Jewish bus). This is a mixed bus – men and women, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews of every description. In the scene depicted here, two women are standing and two Yeshiva students are sitting. The latter tease the former – two new participants in the ultra-Orthodox space, whose body representations do not emulate those of their veteran sisters, but rather conspicuously mark their marginality. Their rejection of the prevailing, conventional organization of the Jewish/Haredi/female body represents a new choice. During the 1970s and 1980s, newly observant women tended to dress like Haredi women, except that many chose to cover their heads with scarves instead of wigs. Contemporary newly religious men and women organize their bodily representations alongside accepted codes without completely complying with them. This choice expresses their structured marginality within ultra-Orthodox society, but also smacks of new independence and criticism. Men raised and reared to be career Yeshiva students say out loud: “here comes the Nach-Nach-Nacmanit to greet the Arab woman.” Perhaps the Yeshiva students wouldn’t have ridiculed out loud

the “Nachmanit” had she not stood by the veiled woman. But their proximity signaled the transformation, the erosion, the increasing diversification and transition of the Haredi canon’s primary colors into its new forms. “Original” Yeshiva student may feel that a distorted emulation of the Haredi body has penetrated into his sphere.

Their comment did not go unanswered: its object couldn’t restrain herself anymore.

Paradoxically she addressed the men while indicating that actually she was not talking to them. However, she clarified that what they see is the original and that she herself is a contemporary version of Sarah as well as Rachel, whose tomb they were about to visit.

After asking them to respect rather than jeer at her attempt, she did not hesitate to acutely criticize and challenge them, by saying out loud, “so that the whole bus would hear”:

“Your women’s wigs are better, right?” is their “promiscuity” better? The Yeshiva students, she told Makover-Belikov, remained silent, the “Arab” woman made them shut up.

Boundaries of the Freedom to Play with the Body

No one scattered Liad Kantorovicz’s bags in the central bus station, or really threatened her. The Tel Avivness treated her with restrained racism. She became aware of the game’s boundaries mostly when interacting, as a Jewish woman, with Palestinians she knew or came across in the city. Kantorovicz realized that her exercise was ill received by them:

She [an Arab girl friend of Liad’s, T.E.] must be thinking that I have joined some kind of minorities’ trend, actually appropriating the affliction of an entire people for aesthetic purposes. All I need now is that every Arab I know would regard me

as shallow and insensitive! From now on, whenever I am attending an event in which Arabs are present, I hurry to them and apologetically expose myself as well as the sublime purpose of my walking around with a Moslem rag on my head (Kantorovicz 2008).

That Kantorovicz has Arab acquaintances and that she is participating in Arab-Jewish events is not a trivial thing as far as most Jewish Israelis are concerned. Thus her first and foremost task is to preserve her own image – a deep left-wing liberal. Her amused style of writing, criticizing anything and everything (Ashkenazi and Oriental Jews, Arabs, Russians, leftists, homosexuals, etc.) enhances the circus-like nature of the exercise, a completely self-conscious performative game – cultural disruption. Liad did not attempt to live as a black/Arab woman, or female labor immigrant as did the other reporters I have mentioned. She went on with her life, kept her own name, house and job – only dressed differently. Such games and their unbearable lightness are a sort of privilege reserved for only a few women.

That the managing of the conservative Bedouin or Arab body is sometimes conceived as contemporary representation of primeval source may serve or disserve the carriers. The assumption that the behavior of members of these societies remained unaltered to a large degree may elicit empathy among groups inspired by values of preservation. In my previous conversations with Haredi women, they often expressed their respect for “unsophisticated” societies and commended their adherence to some of their customs (natural medicine, basic nutrition, naïve faith, modesty, etc.). Nevertheless, the present context along with its political bias charges this symbolism with different connotations

and imply exception, overstated initiative. Symbolic Arabness is the point where one says, “that’s enough.” This is the ultimate exclusion, the greatest insult. As a matter of fact, Kantorovicz current outward appearance is more “Arab” than that of the veiled women from Beit Shemesh. However, she consciously masqueraded as conservatively dressed Arab woman. The veiled women of Beit Shemesh are Jewish women who don, as it were, a disguise of Arab women; they are symbolic rather than real Arab women.

The act of displacement of the Jewish veiled woman, which sought to operate on the gender axis, was managed and regimented primarily on the national axis. On this axis, the veiled woman’s agency and management capacities are weaker. She is confronted not only by Haredi men, but also by the police, female soldiers at the entrance to the central bus station, security personnel in public spaces, or – to put it briefly – the whole body of doorkeepers of the Jewish nation in Israel. The way she looks is an affront, so to speak, to any Jew, her choice to look “like an Arab” is considered a national indignity.

Her body becomes dangerous, her movement is restricted on national rather than gender grounds, and her eroticism, which is supposed to grow stronger behind the veil, is corroded. Who would want to sleep with an Arab woman?²⁵ Even her husband wants to divorce her. Maybe this is why the state allows Arab women to look like Arab women (and would have them all look like that) so that no one would mistake them for something else and covet them. Jewish women should look like Jewish women of any persuasion, and then theirs and other women’s (national, citizen, religious, and sexual) meaning could be organized according to their body’s outward appearance. **In contrast to Turkey and France, in Israel the state does want to see the difference.**

²⁵ In this context, see Tal Nitzan’s MA thesis “Controlled Occupation: The Lack of Military Rape in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” [Hebrew] (Nitzan 2006)

Pushing the envelope of chastity (to invisibility and inaudibility) has revealed that the patriarchy is not really preoccupied with modesty in its simple sense, namely: the covering and silencing of the female body and voice. Instead, it is busy with managing the body. And the conduct of the veiled women exposes some of the premises of this management.

The veiled women's attempt to revert to a certain source as a permanent solution for the appropriate body freezes the act of control, which needs to be dynamic, interminable, and never static. Ostensibly, the veiled women abide by the law that redefines the body as a site in need of constant reworking. But they do it of their own accord resorting to the fundamentalist claim that they have returned to the source. The hegemonial Haredi leadership is less than thrilled about this situation. The ceaseless Haredi activity revolves around the sources and is exclusively male activity. As a punishment for the independent body games of the veiled women, their move was interpreted not as a gender/sexual act toward raising the bar of chastity (as they saw it), or as a spiritual, theological one that would hasten redemption (a recurring theme in their arguments), but as national boundary-overstepping.

While collecting my materials on the 2007/8 occurrences of veiled women, the Beit Shemesh (and two other cases) plot had thickened, introducing care taking and motherhood into the picture of managing the covered body. The act that was described above as an entrenching in the castle/home and undermining its foundations turned out to be more daring than one might imagine. It also included new and different perceptions of pedagogy, proper parenthood and motherhood.

Deviant

On March 25, 2008, a Haredi woman from Beit Shemsh was arrested on suspicion of child abuse and failing to report incest in her family. Press photos and television footage had shown a woman completely covered. It took another look to realize it wasn't one more case of detainee hiding his/her face to avoid identification. The woman's lawyer argued that she was arrested because her neighbors, who perceived her as aberrant, connived against her.

In an article published in *Haaretz* newspaper on the day following the arrest, reporter Tamar Rotem provided details linking the detained mother (whose name was suppressed) to the "veiled women's Rabbanit," about whom she had written several months before. Rotem searched her memory for incriminating signs, she might have noticed during her visits to the veiled woman's home (Rotem 2008a). She remembered a 13 years old boy, who seemed underdeveloped for his age, and a girl who did not attend school regularly. In her article were interwoven sentences indicating that an open and cheerful atmosphere reigned in the Rabbanit's house, and that the girl had sat until the small hours of the night with the women gathered there and was treated by them with warmth. Alongside Rotem's article, the newspaper published an item by crime journalists who reported that welfare officers had known the family for quite some time. Neighbors hearing sounds of beating and crying summoned welfare authorities, and at least one boy was removed from the house and sent to a boarding school. The journalists described a dominant mother (the father spent a lot of time abroad on fundraising), who did not want authorities to intervene in her children's upbringing. One winter night, the article reported, a woman who was praying in the Rabbanit house refused to let in one of her children who was

standing outside wearing only an undershirt. Her son (who did not look like a religious boy) appeared on televised news and denied on camera the things attributed to his mother. Unable to show the boy's face, the camera operator focused time and again on his bruised hands.

On March 26, 2008, Nativ Nahmani reported on *Walla!* web portal that the police confronted one of the brothers with his sister, and that the boy admitted to having had different sexual relations with her, some consensual, some enforced. It was also mentioned that the police was continuing to investigate whether he has had similar relations also with his younger sister (Nahmani 2008). Tamar Rotem cited again, beside the crime article, some of the mother's friends and followers, who told her that she was a dedicated mother, albeit not necessarily a normative one. Following the Rabbanit's arrest the facts of the affair were gradually clearing up, but in the meantime her arrest had already marked her (even though her name was not published as yet), her initiative and her flock as deviant, deviance, and deviants, respectively.

At the beginning of May 2008, *Ynet* reporter Neta Sela returned to the veiled woman from Beit Shemesh. The woman, now subjected to house arrest, agreed to respond in writing and a few sentences to the charges brought against her. Denying the offences attributed to her in the indictment, she nevertheless confessed that she believed in the proverb "He that spareth his rod hateth his son" and learned from a *midrash* of our sages that King Solomon's mother tied him to the pole of the bed and had him whipped. She explained her inward withdrawal with alternative psychological economy she had devised: "I saw that they [her children] don't really listen to me and that I'm wasting precious time arguing with them that they should go to bed on time... [so] I've decided

that instead of talking to the wall, I should dedicate my time to prayers.” She told the reporter that she was on a mission in the service of the people of Israel, that her actions were hastening the redemption and the coming of the Messiah. When asked if she would want the reporter to give any message to her children, she consented and said: “I love you very much and I’m not angry at anyone, but most of all I love the Holy One Blessed be He” (Sela 2008).

327 responses were registered to this article, most of which slandered the veiled woman, complained about her misuse of the title “Rabbanit,” recommended to send her to psychiatric treatment and prevent her from seeing any of her 12 children. The fact that she had presented herself as a righteous woman, who chose to distance herself from worldly vanities, to withdraw to a world of prayer and silence, to reduce the body and hide it, did not elicit a single empathic response, let alone a word of respect. Her deviant behavior toward herself and her body was perceived as a betrayal of her role as a mother. The fact that she drove a wedge between her body and her children and didn’t treat them with warmth was interpreted (also by her daughter in an interview) as the reason that drove her children to seek warmth and intimacy with each other.

Tossed out of the boundaries of the Jewish collective as Taliban-Arabic, the covered body is further hurled now. This time outside the boundaries of humanity. Betraying the role of a mother, child abuse and self-withdrawal were conceived as an all out rebellion. Her attempt to present her behavior as an alternative pedagogy and proposal for motherhood of a different kind failed miserably. The state’s intervention was received with glee by the ultra-Orthodox public. They reserve to themselves the right to deal with

their own women and men; with the others the state is more than welcome to deal as it see fit.

Freakin' Deviant Just as the narratives relating to the “Beit Shemesh abuser” were swirling and twisting, a story about a “Jerusalem abuser” unfolded in late winter 2008 (Rotem 2008).²⁶ Newspapers sometimes referred to her as the “woman in white” – the symbolically opposite color of that of the woman from Beit Shemesh who covered herself with very dark fabrics. Her “veil” was a white-covered Book of Psalms in which she always buried her head in front of journalists and camera operators who waited for her at the courthouse. She and her husband submitted themselves to the unconventional leadership of Elijah Chai, a young practitioner of practical Kabbalah. On his orders she had separated from her husband and let into her home two of Chai’s adherents to help her raise her eight children. The indictment against her was filed in spring 2008 and included charges of severe child abuse, such as burning the children, pouring alcohol on their wounds, locking them in suitcases and other such tortures. The woman was arrested after one of her children was taken to a hospital unconscious, probably due to violent shaking. The story of the woman and her ex-husband unfolded alongside that of Elijah Chai, who fled Israel as soon as the police began investigating the case. Newspapers published several detailed profiles of Chai’s personality, but her profile featured large in them, always hidden behind a prayerbook. At the same time, an ultra-Orthodox woman from Netivot was arrested for sexually abusing her minor sons. She, too, appeared in her

²⁶ The woman and her husband used to live in Jerusalem, but were living at the time of the arrest in Beitar Illit. In more than one occasion the media interchanged names of the actual places, and for a while Beit Shemesh, Jerusalem, and Beitar Illit became, as it were, one and the same place. The details of the stories were also intermixed in the public’s mind creating a single narrative of “abusive Haredim.”

remand hearings with her head buried in a Book of Psalms and hid her hair under traditional Sephardic headcover.

As mentioned above, winter 2007/8 had brought with it another wave of global preoccupation with the “phenomenon of the veil,” which also had a local expression with contexts of its own: forging links between revealing and covering, faith, multi-children families, economic adversity, incest and child abuse. The threat of the veil that in Europe was perceived as economic-cultural and also political, imploded domestically and undermined the belief that homes and families can be run according to criteria other than those of the middle class, that a mother can divide her love and attention between many children, keep an eye on all of them, commit herself to the work of motherhood without collapsing. This implosion spills over and overreaches by far the “veiled” women. It questions the ability of others in general (Haredim, Arabs, new comers) to take care of their children.²⁷

The recurring incidents increased the suspicions that there might be quite a few endangered children of women who cover themselves to various degrees, suggesting that twisted minds and cruel hands might be hiding beneath the long sleeves, wigs and scarves. Suspicions of this kind prompted the Welfare and Social Services Ministry to appoint a revision committee to look into events in Beit Shemesh. The committee was meant to investigate, first of all, the performance of the municipal Welfare Department in its dealing with the case of Bruria Keren, who was known to welfare authorities from her previous place of residence, Bnei Brak. However, the Ministry sought to harness the

²⁷ Winter was followed by summer, and in the summer Haredi families go on vacation. In their vacations they “tend” to forget their children in airports, in locked cars and other places. Each time such a thing happens, the Israeli discourse raises again the question of the ability to take proper care of many children – a question that cuts the religious and ultra-Orthodox public to the quick.

committee's report to a broader debate on the limits of the country's "radar" and its ability to detect deviations of Haredi families and especially Haredi mothers.

The Revision Committee

About a month after the publication of the internal report, a multi-participant brainstorming conference was held at the School for Educational Leadership in Jerusalem to discuss the report findings and related issues.²⁸ The district director conveyed her hope that the debate would assist in devising modes of operation to sharpen the signals caught by the radar in the Haredi society. It was there that I heard for the first time the radar metaphor in this context. Members of the top echelon of the Welfare Ministry in the Jerusalem district were present in the room; and on the academic-professional side, David Tene, professor of social work and clinical therapist, and myself attended the meeting. Psychiatrist Prof. Eliezer Witztum contributed to the debate via videotaped interview conducted by Dr. Neri Horowitz, who initiated and chaired the debate. Horowitz also wrote a summary report and submitted it to the Ministry in early October 2008. The report's opening sentences stated clearly the aim of that document:

This paper seeks to grapple with the difficulty of social services officials to identify abuse and endangerment in helpless individuals, and attempts to pinpoint groups from the same circle of induction that present potential danger and to offer directions and procedures that would better the chances of locating endangered groups and individuals (Horowitz 2008:1).

²⁸ Dr. Horowicz and his staff had access to the internal Social and Welfare Ministry report before convening the conference.

The report was based on a comprehensive and diversified research made specifically for that purpose. “Identification and locating” were targeted for research, namely: the marking of potential internal factors that might endanger and harm helpless individuals within ultra-Orthodox circles. The document implicitly indicates that not only children are helpless and suggests that women, too, may fall near this category. For instance, an examination of the history of the woman suspected of abusive behavior reveals that she herself was a victim of abuse:

Her increasing dysfunctionality, the revelation that she was severely abused by her father and that some of her behavioral patterns imply personality disorders raise the question of the need to deal with the suspect beyond the legal, public aspect. ...the deterioration of the suspect, with respect to her parental functionality, is not examined over period of time, but rather emerges, contrary to the testimonies, as a constant state of abuse and neglect that has evaded the “radar” of various services (ibid., 5).

The report, therefore, attempts to outline access routes to “barred” areas, in the words of its author. State authorities find it difficult to penetrate these areas, and the signals they emit are not caught regularly on the welfare radar. Only when one of Keren’s children was removed from home and sent to a boarding school, the signals began to routinely pulsate. Standard work of welfare officers revealed what needed to be revealed. The simultaneous publications on the “freakish cult” that have radicalized the imperatives of chastity and took the law into its hands provided the event with colorful sub-communal

context. Therein was also made the acute connection between marginal groups (newly religious, New Age, etc.), women's freedom and sexuality and the quality of motherhood. Details, cited in the meeting and the report, indicate that the accused was known to welfare authorities, and not for her tendencies to cover herself. These emerged in recent years. Outgrowing her traditional Jewish background, she went on a search for specialization niche of her own. Her sister said about her that she had tried to be all kind of things before she became a natural therapist. In Bnei Brak she had initiated *pashkevils* against wigs, and spoke against rabbis. While still living there, she already took vows of silence. The hegemonial fabric of the ultra-Orthodox society of Bnei Brak could not tolerate such a behavior and she had to move to the Haredi borderland – Beit Shemesh.²⁹ She had developed the concept of multiple veils in the four years preceding her arrest drawing her inspiration from the “shawl movement.”³⁰

Based on the input of the clinical experts, the ensuing conversion took a pronounced psychological turn, organizing the veiled women's deviance around sex and violence. These were the facts; these were the grounds for the arrests. Sexual deviance and violence were caught on the radar. Horowitz's report balanced the psychologistic bias and introduced the sociological aspect.

²⁹ Religious and ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods were built in Beit Shemesh in order to provide these populations with rural, more affordable and spacious housing in this residential locality midway between Benei Brak and Jerusalem. However, cast out marginal Haredi groups also resettled there. These groups are often surrounded by unrest. In *Eretz Acheret* Summer 2009 issue, several articles were devoted to the problematic human jigsaw puzzle of Beit Shemesh, as well as to the reign of terror inflicted on the entire population by some 600 extremists (*Eretz Acheret* 2009).

³⁰ The “shawl” movement is a broader boundary-crossing movement associated with the Keter Malchut organization headed by Rabbi Benyamin Rabinovitz. The women cover their upper body with a kind of shawl or cloak when they go out and call for replacing the wigs with scarves and avoid completely tricot and spandex garments (Rotem 2007). On the margins of the shawl group, there is a group of Haredi women belonging to Chassidut Toldot Aharon (but not only), who cover their whole body with hooded cloak (somewhat resembling a monk's habit). Most of the women wearing shawls and black cloaks belong to the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi society. Most of the veiled women, on the other hand, are newly observant Sephardi women. The three groups keep in touch with each other and meet on festive and other occasions.

I'd like to use the final paragraphs of this essay to propose a broader sociological reading of the unusual events concerning the veiled women. One should bear in mind that Jewish veiled women represent a marginal episode, but their marginality can certainly be extended into the feminine context of Haredi society as well as Israeli political contexts in light of what has been said here about other veiled women.

Lifting the Curtain, Peeping, and Closing

Situations in which the state lets women be "what they are" should not be taken at face value. It is worthwhile to first check whether the state actually means to let them enjoy cultural freedom of action, whether it actually means to create a public sphere that would include various forms of presence.

Perhaps the state simply "does not see them," and is rather satisfied with what it sees and for that reason is not inclined to intervene in and change the public spectacles of their bodies. Bodily markers may serve a given political-social-cultural situation, and it is in the best interest of the state not to blur them.

In Israel, as it turns out, the state finds it convenient to let Arabs be Arabs, and ultra-Orthodox be ultra-Orthodox. Trespassing into these seemingly unmarked public spaces, without bodily markers, is undesirable. Israeli universities do not even consider stipulating conditions for the outward presentation of identity of those who enter their gates. They have other means to manage the quantity and quality of these potential admittees.

Prevailing games of power make it easier to deal with a female student who looks like an Arab than with her inconspicuous friend who does not particularly look like an Arab.

And this is true also in the case of Orthodox Jewish female students. Ambiguity could lead to confusion. A Jewish woman from Beit Shemesh perceived as an Arab would have her belongings scattered all over the place by people whose job is to protect and uphold the law. A female Palestinian student would get a job, or be able to rent a flat because “she doesn’t look Arab and speaks accentless Hebrew.” Identity games, disruptions of appearance, walking around the Israeli public space with a body bearing no national/religious label, are all privileges reserved to other people. The veiled journalist from Tel Aviv, for example, could have toyed with them.

Thus, the assertion of Scott – or O’Brien after her – that the objection to the veil in France and elsewhere is **only** a matter of racism is somewhat problematic. It may very well be that this objection **also** represents the remnants of an increasingly corroded attempt at creating spaces in which immigrants could be “French.” Since no one is really French, everyone could be French. Since no one was really European, Jews could become excellent Europeans for a short while in early 20th century Europe. It is precisely the license to be “Moslem” that implies abandonment of creating potentially egalitarian public space and leeway, since such a license is predicated on the existence of authentic Islamism on the one hand, and proper Frenchhood that rejects diversification on the other. A multi-cultural project would want, of course, to deconstruct conventional Frenchhood and reconstruct it from interminable equivalent possibilities. But such a project would have to be essentialist, namely, believe in (miscible) cultural essences. In spite, or maybe because, of the acknowledgement of the power of religion, the ancient idea to create an artificial religion-free space is replete with potential to benefit many and have benefited quite a few people, but probably not nearly enough. In France matters

have reached such a state that some Muslim women would have fared better had they covered their heads. Invisible transparent walls strewn all over the *laïcité* are all the more hard to pass. The promised possibilities to move freely in the public sphere were not entirely realized, either by the state or by the women. Covering the head offered a more rewarding, empowering, immediate route.

In Israel standard veiled women are treated leniently. The Jewish religious/ultra-Orthodox or Muslim woman may be whatever she chooses to be. The state allows women to deal with their own identity within familial spaces, the village, or the community. A religious Jewish woman is required to pay a price for covering her head in the public sphere, but not a steep one. This price rises if the woman is ultra-Orthodox or an Arab who covers her head. Her preliminary ethnic marking draws the boundaries of her activity. But she can cross them, and often does, not always unsuccessfully. However, each headcover has an expected and accepted habitat of its own. The veiled women of winter 2007/8 started a new game. Their game forced the state to join in. Inner patriarchies (husbands, rabbis, extended families) collaborated with state authorities to regiment them, to reveal their true face.

The state lifts the cover only when sexual deviance and violence against children are involved. Once the matter is handled, the curtain descends once again on the Haredi society. Now a sign is attached to it, saying: “Behind this piece of cloth, terrible things transpire.” *Quod erat demonstrandum*: raising large families entails neglect, deviance, violence, and lack of love. This boosts our (people who are not religious, not Arab and don’t have multi-children families) confidence in our conception of mental and familial normalcy. Thus the ultra-Orthodox woman’s headcover continues to signal to us what is

right and what is wrong. The fact that it functions as a marker within the various Haredi communities makes no difference to the state.

The women of Beit Shemesh limited the political potential of managing the body to the domestic sphere, and thus helped the state and their husbands to relegate this game to the realms of psychological treatment. If they ventured going out, they were dealt with like “Arab” women, ousted from mainstream citizenship and pushed into the margins. Time and again, their message was reduced to different forms of madness and obsession, to something that should and could be locked at home or behind bars. Their excessive covering has demonstrated that the State of Israel is at ease with a body that marks one’s affiliation as long as it does not fool the radar as in the case of a Jewish body that signals “Arabness,” or child abuser’s body that signals benign “multi-children motherhood.”

In France, the state demands: “reveal your head so that we would know that you’re alright, a woman like any other French woman.” In Israel, the state demands: “cover your head so that you would appear as who you are, not like any other woman.”

Summer 2009: Epilogue

During the summer months, I follow the headcovers’ affair in the press in order to update its thickening plot before submitting my article for publication. The issue remains firmly on the agenda. In June 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy addresses a special sitting of both houses of parliament at the Chateau of Versailles – the first French President to do so since the 19th century. In this historical event, he elects to say: “The Burqa is a sign of subservience and debasement. [...] the burqa is not welcome in France” (Melman 2009 in haaretz 23.6). His words echo the proposal of sixty coalition and opposition members

of the French National Assembly to set up a commission of enquiry to study “the practice of wearing burqa and niqab on French national territory and consider banning these veils.” The resolution’s promulgators argue that wearing burqa and niqab constitute an “attack on the freedom of the woman as well as unbearable humiliation.” Deputy minister Fadela Amara, a Muslim woman of Algerian descent, welcomed the initiative and said: “The burqa is a prison, it’s a straitjacket.” A British Muslim organization immediately protested against Sarkozy’s statement regarding the burqa and called it offensive and divisive (*Haaretz* 25.6.09).

In Belgium, on the other hand, the first hijab wearing woman, Mahinur Ozdemir, was elected to the Brussels-Capital Regional Parliament. “Underneath this veil there is a personality,” said the newly elected Member of Parliament, “there is someone who is engaged, who wants things to change, who wants to move forward and execute lots of projects for the people of Brussels” (*Haaretz* 25.6. 2009).

In Germany, a pharmacist of Egyptian origin was murdered at the beginning of July She was stabbed in a court of law by ethnic German immigrant from Russia, against whom she had testified for verbally abusing her in a park for wearing Islamic headscarf. Her husband who stepped up and tried to protect his wife was mistakenly shot by police officer thinking he was attacking his wife with a knife.

Keeping up with events is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, I could not had completed my essay by mid-summer, since July 2009 was especially hot in Israel: the verdict in the trial of the veiled woman (dubbed “mother Taliban” by the media) was about to be delivered; Jerusalem’s streets were filled with demonstrators against the opening of Karta parking lot on Saturdays dragging intra-Haredi politics into the town square in their

refusal to forget how the Admor of Gur had sabotaged the election of ultra-Orthodox candidate for mayor of the city.

Against, or ostensibly irrespective of, this backdrop, Haredi streets flared around a new story subsumed under the title “the starving mother.” A Haredi woman belonging to Toldot Aharon Hasidic community is accused of child abuse. The media cite hospital and police officials who indicate that she might be suffering from Munchausen Syndrome by proxy, in which a person harms people close to him or her in order to draw attention to him/herself. The woman is arrested at the entrance to the municipal welfare office in the Bucharim neighborhood, to the amazement of the office’s employees. After complicated negotiations between the authorities, the family and Haredi public figures and under plumes of smoke billowing from burning dumpsters all over the city, the woman was released to house arrest on Friday, July 17, before the start of Shabbat. On Sunday morning, the verdict of “mother Taliban” is published: she is convicted of abusing six of her children, abuse of a minor and aggravated assault. Her husband is convicted of abuse and failing to report abuse.³¹ The cases add up. Websites publish reports on the verdict and offer backward links to the chain of events in Beit Shemesh along with references to the cases of Elior Chen and the abusive mother from Beitar Illit. One item also provides links to websites dealing with the “starving mother,” or with the prevailing welfare policy in Jerusalem – and chaos reigns supreme.³² The Jewish mother, the Yiddishe Mama, is

³¹ Israeli Court Ruling no. 152/08, July 19, 2009.

³² The Ashkenazi Haredi world, on the other hand, did distinguish the cases from each other. The mother from Beit Shemesh was treated with hostility. Her moves were interpreted as boundary-crossing contestation, in light of her past as “*mithazekel*” (strengthening in her faith) and her Sephardi origin. The abusive mother from Beitar Illit was also described as “foreigner” (she immigrated to Israel from the USA and was raised in a modern Zionist home), who joined forces with imposter rabbi of Mizrahi origin. By contrast, the “starving mother” hailed from Meah Shearim neighborhood was doubly and contradictorily marked: firstly, externally, as “one of us” deserving the mobilization of the Haredi camp for her case and the struggle against the authorities’ attitude towards her in particular and towards the ultra-Orthodox in

criticized, but this time not for overfeeding her children or for her endless care for her darling boy, but for starving, neglecting and abusing them. Particular cases are projected onto the ultra-Orthodox society as a whole. The image of the Jewish family sitting around the Shabbat Table is being tarnished and the ways in which “other” people choose to conduct their family life are presented as problematic.³³ At the heart of the new unsightly image stands the mother wrapped in a myriad of fabrics that trail behind her, or hiding her veiled head in a prayerbook.

The July 2009 events enhance the argument that Israeli public discourse does not grapple with the civil status of “other” women; with their relative freedom, economic, physical and mental welfare in light of social expectations of border groups or conditions of poverty and distress. The intervention of authorities in their life and the ensuing media interest rely upon the fact that they are mothers. Invading their private life spaces and unveiling their faces (both literally and metaphorically) do not derive from a concern for their welfare. The objects of concern are apparently their children, and the objects of the scanning and control are the pedagogy and feasibility of families “blessed” with many children. The politics employed here is, therefore, a politics of the normative national home and the role of the mother therein rather than one of a civil-gender public space.

general; and secondly, internally, as belonging to the extremist Chassidut Toldot Aharon that it was about time to distance oneself from them and their likes. Parts of the variegating Haredi world denounced the violence, the alienation from state institutions and the ban placed on Hadassa Ein Kerem hospital.

³³ Towards the end of July a father murders his three-year-old daughter. The media describe the case as a particular event for itself and in itself. Reporters of some religious and ultra-Orthodox web portals (for example, Zofar, http://www.tsofar.com/zofar/see_article.asp?id=11221) retaliate by describing the father, Assaf Goldring, as “salt of the earth” leftwinger whose signature adorns all kind of petitions calling soldiers to refuse serving in the occupied territories, brother of self-proclaimed gay member of the Tel Aviv city council. They imply that the motivation for the murder was the mother’s return to religion (*hazara betshuva*). The rhetoric of the father’s depiction in Haredi press is intentionally parallel to that of the “starving mother’s” family, which belongs to extremist current within the Haredi society. Once again, the national and the religious align with motherhood and “proper parenting.” The reversal performed by Haredi web sites escapes, almost completely, the media’s attention. A noticeable exception is Gideon Levy’s *Haaretz* article “Between Real and Gratuitous Hatred” (Levy 2009).