Pergamon

Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 20, Nos. 5/6, pp. 665–673, 1997

0277-5395/97 $17.00 + .00

PII S0277-5395(97)00060-5

VISIBILITY AND POSSIBILITIES: ULTRAORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN BETWEEN THE DOMESTIC AND PUBLIC SPHERES

TAMAR EL-OR
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The Hebrew University, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel The Hebrew University, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel

Synopsis — The literature on women in the Middle East deals extensively with their looks. Traditional feminism tended to use women's appearance in public places and their clothes as a barometer of their freedom and power. Current feminism tends to treat these issues as a critical dialogue with Western colonialism. This paper relates to the presence of ultraorthodox Jewish women in their community's public sphere, as well as in the Israeli-Zionist, nonreligious sphere. It analyses lectures given to young ultraorthodox women during the Gulf War, when major social cleavages (Palestinian–Jews, Orthodox–nonorthodox, men–women) were blurred, and the dominant Zionist discourse was muted. The analysis discloses the complexity of the "discourse of modesty" addressed to ultraorthodox women, and the paradox it contains. Rather than use these incongruities to dismantle the discourse itself, an effort is made to use it as a critique of both orthodox and nonorthodox patriarchies. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

"At the end of your book you could have a wonderful chapter on fashion. Look at the way they dress, their shoes, the way they walk quickly. It's going to be a great chapter." The car was sliding down Bar-Ilan Street in Jerusalem, leading from the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus to the city gates, passing through the Jewish ultraorthodox neighborhoods. The sights were bizarre for Tel Avivians like us — three anthropologists returning from an annual conference. The statement was addressed to me since I was in the midst of a field work in a Hassidic[1] community near Tel Aviv. Through the window I could see restless movement on the sidewalks, like scenes from an old movie. Men dragging little children whose feet barely touched the ground, women hurrying along pushing buggies, girls with huge school bags wearing pale pink shirts and blue pleated skirts. A frenetic mixture of ages and sexes and sects. But my eyes were not drawn by the women's scarves or wigs, by the girls' long hair and satin ribbons, or the shabby thick platform shoes. I wasn't interested in differentiating between Lubavitcher and Beltzer Hassidim, Lithuanians and Eastern Jews. The "directory game" was no longer fun, having been replaced by that sense of patronage, of "don't talk about my people as objects." It seemed to me that people around me felt they knew the ultraorthodox community once they had created their "appearance catalogue." If he wears a gold striped coat he's a veteran Jerusalemite, if she wears a thin black scarf over her shaved head she's from an extreme group in Mea Shearim.[2] The physical description was the beginning and the end of both curiosity and knowledge. It went along with such statements as "They look so odd," 'I kind of like their dresses," "How can they wear those heavy suits in such weather," "Aren't those outfits too expensive to be modest?"

I decided to discard this aspect of ultraorthodox hassidic women in my anthropological studies, and eventually shed another favorite topic of interest — their sexual customs (El-Or, 1991). I went on to write a book about their intellectual life (El-Or, 1994). But their physical presence in the public sphere in a Jewish state amongst their own community kept bothering me.

Ethnographies on women and fundamentalism, and women in the Middle East, reflect a preoccupation with looks. This subject is addressed by all scholars regardless of gender. The appearance of the woman's body in public was construed as a parameter of freedom. Bare faces, naked arms, Western clothes, and loose hair took precedence over voices, knowledge, political power, and local histories. Second wave feminism, postmodernism, cultural relativism, and the new anthropology nurtured diverse kinds of interest in the appearance of women among fundamentalist groups (Hale, 1989). Most contemporary feminist scholars regard the visibility = freedom formula as an ethnocentric, eurocentric judgment, and try instead to understand women's physical presence as a form of language, a critique, a communication challenging the local culture and political situation (Abu Odeh, 1993; Macleod, 1991; Mohanty, 1988).

I present here the community of ultraorthodox Jewish women in Israel along these lines. I do not do so in order to reread their "looks" positively and to mark them as a choice. Rather, I choose the public appearance of women as a topic and not as a measure, as a dynamic phenomenon that can be used to analyze the ultraorthodox community in Israel, and the meaning of its fundamentalism.

The Gulf War of January–February 1991 was selected as context in order to highlight some of the elements that shape the socio–cultural–political state in Israel. Most of the text analyzed here was transcribed from an audio cassette of two lectures given by two prominent women in the community during the third week of the war to girls in a secondary boarding school in Jerusalem. The lectures were recorded and distributed — part of a brisk market in audio cassettes containing didactic lessons and religious messages.

THE COMMUNITY

Whether Jewish ultraorthodoxy constitutes a fundamentalist movement is a matter of controversy. Fundamentalism evolved from American Protestantism and yet it is quite often associated today with the New Islamists movement. With regard to Jewish fundamentalism, Heilman and Friedman (1991, p. 197) can be informative: "Hence, not only Christianity and Islam but also Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions may be found to have fundamentalist variants. Moreover, an understanding of each of these versions of fundamentalism, so the argument runs, will shed light on the phenomenon as a whole."

The ultraorthodox community constitutes about 6% of the Israeli population and is divided into Ashkenazi[3]-Lithuanians, Ashkenazi-Hassidim and Orientals (Heilman & Friedman, 1991). My main field work conducted between 1985–1988 was with women from the Hassidic sect of *Gur*, founded by Rabbi Yetzchuk Meir Alter in mid-19th century in Gura Calvaria near Warsaw, Poland. Their positive attitude toward Zionism brought some members of the sect to Palestine before the Holocaust, where they settled in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Benei Berak. More came following the second World War, and today with some 7000 families, they are the strongest Hassidic group in the main ultraorthodox political party. Many are merchants and financially well off compared to the rest of the ultraorthodox community.

The *Gur*, like the rest of this community, finds itself living in an open cultural market in Israel among Jews who exercise their national and historical identity without religious orthodoxy. These communities have fortified their threatened cultural choice by emphasizing their "otherness" (Friedman, 1986). They achieve this in part by recreating the "society of scholars," where men are encouraged to study as long as possible. This is a concerted effort to turn away from the economic sphere where contact with the outer world is forced upon them, and to postpone or evade military service with its potential for contact and possible identification with nonorthodox Jews. The society of scholars builds a distinct cultural alternative for living in a Jewish state. This recreation of a conservative society is seen by Friedman as stemming from modernism (Berger, 1969) and its open cultural market. Rather than describing orthodoxy as a nonmodern phenomenon in a modern society, Friedman sees orthodoxy as a paradox of people choosing to reform conservatism by modernism.

Most men stay in the Yeshiva[4] until their mid-20s, when they begin to drop out as financial need wins out over academic zeal. A scholar's stipend is $250–400 a month, plus national insurance paid according to the number of children in the family. Most women graduate from the sect's high schools and teacher training seminars, but only a small number find permanent jobs in the educational system. The rest work in family businesses and shops, or at home as wig dressers, seamstresses, accountants, typists, babysitters, and the like. The ideal ultraorthodox woman stays home, takes care of her ever-growing family, attends classes in the evening, and devotes time to social and charity activities.

The ultraorthodox choice to extend the length of time men study, together with the norm of the ideal woman, create severe financial strains. The years in school impoverish the community and make it difficult to sustain the families of the scholars, at the same time that the standard of living in Israel keeps rising. While some men live off family businesses and gradually leave the Yeshiva to join them, the rest of the community has little access to the appliances, toys, paper diapers, and fashionable clothes that fill their shops. The community leaders teach the members that one of the main threats of orthodoxy today is luxury, and equate poverty with piety (El-Or, 1993).

The family I stayed with during my fieldwork was exemplary of the ideal *Gur* family. The husband studied while the wife, who was a high school graduate and had attended the seminar for 1 year, took care of their growing family. When I started my work in March 1985, Hanna was 30 years old, had four children and was pregnant. When I ended my research 3 years later, she had six children. In 1995, Hanna had her 10th child. Today, her eldest daughter is married. Thus, in 20 years Hanna gave birth to 10 children, worked at home, occasionally earned money taking care of neighbors' children, and gave lessons on religion to a group of Oriental women who lived nearby, but were not members of *Gur*. They came from traditional families and wanted to intensify their religiosity.

Hanna took me into her home because I asked her to, because I showed interest in her life, and because in her world, "You don't turn down a Jew who wants to learn." She was able to take me in for a year because she and her husband were known as extremists and my presence did not jeapordize their name. Her husband spent the week in a distance Yeshiva, coming home only on weekends, which meant she had long evenings to share with me. She permitted me to stay longer than the originally agreed upon time because of the relationship that developed between us, which was very close, yet careful (El-Or, 1991, 1994). I took part in some of Hanna's and her community's activities, like the women's lessons, spent time with other women, and participated in celebrations and events of the local community as well as the entire Hassidic sect.

THE SOCIO-HISTORIC CONTEXT OF THE GULF WAR

While the debate raged over whether and how Saddam Hussein would attack Israel if an attempt was made to force him out of Kuwait, the citizens of Israel were being instructed in how to get ready for a chemical attack. Gas masks were distributed and announcements made on television and in schools and community centers about how to prepare the home for chemical warfare. Each family was advised to seal one room in the home by taping nylon over the windows and around the doors; to put in a supply of food and water for an extended period, a radio or television set for listening to the news, and their gas masks. This was a far cry from previous wars when the population was instructed to hide in bomb shelters.

Wars are not new in the area — there have been six, not counting the Intifada, since the establishment of the State in 1948. All of them, except the Lebanon War in 1982 aimed at the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), were between Israel and neighboring states. The Israel Defence Forces fought alone in all of them, except in 1956 when it was joined by England and France. The Gulf War differed from these wars. It was the first war where the majority of the reserves were not mobilized and the major part of the war effort was handled by the civil defence units. The scud missiles were aimed at the civilian population, while most of the standing army of young soldiers and reservists were mobilized on the country's borders. And, Israel did not participate actively in the war against Iraq, even when its population centers were bombed. The Zionist-militarist discourse that prevailed during previous wars was less relevant in the Gulf War, since the well-being of all the people in the region depended on foreign troops, including Egyptians and Syrians.

The entire population, regardless of nationality, gender, religiosity, or age, was at equal risk this time. Previous wars tended to emphasize the differences in Israeli society: men fight, women and children stay home; nonorthodox serve in the army, ultraorthodox men do not; Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the occupied territories do not take part in wars and are generally placed under curfew. Now, instead of being divided into Jews–Palestinians, fighting men–children and women, young–old, nonorthodox–ultraorthodox, people were separated into single families closed inside sealed rooms in their homes. The nation was further separated into regions as the Iraqis aimed their scuds at only certain parts of the country.

The hegemonic image of the strong active Israel was affected. Jewish passivity and the gas threat evoked associations to the Holocaust. The special preparations for the war raised problems for the ultraorthodox community. They were forced to open official channels of communication with the State by listening to the radio and reading newspapers, which they avoided doing in ordinary times. They had to deal with the army. They received their instructions from women soldiers, and the contacts were often lengthy as they encountered difficulties with the special equipment for young children and babies. They depended on the good will of the army to equip their bearded men with special masks. They regarded the call for men to shave their beards as one more expression of Zionist animosity toward the orthodox, and even anti-semitism reminiscent of gentiles cutting the beards and sidelocks of Jewish men.

Zionism calls for Jews to take their fate into their own hands — to leave the diaspora to create a Jewish state on the land of Israel and defend it by force. This stands in opposition to the traditional belief that the Jewish people must wait for the Messiah to appear, gather the people of Israel and create a religious (not democratic) state. Only this state is accepted by the ultraorthodox, who find it hard to identify with the *State* of Israel. The passivity of the Israeli state in the Gulf War brought an opportunity for alternative meanings and decodings.

Let's turn now to the cassette, and listen to the alternative discourse offered to schoolgirls. We can then look at the bearing that discourse has on women and women's presence, and the insights it offers for understanding ultraorthodox fundamentalism.

The scope and importance of the cassette market in the cultural life of ultraorthodox Jews has not been studied extensively. Generally, the ultraorthodox do not oppose technology per se, and tend to consider that if inventions and technological advances are made by human beings, they are a result of (wo)man's being created "in the image of God." At the same time they carefully check the content and implications of each of these inventions. ultraorthodox Jews publicly ban both radio and television, seeing them as a major threat to their culture. If one wishes to deride a family as "not really Orthodox," one can say they watch television or even hide one in their living room.

Audio cassettes offer complete control over content, and their production recording, distributing, selling, renting has flourished. Next to books, cassettes have become the major source of information, teaching and preaching. There are Talmud lessons for men and morality tales for children. Women suffer from a scarcity of books specifically for them, and they are therefore a major target for the cassette manufacturers. The profitability of this market makes the cost of buying and renting low. Most of the cassettes for women consist of lectures recorded at public events or series of lessons conducted in schools and synagogues.

The cassette analyzed here was taped during an evening at a girls' school in Jerusalem 2 weeks after Operation Desert Storm began.

The men left and opened the way for us women

The cassette begins with a brief description of the men's prayers for deliverance at the Western Wall (a remnant of the western wall of the second Temple in Jerusalem), followed by a lecture by Rabbanit[5] Zisa Hazan.

> The next day — I don't know if you were there — it was at Yeshu'ot Ya'akov Synagogue in the center of Mea She'arim at two in the afternoon. They said the Psalms. The entire market around the synagogue was black with women. I was astonished when, after the awe-inspiring fervent prayer, the loudspeaker suddenly announced at the end of the service that the men would now leave the synagogue and let the women enter and open the ark to beseech God for deliverance from danger. I had never seen such a thing. The next day I felt weak, not physically weak, just unwell from the passion of that prayer. The men went out into the courtyard next to the Mea She'arim Yeshiva and formed a path between themselves and the wall of the synagogue, along which we filed into the synagogue through the men's side.

> There were so many women in the women's section that we couldn't get in through our usual entrance. By the time I got inside, there were already thunderous screams, shrieks. The ark [raised on a dais in the middle of the synagogue] was open, and pious old women I've known for years stood with their heads in the ark wailing and shrieking. You can't imagine. After they had a good cry, they gave out more screams — you can't imagine — until two old women who had finished their prayers turned around and said to us: "With God's help you will see there will be deliverance." They went down the stairs of the ark (the speaker laughs), moved aside and others went up. There was a feeling that deliverance would come. Never before was there such a prayer. So, if we earned such closeness to God, you know, they have certainly talked to you about the importance of prayer, prayer from the depths of the heart. There's no limit to what it can do. When we left, a very dear old man told me he remembered such a prayer only one other time, when the Nazis were in Egypt during the Second World War, at the gates of the land of Israel, and people thought they were about to enter the land of Israel. (Zisa Hazan)

An extraordinary situation brought women into a sacred public place restricted to men. They, who always stay away from where the abstract work of God is done, like public prayers and public rituals, are let into the synagogue, into man's land. Women who see the doors of the ark opened for prayers only from a distance, now touched the old wooden benches where men and boys sit. Women who witness the "real things" happening below, from their seats up above, looking through the tiny holes in the mehitza.[6] They know the rhythm, the text, the gestures of the bodies, but they had never participated in any of it publicly. They might pray at home or quietly in their forgotten space upstairs. They might conduct a ritual at home if there is no man around to do it, but never are they asked to come down into the sanctuary in front of the Torah ark.

The prayer of an innocent child or a simpleton or a woman is highly valued in Hassidic mythology. It was part of the rebellion against the intellectual, elitist Judaism of 250 years ago. Women are expected to pray when possible, but are not obliged to do so. The megaphone, a voice from above, inviting them into the men's territory was a complete surprise. What followed left Rabbanit Hazan feeling unwell. In order to enlist the help of the innocent souls of the women to chase away an existential threat, a path had been opened to let their hearts and true feelings into the holy sanctuary — *their bodies were acknowledged.* They were allowed to present themselves in forbidden territory, to stand where no woman stood before, to see and be seen, to briefly take center stage, which the men briefly vacated for them. Rabbanit Hazan describes strong emotions. After recounting how the women were let into the sacred place to contribute their feelings toward the salvation of the community, she ends by relating what "a dear old man" told her as she went out: that such a thing had happened only once before in his life, when the Nazis were poised at the gates of Israel.

The *soul in the body* was acknowledged and presented on public sacred ground only in the context of a catastrophe: possible genocide with a clear reference to the Holocaust. The listeners might have interpreted it as recognition of their spiritual strength, but they must also have realized that only a megadisaster would entitle them to it again.

Hide your bodies in the inner rooms

Rabbanit Hazan's report about the synagogue is followed by a story told that night to the same audience by Mrs. Dina Kampinski, a prominent teacher in the community.

> The other day I was riding on a bus in Jerusalem when I overheard a conversation between two Arabs. Mohammed said to Ahmed: "You wouldn't believe what I found on the street this morning. I saw something sparkling on the ground, I bent down and it was a huge diamond." "Was it a real one?" asked Ahmed. "I was sure it was," replied his friend. "So how come you are still cleaning the streets of the Jews?," asked his friend. "Well, it turned out it wasn't real." "Of course it wasn't," said Ahmed, "real diamonds don't lie in the streets, they're kept in a safe."

Even a simple Arab, a street cleaner, knows that good, pure and beautiful things don't belong in the streets. They are kept in a safe. If something shines in the outside, on the streets, it must be phony, it can't be real. And you girls and all the daughters of Israel belong in the inner rooms of the house. The farther inside you are, the more beautiful and pure you become. The sealed rooms we are ordered to sit inside are only a metaphor, a symbol for us, because we all know that there is no chemical war. It is a sign for us, a reminder of our situation. We must close ourselves from the outside. All of us, and especially you girls."

What do we have here? Close on the heels of a very emotional report about an extraordinary event that actually happened in Jerusalem, comes Mrs. Kampinski with the most trivial story. Looked at with a critical eye and ear, the simple tale doesn't ring true. The two Palestinians probably spoke Arabic, does Mrs. Kampinski understand Arabic? The clichéd names of the Arab men, the rhythm of the conversation, the timing, all add up to a fabricated narrative that sounds like the archetype of an everyday event that never happened.

Yet, the speaker chose to begin her moral preaching with something that happened to her "the other day," and to close with the political-existential situation of the war. In between, she builds her interpretations and moral conclusions. The instructions are not new to the girls. They have heard the rules of modesty many times before with reference to skirt length, sheerness of nylons, hair style, and plunge of the neckline (El-Or, 1993). They see how all the women in their community maintain these roles, and how any deviation from them is met with gossip, condemnation, ostracization, and, in extreme cases, violence. The old decrees to hide the body, to remain inside, to shield their presence — are all represented and reconstructed to fit the new situation.

A melange of narratives — documentary, moral, historical, imaginary — is very common in the ultraorthodox discourse. The listeners can hear the bus story right after the report on the synagogue with no difficulty. This juxtaposition devalues the ontological content of the two parts of the cassette, and endows them with the value given by the presentation and interpretation. They don't need to make sense, to sound authentic, to coincide with reality. They will be understood according to the moral lesson attached to them by the speaker.

This kind of discourse seems irrational to the outsider — a manipulation of reality, a juggling of ideology and facts. Instead of trying to show the rationality of this discourse in terms of cultural relativism or functionalism, it will be of interest to analyze it as an alternative interpretation that acknowledges the hegemonic discourse, converses with it, and perhaps, in some ways, becomes a viable challenge to it. This would mean that fundamentalist discourse in the Middle East is a relevant historical phenomenon that lies within the political-cultural time, and should be treated as a critique of neocolonialism, nationalism, postmodernism, capitalism, and in our case — feminism.

The alternative discourse of the present/absent body

Sherifa Zuhur (1992) attempts to place the reveiling movement of Egyptian women in its historical context. She relates to the process of feminine image creation and to the paradoxes it contains:

> The Islamists of Egypt are involved in an active, creative effort at image construction for women. We may also note an eliminative, reactive process against other models of imaging and against Western ideals for women. State policies have in some ways encouraged a model of a secular, elite, powerful woman. The Islamists can criticize that model, and it does contain certain inherent contradictions. (Zuhur, 1992, p. 16)

Fundamentalism is strongly related to religion, but goes beyond the space allotted to religion in the nation state. Born within the nation state, it functions in Israel at the margins of the cultural-political arena, and strives to influence/conquer it. This complex situation appears to contain inherent contradictions (as stated by Zuhur, 1992), or paradoxes (in Israel, Aran, 1991; El-Or, 1994; Friedman, 1986). These inherent incongruencies can be seen as a subversive interpretation of the hegemonic discourse. They exist because the hegemonic discourse is not without fault and uncontaminated.[7] Subversive acts are familiar with and nourished by the faults. When we talk about paradoxes, conflicts, or dilemmas, we assume that each discourse has its own coherence and logic that stands in opposition to another logic: wanting to be a free woman conflicts with the command to cover the body; seeking knowledge and career clashes with the ideal mother who stays home; aspiring to a spiritual life opposes the exclusion of women from the main stage of worship. Instead of this interpretation, the fundamentalist discourse can be regarded as part of the postmodern cultural arena. Viewed thus, we can see it as a critique of modern western feminism, and an example of an attempt to evade or negate feminism at the end of the 20th century.

The first event related on the cassette, the women in the synagogue, fits the genre of a documentary. It is a real event, firmly rooted in time and place, with the date, hour, and what preceded and what followed all carefully noted. It is compared to another in recent Jewish history — a major existential threat during World War II. The extraordinary occurrence of women praying in the main sanctuary before the ark was felt so strongly by the teller she felt "unwell." A slight reflexivity in her report, expressed in her amusement at a certain point, and the irregular delivery of the narrative impress upon the listener the uniqueness of the opportunity to present themselves as women on the main stage: to function as true believers, to pray as a large, visible and deserving public.

The next band on the cassette fits the genre of a morality tale. It begins with "The other day," and goes on to portray a very unrealistic situation. There are no women in this story. Two "others" — Palestinians — are having a conversation, which the teller supposedly overheard. The narrator takes their conversation and turns it into an allegory whose interpretation is based on the everyday reality of Israel. The Palestinians are used as the primitive other: they are street cleaners and she states, "Even this simple Arab knows." Later she refers to the sealed room, which was a very real part of daily life at the time. But, she uses these bits of reality, this grounding in earthly routine, to detach the listener from that reality. The political scene, the street, the army, the other (Palestinians, nonreligious Jews) are presented as characters in a different story where new roles are made for them. In the new story they exist in order to tell the true believers the truth. They are used to build a subversive interpretation of power, nationalism, beauty, femininity, Judaism. The alternative discourse tells us that there is no place for the ultraorthodox in the hegemonic spheres. Their perception of reality is presented as primitive, passive, unpatriotic, risky. But the subversive interpretation of the shielded rooms as a metaphor rather than a rational defence against chemical weapons is directed at that rationality. Very soon after the first missile attack most people realized that the sealed rooms were useless. Many left the dangerous areas of the country and others sought refuge from scuds in bombs shelters. The former Israeli collective patriotism broke up into families scattering, looking for a place to hide. In this respect, presenting the war as a moral symbol was a critique of local nationalism, its self-assurance, and its symbols of heroism.

The feminist discourse tells us about the value modern women place on outer appearances, on her looks and sexuality. Mrs. Kampinski knows her listeners watch other women as they walk down the street, that they desire to "look good." The fashion industry for orthodox women is thriving, and Mrs. Kampinski does not intend to fight it. Rather, she wishes to comment on the order of external versus inner values concerning women, their sexuality, beauty, visibility and availability as objects.

Secular feminists sometimes find themselves fighting alongside conservative colleagues on certain issues, like pornography and street advertisements. These situations push both sides to clearly state their causes and targets in order to disentangle their ideologies. At the same time, these moments of artificial or tactical cooperation position the parties as opponents of the main discourse, offended, incensed, and ready for battle on the same issue. In March 1994 a new advertising campaign for a car came out with the slogan, "A bad girl from a Good Home" written across the back of a young girl whose skirt is being lifted by the wind to reveal her underwear. The *Good Home* referred to the auto manufacturer the established, respectable, reliable home of Ford Motors. The bad girl was the car itself wild, fast, and tempting. Driving past this huge billboard, I got very angry. Five minutes later I left Tel Aviv and drove into the orthodox city of Benei Berak, where the billboard appeared again, this time without the picture. My fury turned to envy and appreciation of the power of the orthodox to control their surroundings: to identify the sources of aesthetic and moral moulding, and to counter what appear to us to be inevitable — part and parcel of the times in which we live. It would have taken the feminist activists months to make the company remove the picture or stop the ad campaign altogether. But it was clear to the advertisers that they have to "respect" the orthodox.

The ultraorthodox position vis-à-vis the external market tells us something about our tendency to give up, to overlook, to be passive and to assume that the power of the market is beyond one's values, or that one has to wait until the market sees the benefit in politically correct values. It shows us that we tend to phrase our indifference as liberalism, that we disempower ourselves and bestow on the market mythical powers it doesn't have. At the same time, this sort of indifference reconstitutes the sociological powers of the market and recreates the feeling of helplessness. The negotiations between the ultraorthodox and the others (us) reveal the choices made within the discourse of both the economic and cultural markets: ideological choices we make while praising the loss of "grand theories," values we profess under the cover of multiculturalism. The ultraorthodox discourse, like any other fundamentalist discourse, expresses such choices, and a fresh approach would recommend listening to its critique, because it stems from the same existential ground it is criticizing.

The alternative discourse shows us that the ultraorthodox, and perhaps all new fundamentalists, are attentive to the hegemonic voice. Their desire to be part of it, to influence it, to be relevant "out there," pushes them to explain themselves to themselves via some of the very values they object to. One way or another, the spirit of the alternative discourses becomes part of the dispute within the ultraorthodox discourse; and ultraorthodox discourse cannot afford to neglect this spirit, including feminism. The purpose for which women were created, their rights, their visibility, and abilities in public spheres, their aspirations and desires are all dealt with obsessively. These are not closed matters, solved automatically by referring to the legal text (*halacha*). They are, rather, open and negotiated matters, with respect to this and other texts.

The turning to the "ancient texts" is the choice of a particular group of people. It is nourished by spiritual, social, and political motives, which are all part of the current scene. Thus, it must offer relevant answers, beyond the pragmatic ones, to present-day fundamentalist women. Furthermore, this choice does and will continue to acknowledge women's rights to participate, to influence, to create, to gain power. As a secular Jewish citizen of the State of Israel, I watch the fundamentalist arena with resentment. As a feminist anthropologist, I try to decode their discourse and experience it as a form of communication as well as an important critique.

Western feminism has accepted the existence of other feminisms from within and without. Beyond this theoretical acknowledgment, each culture must do its own homework: to listen to the nonhegomonic voices of women (in Israel: Oriental Jews, Palestinians, Orthodox, etc.) who try to negotiate with the center. This homework should move carefully between the temptation of cultural relativism and the concern for the rights and power of women as autonomous human beings.

ENDNOTES

1. Hassidim are members of a popular movement of mysticism founded in the late 18th century in Eastern Europe.
2. Mea She'arim: an ultraorthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem.
3. Ashkenazi: Jews of East European origin.
4. Yeshiva: a religious school for boys and men.
5. *Rabbanit*: the wife of a Rabbi; can also refer to a prominent teacher or community leader.
6. *Mehitza*: a partition between the main sanctuary of the synagogue where men pray, and the women's section, usually on a balcony. In ultraorthodox synagogues the partition is a wooden wall with tiny holes.
7. In late 1994, the French scholar Julia Kristeva visited The Hebrew University. In an interview with Prof. Stephen Moses, she talked about the anti-humanist phenomenon of the western world "new social order." Kristeva mentioned the normalization of indifference, the banality of evil, and the perversion of the public arena. When asked to identify the forces working against those trends, she answered: "Unfortunately, these are very radical forces: the Pope, the religious extremists (Christians and Muslims) — they hold on to ancient but solid values and oppose some of the anti-humanist trends

I have just mentioned" (Ha'Aretz Newspaper, 1994). Kristeva's answer supports my claim that the religious extremists act within the historical moment: their voices, resentments, ideologies and way of life are rooted in the very time and place in which they live, and stand as a viable critique to that same "social order." The question is not whether one agrees with their ideology. Rather, their ideology serves to hold up a brutal but crucial mirror to other ideologies taken for granted as "the right ones."

REFERENCES

Abu Odeh, Lama. (1993). Post-colonial feminism and the veil: thinking the difference. *Feminist Review, 43*, 26–37.

Aran, Gideon. (1991). Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism. In Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby (Eds.), *Fundamentalism observed* (pp. 265–344). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Berger, Peter. (1969). *The sacred canopy*. New York: Anchor Books.

El-Or, Tamar. (1991). Do you really know how they make love: The limits of intimacy with ethnographic informants. *Qualitative Sociology, 15*, 53–73.

El-Or, Tamar. (1993). The length of the slits and the spread of luxury: Reconstructing the subordination of ultra-orthodox Jewish women through the patriarchy of men scholars. *Sex Roles, 24*, 585–598.

El-Or, Tamar. (1994). *Educated and ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish women and their world*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Friedman, Menachem. (1986). Life tradition and book tradition in the development of ultraorthodox Judaism. In Harvey E. Goldberg (Ed.), *Judaism viewed from within and from without* (pp. 235–255). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Ha'Aretz Newspaper. (1994). September 2.

Hale, Sondra. (1989). The politics of gender in the Middle East. In Sandra Morgan (Ed.), *Gender and anthropology* (pp. 246–267). Washington: AAA.

Heilman, Samuel, & Friedman, Menachem. (1991). Religious fundamentalism and religious Jews: The case of the haredim. In Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby (Eds.), *Fundamentalism observed* (pp. 197–259). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Macleod, Arlene. (1991). *Accommodating protest: working women and the new veiling and change in Cairo*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mohanty, Chandra. (1988). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review, 30*, 61–88.

Zuhur, Sherifa. (1992). *Revealing reveiling. Islamist gender ideology in contemporary Egypt*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.