

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **TO BE LIKE OTHER WOMEN: THE VEIL AND THE MICROSCOPE**

#### **PRELUDE: THE POWER OF EDUCATION IN THE TUMULT OF GLOBALISM**

Photographs of girls in Muslim attire studying computers in Malaysia, women in traditional dress peering into a microscope in a medical school in Egypt, or sari-clad women at an astronomical observatory in India are no longer novelties. They are disseminated in order to deconstruct and reproduce stereotypes about the Third World, about traditional societies, and about how Third World traditional societies address education for women.

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In modernist thinking, education corresponds with correctness. Modernism thus links a society's claim to be worthy of equal status in the world community to the education it grants to its citizens. In the age of globalism, when an international seal of approval is vital to every nation, the girl or woman student often serves as a symbol of adherence to the norm.<sup>1</sup> The peripheral-woman-student is a doubly victorious "educationist" symbol. First, she is a non-Westerner who accepts the yoke of scientific, secular, modern education. Second, as a woman and citizen, she marks the acceptance of

the value “education for all,” thus symbolizing the universality of universal education. Throughout the world, education has become a fundamental human right, and in many countries it has also become an obligation that the state must provide for its citizens. The extent to which the right to education is granted and the obligation fulfilled, alongside the outcomes of that education, position societies along the axis of modernization. Many studies have thus focused on the status of education in the Third World (and thus on the standing of its weak populations), while assuming that this subject encompasses further questions about modernism in areas such as nationality, citizenship, democracy, ethnicity, and feminism.<sup>2</sup>

It is hardly surprising, then, that in the introduction to her anthology of articles on women in the Middle East, Lila Abu-Lughod proposes “modernization” as a key for decoding the project of remaking of women in the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> Most of the articles in the book focus on the transition between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a critical point in the colonial West’s influence over the region’s inhabitants, and they all examine how the experience of colonialism and modernism affected that reordering. The agents described in the articles (politicians, religious leaders, feminist activists, educators) propose a variety of attitudes towards the modernization enterprise, ranging from positive to negative, from desire to fear, from acceptance to rejection. It quickly becomes clear to the reader that these essays are in line with a large number of critical works that seek to deconstruct the binary distinctions of East and West, modern and primitive, authentic and fabricated. At the end of the book, the diligent reader will find a thought-provoking challenge from the anthropologist Deniz Kandiyoti. Kandiyoti turns her gaze to local societies and seeks to learn about their power to conduct a dialogue with modernity. She

emphasizes external power, coercion, and the imposition of the ruling occupier's values on the local population. Is it possible, she asks, that some of the shaping of the traditional/modern dichotomy is accomplished by internal forces that have an interest in reinforcing certain trends, rather than it all being a reaction to external pressures? Is it possible that "modernization" as a cultural and political movement has not created, but instead revealed and enlarged, existing social segmentations within society? Furthermore, the West is not monolithic and the local is not generic. Cultural and political entrepreneurs address different trends and voices where they appear, and in the context of local problems, and these often define the quality of the dialogue that takes place between "here" and "there."

In Kandiyoti's view, then, a scholar studying a society must take into account the mediation, translation and negotiation that takes place *within* the society she examines and which she seeks to study. She must suspend her preconceptions about value control and conquest, in order to learn the actual significance of repression, and resistance to repression, in the creation of local power and critique.

Anthropological work makes it possible to address Kandiyoti's challenge, inasmuch as it is based on events observed on the micro level. In a classroom, in the syllabus, in the behavior of the students, as well as in the work of translation and mediation conducted by the teachers and administrative staff, lies material that can answer the questions Kandiyoti poses. Anthropology can illuminate the forces of conveyance and reproduction in their local manifestation, without ignoring their general context.

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This chapter addresses a small corner of the collage of studying women—a vocational course for senior secretaries conducted in the Pardes Katz community center. It describes and analyzes an experience of study in the Middle East, by religious and traditional lower middle class Jewish women of Mizrahi ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> Most of the women enrolled in the course after participating in another of the community center's initiatives, a career counseling workshop run on dynamic principles. During the workshop they were meant to find out for themselves, with the help of a professional counselor, what they wanted to do and how they could advance toward that goal. They participated in a simulated work interview, prepared a resume, underwent an analysis of their appropriateness for various kinds of work, and discussed among themselves how work could be integrated into family life. Only a limited range of career training was offered within the neighborhood. The senior secretary course promised a stable foundation after which, they were promised, they could continue with a training course for medical secretaries. The course comprised four units: administration and secretarial work, English, computer use and applications, and bookkeeping. This chapter will discuss the first three units; I did not attend the fourth.

The units undoubtedly imparted critical knowledge for working in a modern office. However this material will be treated here as a body of cultural knowledge and as an icon of “necessary knowledge” signifying “normative citizenship.” Regarding the students, this chapter will seek to estimate the prospects for empowerment that the course provided for the women, and the extent to which it connected the women to the “world society of knowers.” The local conclusions about the links between religion, knowledge, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship will serve as a basis for a discussion of general

questions of cultural identity and learning, such as: what surmounts differences? What, if any, kinds of knowledge and literacy with a potential for meaning and power are internationally portable? That is, what knowledge and literacy is free of local anchors and can thus appear in the microscope of a woman student in Egypt, or on the computer screen of a Haredi graphic artist? In the context of going beyond the local into the world at large, computers and English play a special role that should be examined before proceeding to a description and analysis of the course.

### **Opening Windows and a Passport to the World: The Ethos of Computers and English**

English and computers are at the top of the ladder of normative education for Third Worlders in the third millennium. They are considered vital for “opening windows” to the world and preconditions for integration there. English and computers are icons that indicate the chances for entry into enterprises of knowledge, work, and tourism, and the ability to move within and beyond one’s country. They are like passports that enable one to receive visas for entering places one wants to visit, and which help you make your way once you are there. English and computer studies are thus well-situated sites for examining the goals of educating bodies. Are these bodies interesting in providing their students with such passports, and if so, to all or to only some of them? Are there educational institutions that restrict the study of these subjects in order to keep students from using computers, surfing the internet, working in high-tech, connecting up with the rest of the world?

The women who took the secretarial course were no longer of school age. The course took place in a public framework (the community center), was sponsored by the

state (Project Renewal and the Ministry of Labor), and the program was run by a professional commercial outfit (Ort Career). This facts make it difficult to link the course directly to Israel's institutional school systems. (Israel has three public school systems to serve its Jewish citizens: State [secular], State-Religious [modern-Zionist religious], and Independent [Haredi]). Nevertheless, all the women were graduates of that system, and the Haredi women among them accepted the authority of Haredi guides and pedagogues who label areas of education as permitted or forbidden. The Haredi women's social affiliation also marked specific kinds of work as possible for them, and others as unsuitable. My working assumption, therefore, is a woman's decision to enroll in a course that offers the fields of knowledge surveyed here is linked to the way in which those fields are accepted by the public to which the she belongs. This assumption raises the following questions:

1. Do Israeli religious leaders and educators who design curricula for children constrain or restrict the study of English and computers in order to enforce intensive cultural segregation between their students and the surrounding non-religious environment, and between them and "the rest of the world?" What place do these subjects have in the struggle to know the world, and in the struggle over what a person needs to know in order to manage within it? How do those in power apportion knowledge among their followers—that is, who will know what? What rights do students have within their society and in general, as a result of their knowledge or lack of knowledge?

2. Once young religious people have been given the opportunity to study English or computers, what is the reality behind these icons? Does the same "double click" open an identical path for all users, or does it offer different ways for different users?

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This book cannot provide a history of Haredi education in Israel. It will note only that Haredi schools function as part of a separate system, alongside the public State and State-Religious schools. The Haredi Independent school system receives government funds and thus has obligations to the state. Its leaders are therefore sensitive to criticism of their curricula, and are alert to the fact that the government support they receive is increasingly unstable.<sup>5</sup> This system also faces internal pressures to expand curricula so that graduates can integrate better into the job market.<sup>6</sup>

The model Haredi student is a male who studies only sacred texts. Such students are at the top of the pyramid of knowers, and constitute the ideal. They are exempt from military service, receive state subsidies, and can place themselves in Haredi societies' schools and other prestigious institutions. The base of the pyramid consists of men who do not continue their studies and enter the work force, generally between the ages of 26-30, and of women who enter the work force after completing secondary school. This structure became institutionalized in the 1960s and 1970s, and expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. Now it has cracked, both substantively and economically.

So as not to reach the point where Haredi families would be faced with intolerable economic hardship, and so as not to culturally damage the image of the full-time male student as the ideal man, Haredi leaders have permitted a slow and controlled expansion of curricula, and the acquisition of professions such as computer programming, property assessment, tourism fields, and graphic arts. The entry of male yeshiva graduates into these fields has to a certain extent raised their status. It has granted legitimacy to the workplace, which had previously been rejected.<sup>7</sup> Haredi women have always received

more general education than men have. Jewish law does not require them to engage in sacred studies, and the community expects them to support their scholar husbands. Schooling for girls and women has undergone many changes since it was institutionalized at the beginning of the twentieth century, and curricula now have more of everything—more sacred studies, and more general and vocational studies.<sup>8</sup>

The Sephardi-Haredi school system, El Ha-Ma'ayan, is a relatively new player in Haredi education. Because they are identified as non-Western, its leaders are frequently called on to address areas of study considered to be markers of “progress.” In media interviews, these leaders stress that they do not neglect important subjects and that they provide their students with solid foundations in computers, mathematics, and English. The system’s officials seek out professional teachers and try to provide established teachers with administrative know-how.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that they represent a population that is in part indigent, with a low average educational level, and that they seek to teach general material in their school system, makes them appear more threatening. It elicits special criticism from the state, different from that aimed at Ashkenazi-Haredi leaders.

English and computers can easily be described as “languages” and “tools” and thus segregated from areas of knowledge that offer insights about the world.<sup>10</sup> These tools seem to be “value-free,” and it is easier to bring them into conservative curricula. The system gains a double benefit. Externally, they show the decision makers and power brokers that they are not as conservative as they are made out to be. Internally, they seek to grant the members of their community skills that can bring them work, on the assumption that the ideological danger is small. The Haredim call such a strategy

*shebede'avad*—a situation accepted ex post facto, but not to be aspired to a priori. Yet this is not a cynical gambit that seeks to maneuver between internal and external pressures. It constitutes a specific, controlled internalization of the contemporary gospel of education. Few in any sector dismiss the power of technology and the achievements of modern science and medicine. This internalization is expressed in declarations about “our children, who study computers,” or in stories about successful Haredi-run technological companies. Even a person who identifies himself as very religious, or even fundamentalist, still desires to be a normative member of his time and place.

The close gaze of anthropology makes it possible to examine the “how,” how teaching is accomplished by someone “alien,” “other,” “new,” and what cultural actions are involved in such a situation.

It is nevertheless important to state, again, that the study group I observed is not part of the Haredi educational system. The opposite is true. It was conducted under the aegis of the Pardes Katz community center and was based on the curriculum of a commercial educational company. But the fact that Haredi and religious women were not deterred from signing up for the course (where they studied together with non-religious women), is evidence of the atmosphere of religious-Haredi society, and of its changing attitudes towards the boundaries of women’s knowledge.

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The choice to observe the course for senior secretaries at the Pardes Katz community center was, as noted, an ex post facto choice—one I made after failing to find a community of religious Mizrahi women who engaged in sacred studies together. My original goal derived from my previous research projects, but was inappropriate for the

new field I was now exploring. Religious Mizrahi women indeed engage in sacred studies, but the way and where they do so does not mark out a fixed site and organic community.<sup>11</sup> In the conversation with the community center's director, Michal, that I cited in the introduction, I learned that the religious and Haredi community living in the vicinity of the community center uses its services in different ways. Many Haredi women and men use the gym during the hours it is open for their sex only. During certain periods, the Ashkenazi Haredi community has offered vocational classes in the center's facilities. Religious children from the neighborhood participate in a small number of after school activities. They and some of their parents sometimes make use of the library. "My target population is, without a doubt, the neighborhood's silent majority, which is unfortunately shrinking," Michal told me. "Working parents, families that are perhaps traditional, but not necessarily very religious, people who want to give their children what they can, and who sometimes want something for themselves in the evenings. Those are the people I keep in mind. Yes, here and there we also have religious and Haredi people coming in, and that's wonderful, but they are not the majority. If I were to look for them, the most noticeable place that they participate in is the course for senior secretaries. They are at least half the students there, and it works. At least last year it worked. Maybe go there?"

I went. During 1998-1999 I attended one of the two weekly sessions of the senior secretarial course. As noted, ORT, an Israeli organization that runs vocational schools and programs, had academic responsibility for the course and set its curriculum, in the framework of its Ort Career subdivision. Funding came from three sources: the Ministry of Labor, the Project Renewal Program, and tuition paid by the participants. Graduates

received an ORT diploma certifying that they had participated in the course. To be officially certified as senior secretaries, the students had to pass an examination administered by the ministry.

My previous studies addressed the question of whether one can teach someone something while controlling her future use of that knowledge.<sup>12</sup> The same question was put to the test in this project. The answers illuminate the potential powers of education, alongside its limitations. They can indicate when study has the potential to overcome disparity. Focus on this question can show whether, under conditions of multicultural democracy, in which difference is institutionalized but where there is also a struggle over its legitimacy and values, education can create a common foundation of knowledge. Such knowledge would be independent of the student's religious status, her class, her ethnic origin, and or gender. Such knowledge would provide her with increased participation, as a citizen, in the social, economic, and political world in which she lives.

## **WEBER AND TAYLOR IN PARDES KATZ**

During that entire winter in Pardes Katz, when I read Heidegger's *Being and Time*, I heard Anton Bruckner's Fourth Symphony in my imagination, and on the bus I took each day on my way from my father's store to Amalia's house, I wrote a short story with the title "Heidegger and Bruckner Visit Pardes Katz" (Yossi Sukari, *Amalia and the Salt of the Earth, Confession*, p. 58).

As usual, I don't feel like going. Why should I leave home now? It's Hanukah, we haven't lit candles yet, and it's cold outside. But I have to. I know that in these beginning stages everything is still fragile and elusive. I'm afraid that the community center and the

Project Renewal office will forget that they gave their consent to my participation. I leave home early and decide to stop to buy pitas, so I won't get there too early. It's not unusual for the line at the Taboun Bakery to be long, but this time it is huge. Everyone is buying jelly donuts, for Hanukah. I give up on the pitas. I slide my car into the parking bay in front of the community center, next to the dumpster. There are lots of parked cars around, but, given what neighborhood I'm in, I'm sure that they'll try to break into my car. On the short walk from my car to the entranceway I step over shreds of paper and popped balloons, the detritus of that afternoon's Hanukah fair. A young woman of about 30, dressed in pants and a tight sweater, stands at the counter in the office trying to explain something to an older couple. They call her Heli and I think she might be the Project Renewal official I spoke to that morning on the telephone to get permission to observe the course. A young woman in a wig and Haredi dress comes up and asks me if the woman behind the counter is Heli. "I think so," I reply. "Tell me," I say, taking advantage of her opening, "do you know where the secretarial course is?" She gives me a brief look and asks "Why? Are you going, too?" "Yes, something like that," I mumble uncomfortably, unwilling for now to reveal my true identity and purpose. "So follow her," she says, pointing to a woman in a pants suit who is ascending a stairway. "You mean it started already?" "Yes, it started, it begins at 6:30." "Oh no," I say, confiding my mistake to her. "I thought seven."

I enter the classroom, passing by the teacher, who looks as if she is just about to begin the class proper. She gives me a look of surprise and I whisper: "It's okay, I talked to Heli, I'll speak to you after the class." "Okay," she says tersely. "Girls, let's begin."

I take a seat in the next-to-last row. It's a small room. In back, two windows open to the street, and in front there's a whiteboard. I look around and engage in my compulsion: I count the religious women. Seven out of fifteen, four with wigs, two who look Ashkenazi. The younger ones look about twenty and the older ones perhaps 50. A young woman comes in, even later than I was, and sits next to me (I'll later learn that her name is Tali). She is dressed in a long skirt, sheer black stockings, black pumps with flat heels, a brown sweater, and light-colored coat. Her hair is bobbed. The woman behind me greets her.

"Hey, Tali, it's good you came, did you bring me the notebook?" The speaker, who looks about 40, is dressed in pants, a sweater, and house slippers.

"I brought it, I brought it, what did you think I'd do?"

The teacher takes a thermos out of her bag and pours herself something that looks like weak tea. "I apologize for the muddle of the last few weeks, I was sick, I had to go to the hospital, it's still not over but how long can you sit at home? So that's it, I'm here and we will continue."

The security alarm in a car outside goes off and threatens to drown out her voice. One of the older women who sits at the back end of the classroom gets up to see whose car is wailing. "I thought it was Hannah, her alarm is always broken, but she's not here."

A second later a young woman enters the class carrying a large coffee urn. She smiles. Her long hair is dyed in shades of honey; her face is fair and pleasant, her figure full.

"So I was right, it's your car, right?"

“Of course it’s mine, you don’t recognize it yet?”

“So maybe turn it off?”

“That’s the way it is, what can I do, it’ll stop on its own.”

Hannah goes to the back, puts down the urn, returns to the front of the class, looks at the teacher, and asks: “So, should I sit here? In front?”

“Sit down, sit down, it doesn’t matter where. I want to start already.”

Hannah smiles at the teacher. “I don’t like it when people are mad at me, don’t be upset.”

“Hannah, sweetheart, you haven’t yet seen me when I get upset. I’m completely calm.”

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“Okay,” she begins. “I owe you, from the last class, the types of leadership. Right? We didn’t get to that, if I remember correctly? So it’s this way.”

She goes to the whiteboard, says she’s glad they finally put it up, and writes: autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, liberal leadership. Each of the adjectives is a Hebraicized English word, *autokrati*, *demokrati*, *liberali*. She explains each concept, conducts a short exchange with the students, and then slowly dictates. They take down, word for word, everything she says. They stop her if they miss a word. Young and middle-aged, religious and non-religious, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, hunch over their notebooks like diligent schoolgirls. They write down the types of leadership with the foreign names. Then the teacher gives historical examples (Stalin, Saddam Hussein, Lenin, and Bill Clinton), and explains how they might be like the women’s future bosses, heads of the organization, company, or office where they might find work.

Helena, who immigrated to Israel from Russia three years ago, sits next to the wall. She's dressed in jeans and a black sweater, wears old-fashioned glasses, and has not done anything with her hair. She giggles to herself when she hears the examples and even whispers a few words.

"Is something wrong, Helena?" the teacher asks. "Am I wrong when I say that Stalin's rule was autocratic and not paternalistic?" Helena nods. It's not clear whether she agrees, or that she just doesn't want to get into an argument. The teacher proceeds with her dictation.

At 7:30, Hannah goes out to fill the urn. When the water boils, the class will take a fifteen-minute break.

"How much water did you put in, tell me? That's a bathtub. Next time just fill it up half way. It won't boil until midnight, I can already see that I'll have my coffee at home tonight," says one of the girls.

Hannah laughs. No one is going to get her down. Tali glances at the small pad on which I'm jotting down some comments—I didn't want to take down a complete transcript the first time.

"Are you observing? Learning how to teach?"

"Something like that." I'm repeating my old lies.

"Us or her?" she wants to know. "Everything," I say evasively.

"So take a more normal piece of paper," she offers, about to rip a sheet out of her notebook. "No thanks, it's okay." Tali stops writing after about twenty minutes and starts doodling on her graph paper. At the end of the class maybe she'll again borrow the notebook of the woman behind her and keep it until next week.

The water boils and the break is declared. I go out with the teacher. She's tall, dressed in a long skirt and a long-sleeved shirt, but it's clear that she's not religious. She's got a tight ponytail, lots of gold rings on her fingers. Her nails are glossed and she wears glasses. My first impression is that she taught with energy and vitality, tried to keep up a reasonable level, did not speak to the students as juveniles, or as if they were uneducated. I explain what I'm looking for in general terms. She says her name is Ofra and begins to tell me about herself.

What can I say, you're doing what I'd like to do. I studied sociology as an undergraduate in Tel Aviv. I began a masters but home, the children, I had to work. And my life is a big mess now. I got divorced two years ago and I have to support two children, so I run from job to job. You are welcome [she says the last word in English] to stay. I don't know what you'll find here, it's not such a great group, you should have come to the last course. I had a wonderful, cohesive group, with a good atmosphere, there were lots of religious women, and non-religious ones, but there was a good atmosphere. Here, you can see, in general it's okay but there's not a sense of togetherness. I showed up today, so they say "Blessed be He who heals the sick," but no one called, no one picked up the telephone, they're phony, it drives me crazy. In class, when I didn't feel well, two of the older non-religious women actually accompanied me home, they don't even live in Pardes Katz. They drove with me to Rishon LeTzion to make sure that I got home safely.

Some of the young non-religious girls are sitting on a table outside the classroom and smoking. They're dressed fashionably cheap. Inside the class, some of the religious

girls have gathered around Tali and are speaking about the local falafel stands—which offers the best, the freshest, and most kosher fast food.

After the break, Ofra sums up a few more matters about management, in preparation for the test she'll be giving them.

Sigalit: “The problem with preparing for the test is that each subject we studied divided into one-two-three, and in each of those a, b, c. You can't remember it that way.”  
The girls laugh.

Ofra: “What's wrong with you? Do you think I want you to fail? I won't ask details like that, I'll concentrate on the main subjects, for example the matter of coordination, who to coordinate between, the relationship between the superior and the subordinate, between the worker and the superior, I won't let you fail. If someone fails, I'll give her another test. If someone doesn't understand something, she can call me at home at four in the morning. Girls, don't be pressured.”

Sigalit: “In other words, it's not critical.”

Miri: “Okay, that puts our minds to rest.”

Ofra: “I want to go over the management styles with you. We mentioned the theories of Max Weber and Taylor, right? We spoke about the accelerated process of industrialization and urbanization, on the growth of labor organizations, and on the whole context that made scholars think about modern bureaucratic society and on management styles.”

For ten lucid minutes, Ofra holds forth on the social, economic, and political atmosphere in Europe at the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She brings Weber and Taylor to Pardes Katz, and they bring along bureaucratic management and

scientific management. She follows through to the famous Hawthorne studies and does not neglect to mention Japanese methods and their affect on global management. The students have encountered this material in the past, so Ofra is summing it up for them.

Shoshi: “It still seems to me that this Professor Weber completely ignored what’s going on. He didn’t take into account the way people relate to each other.”

Ofra: “You’re absolutely right. We spoke about that when we presented his approach, and we noted that he ignored informal systems of relations. I stressed that in contrast with Taylor and his mechanistic-instrumental approach. There are lots of terms and it sounds hard, but you’ll see, when you go over the material, that it’s not so bad. Do you know what? [She pauses for a moment.] I’ll read you something I clipped from the newspaper yesterday, “Six Questions You Should Ask the Doctor.”

Ofra reads the article, which seeks to empower women when facing their doctors, and to position them as people who maintain their right to know. “It’s your body, after all, right? And they don’t always tell you everything, or they don’t always tell the truth. So this article tells you what to ask.”

The women listen attentively, although no discussion takes place afterwards.

The lesson continues. Ofra reminds them about goal-oriented management. The students do not challenge anything. A professor is a professor and a method is a method. From time to time—and only in reaction to comments that Ofra makes—a brief discussion takes place. Ofra takes advantage of every opportunity to broaden the class’s platform. She speaks about the stock exchange collapse in the former Soviet Union, about the global village, about the industrialized world. Her attempts to expand the discussion are not patronizing, but are nevertheless general and simple. When she again mentions

Japanese management, and refers to that society's loyalties, Helena raises her hand and interjects that she has read a book on Japanese history. The book informed her that, since Japan has few raw materials, people have always been very dependent on each other. If a man was expelled from his extended family, it was a death sentence. In reasonable but heavily-accented Hebrew, Helena sums up the book's main claims, which point to historical management methods that are valid in Japan today. The situation in the classroom is one in which a group of native-born Israelis, with a sizable Mizrahi majority, is listening to a new immigrant from Russia who read a history of Japan. Tali, who teaches in a school run by Shas's El Ha-Ma'ayan system, looks at Bracha and smiles at Helena's accent. Helena had arrived early for class but was late for the lesson because she made a detour to the community center's library to take out Naomi Regan's *Sotah*, a novel set in the Haredi world. Apparently she is doing her own little research project on the environment she lives and learns in. Later, she took an interest in my book, *Educated and Ignorant*, which I'd brought to show to Rivka. It got handed around the class, and Helena asked to read it after Eveline.

Towards the end of the session, Ofra announced that they had completed the unit on management, and that the next twelve class sessions would focus on correspondence. To mark the event, she removed a small book from her briefcase—a collection of management jokes. She read a few of them. The first one was incredibly sexist, comparing women to the continents, by age. At first, a woman is Asia—undeveloped; then Africa—hot and wakening; then she becomes America—lively and active; and in the end she is Europe—sensible and conservative. Some of the women laugh, and the woman behind me adds that in the end she's Antarctica—cold and dry. Tali doesn't like the joke.

She tells me: “She ought to be considerate of the religious girls, it’s really tasteless, no?” “I think so, too,” I reply. “I’m not religious but it upset me, too.” Tali glanced at my borderline dress—just down to the knees— and continued to doodle on her graph paper.

### **The Form of a Letter and a Cohesive Class, or: You Really Come for the Breaks**

Everything became much simpler. There were no more stomach cramps or fears, and even the issue of what to wear was not critical, I could dress this way or that. The only discomfort came from the boredom, from the need to sit through two hours of a course on management and secretarial skills. But I was even getting used to that.

At 6:20, five women sit in the community center lobby, talking with Ofra. I am welcomed with a smile and Ofra immediately inundates me with the events of the previous week, which I missed.

The first of the religious women to appear is Rivka, dressed in a corduroy jumper, a white knit shirt, and black three-quarter shoes. The bottom buttons in the front of the jumper are undone. Her wig looks expensive and high-quality, while her clothes are fashionable but inexpensive. She sits next to me on the couch and I take in her eye shadow and lipstick. “You’re pretty today,” I tell her, “At least the outside should show if the ... that is, not so much.” She wears a number of rings, but no wedding band. I know she has children, because she spoke about them last time. I think she is divorced. She indicated to me that she was born into the extreme Satmer Hasidic community and I saw in her resume that she speaks Yiddish. I wonder what happened there. A Satmer woman doesn’t look like that.

Bracha and Sarit arrive. Everyone congratulates Sarit on her wedding of the previous week. Sarit is short, dressed in a long, light-blue skirt, Mary-Jane shoes with

thick, high heels, and wears a dark coat over her black shirt. A black kerchief is wrapped around her hair, tied by a velvet band that holds the hair under the kerchief in a ponytail. Over the kerchief she wears a stiff blue hat with a blue velvet ribbon running around and through its center. She is made up with eye shadow and lipstick, but the makeup does not conceal the pimples on her cheeks. I take stock of which women are made up and which not, and find that all those with makeup are Haredi, yet not all the Haredi women wear makeup.

I sit down next to Rivka when we enter the classroom. She keeps an organized loose-leaf notebook. When Ofra returns the management exams and homework, a hush falls over the class. Rivka receives a 90, but she's disappointed. "What will I tell my children?" she asks. "That it's excellent," I tell her. "No, it's not enough," she answers. "In secretarial I got 100." Rachel gets 100. Her comments in class also make her sound like an intelligent and knowledgeable woman, and I make a mental note to talk to her. At a much later stage, she'll agree to help me out with my research.

Ofra announces that today's lesson will last until 10 p.m., to make up material missed when she was unable to come. No one complains—in fact, it looks as if everyone appreciates the gesture. Today they examine photocopied samples of different letter styles, and concentrate on replies to a justified or unjustified complaint, as well as letters of confirmation and recommendation. Most of the focus is on the layout, how it is organized graphically—what needs to be written where.

The study of types of correspondence used by organizations, public institutions, and companies, and the sample letters contained in the Ort Career curriculum, bring into the class a "clean language"—standard, and devoid of gender, ethnicity, class, and

religion. This administrative, standard speech exposes the women to public language. This language is not situated and not rooted. The syntax of institutions and organizations, structured and laden with bureaucratic and universal assumptions, does not undergo deconstruction in the class. The students try out this language, which offers them contact with a different, new, formal, power-laden level of discourse. When they are assigned to draft a letter of reply to a citizen who has submitted a complaint, they must identify for a moment with the organization, society, or institution in whose name they are writing. Ofra herself seesaws between the role of the injured citizen confronting the system's indolence and corruption, and that of the system itself. When we learn, for example, how to reply to an unjustified complaint, she reads to them out of her notebook: "You are not to educate the complainer, or preach to him." The women generally do not challenge Ofra's correct language or the messages it contains. They let Ofra do the institutional-critical work, and she does. Today there was one exception, Sigalit. When Ofra speaks of the wording of a confirmation, she writes an example on the blackboard, which includes the line "Name of pupil \_\_\_\_\_." But in Hebrew, the words for boy pupil and girl pupil are gender-specific, with the feminine form having the suffix *ah* added to the male form, *talmid*. So, as is common practice, the line was made gender neutral by writing the word for pupil "*talmid/ah*." This construction aroused Sigalit's ire.<sup>13</sup>

Sigalit: "Why is the man always first?"

Georgette: "What do you want? There's no other way to do it. It's shorter this way."

Sigalit: "Okay, maybe it makes sense here, but with everything, all the time, the man comes first."

Bracha: "It's according to the order of creation, he was created first."

Sigalit: "Look, even in advertising, he's the boss and she's the secretary, at his beck and call, it's really annoying." The class buzzes.

Ofra: "I once told a guy, what do you want from us, after all we're material taken from you. And he said, no, not at all. Am I wrong, girls, tell me, isn't that the way it is in the creation story, that they took a rib from him?"

Bracha: "Yes, of course. He must not be from here, the man who told you that, he doesn't know the sources."

Rivka: "That's why we're called 'woman,' 'because she was taken out of man.'"

Ofra: "So I remembered correctly, he was just trying to confuse me."

Sigalit: "The bottom line is that the man leads in everything, it's not fair, look the way it is on television."

Rivka (softly, to me): "It's not really like that any more, things have changed, haven't they?"

Ofra: "Girls, that's enough, let's go on, that's not our subject here."

Rivka (softly, to me): "What can you do, that's the way it is, there's no equality, right? What can you do about it, that's the way it is."

During the break, the non-religious women go out, as usual, some of them to smoke. This time Hannah hadn't come—she had a parents' night at school—so there was no tea. Georgette runs home, across the street, and returns with tea, but just for herself. The religious women remain in the classroom and I talk with them.

Rivka reminds me that I promised to bring her my book on Haredi women, and I apologize for forgetting. We jump from one subject to another. I present here some of our

exchanges. One deals with how non-religious Jews relate to Haredim. We talk about the movie *Price Above Rubies*, a film about a Haredi woman that was playing in the theaters at the time. Rivka, who dresses in Haredi style, had seen the movie, and tells Eveline, who is also Haredi: “I saw it with him, you know...”

“Avi?” Eveline smirks.

“Yes, the movie isn’t embarrassing, it’s pretty much okay, what’s it’s actually about is a woman who can’t live with the rules of Haredi society, and I could really identify with that, her acting was very good. Avi was less enthusiastic than I was, but he also enjoyed it.”

I offer some information. “The actress isn’t Jewish.”

“Really? I didn’t know that. She really got into the part very well.”

Eveline had not seen the film. She is Haredi. She came to Israel from Makhnes in Morocco at the age of ten and has never gone back. “There’s nothing to do there,” she said. “There are hardly any Jews left.” I tell her about a study that the anthropologist Andre Levy conducted in Casablanca. “Well,” she said, “Casablanca is different. There are things worth going to see there, maybe some day.” Tali comes over and congratulates Eveline on her new wig. “New?” I ask. “Didn’t you wear it last week?” “Of course I did,” she replied. “Tali didn’t notice. Of course, it’s not as nice as Rivka’s, but I’m pleased. Do you know that there’s now a new kind of wig? Once it was either synthetic or natural. Today there’s something called Custom, I think it’s from donkey hair.”

“There are women in Bnei Brak,” Eveline continues, “who go out with wigs that look like a pot lid, go to Bnei Brak, you’ll see poor girls whose wigs are like pots on their heads.”

When I inquire about religious studies for women, I don't receive any answers. Bracha, who seems to be more interested in the subject than any of the others, tells me that she is new in the neighborhood and knows only about the lessons given by Rabbi Daniel Zer, which are really something, at the Or David yeshiva. "Men and women. The men upstairs and the women downstairs, non-religious and religious, no problem. You should come, you'll love it. He shouts, gets people worked up, he's a great man." Bracha changes the subject. "You come mostly for the breaks, right? To talk to us. Aren't you bored by the secretarial course?"

An older woman in standard dress sits behind me. She raises her eyes from the papers she's busy with and says: "Do you want to hear classes for women? All the synagogues are full of them, go to the synagogues, there's lots, look at the posters, or I can ask for you."

"Thanks," I reply.

Ofra returns to the class, the smokers in her wake. She resumes the subject of letters and wording. At some point, I don't even remember when precisely, Ruti, an older, non-religious woman, raises her hand. She asks Ofra if it might be possible to have a short discussion about the situation within the group. Ofra says she's willing to devote ten minutes to the subject, so that each student can speak in turn and say what bothers her.

Georgette (religious Zionist, born in Tangiers): "It's nothing special, we're just not organized, with the coffee break and all that, and there's some pressure with the studies, maybe because there's a difference in ages, and the non-religious and traditional

and religious each keep to their own corner.” (Murmurs: “What’s that have to do with it?”, “It doesn’t make any difference.”)

Lydia (dressed non-religiously): “First, I disagree with Georgette, it’s not connected to being religious or non-religious. I respect her and she’ll respect me and that’s all there is to it. Each one has found a friend, and that’s just fine, each one with her own business and that’s just right for me.”

Ofra: “You don’t think there needs to be a little more group feeling?”

Lydia: “If there’s nothing to talk about with someone, I won’t force myself to talk, just say hello and that’s it. What bothers me is coffee break, and that’s urgent. And another thing is the talking in class. You made a rule that there’s no talking, but on Wednesday, the other teacher, the bookkeeping teacher, was here and everyone just talked and talked, until Sigalit couldn’t take it any more and got up and shouted at them.”

Ofra: “Okay, we’ll put things in order.” She erases the whiteboard and sums up the discussion. “What worries me is that I’ll be leaving soon, and you’ll need to remain here at least another four months. If there isn’t a pleasant atmosphere, girls will drop out, and that’s what I’m anxious about. I like you and you matter to me. I want you to finish the course. They gave you a course that’s not cheap, at half price, and you’ve gone more than half way. Go on and complete it.” Ofra calls on each of the women and asks for a response.

Yasmin (dressed non-religiously): “I don’t have anything to add.”

Helena (the immigrant from the former Soviet Union): “I don’t have anything to add.”

Rachel (Haredi): “I don’t have anything special, I just wanted to say that there’s no connection to the group being mixed.”

Ruti (older, non-religious): “The atmosphere is, you know, unsettled, people feel they’re being exploited, discriminated against, some contribute, some don’t, the coffee break is marginal. There’s no help, or cooperation, each one looks after herself.”

Rachel (Haredi): “What do you expect? I don’t have any problem talking to anyone. What happens, happens, and that’s all there is to it.”

Tali (Haredi): “Not that I condemn it, it’s something typical, it’s the way people are, and I include myself. That’s the way it happened, it’s the people, it’s not intentional.”

Hannah (dressed non-religiously, arrived late): “Each girl has her own personality, you can’t force people to click together, if someone wants just to study and go home that’s fine.”

Shoshi (dressed non-religiously): “Religion and ethnic groups and all that, it’s not true, I have a common language with everyone, that’s my personality. Miri and Ruti and Yasmin studied together in another course, so they have expectations, because that was a cohesive course.”

Sarit (Haredi): “Everything’s fine, I don’t have anything to add.”

Ofra: “Of course everything’s fine with her, she’s still on her honeymoon....”

Everyone laughs.

Miri: “We’re bringing up problems to solve them, not to make them worse. We’re here eight hours a week, let’s make it pleasant. When it comes down to it, it’s to be considerate. Just to be considerate. I also think that it’s not a matter of age or ethnic group or religiousness. I’ve been in a lot of mixed groups and there was no problem.”

Rivka (in Haredi dress): “I don’t have anything to add.”

Ofra writes the problems down on one side of the whiteboard: coffee break, and talking. On the other side she writes expectations: understanding, consideration, cooperation, and so on. She speaks again about her experience at the teachers college she attends (she is studying to be an English teacher, in the hopes of having another source of income). She talks about how it bothers her, as a student, when others talk in class, and how it is different from the way talking in class bothers her as a teacher. She tells them that certain subjects are difficult for her, and that she holds down three jobs in order to support herself and her children, and is tired by the time she goes to class.

Shlomit (Haredi, Ashkenazi) tries her hand at a psychological explanation:

“Maybe the girls are already edgy when they get here and they take it out on the coffee break, they come here without any patience to begin with.”

Ofra: “Talking in class doesn’t just interfere, it also creates a shitty atmosphere, excuse my language. We have a researcher sitting here among us who I’m sure is very interested in this conversation, but beyond her research, you also need to keep in mind that in your future work places you will be expected to cooperate. It’s not always fun to make a cup of coffee for the boss, and you don’t always feel that it’s right that you’re the one who has to wash all the mugs that pile up in the sink. If there are a few people in the office, you have to learn to be considerate, sometimes also to hold yourself back. You need the job.”

At the end of the class, I ask Tali to give the book I brought to Rivka, who left a bit before the end. Eveline overhears and asks if she can give the book to Rivka. She takes me off to one side and adds: “Rivka is divorced, seven months ago. Her husband is

kind of weird, a Satmar, but he never found himself, always wanted to go with something big, grandiose, and his business collapsed, so he gave her a divorce and absconded overseas. He didn't know where he was, one day he shaved off his beard, put her a television in the middle of the living room, was totally confused. Her mother also brought up her children alone. She worked, and to this day her mother drives, and works as a secretary. She supported her girls, and now that they're married, she continues to help them out. Just two years ago she received the divorce and married again. Sometimes she comes over to help Rivka, but Rivka, poor thing, is alone, gets social security payments, but she doesn't have anyone to help her. That's what happened to her mother and that's what happened to her, too. Rivka's sister also left her husband, a Gerer Hasid, and now she lives with a guy and with her children on a farm. Rivka's mother didn't bring them up with warmth, didn't touch them, didn't pet them. Maybe that's the reason. With me, when I was little, I'd come home, there was food, my mother was always home. Today it's hard, we also go out to work and have to keep the home going, it's hard. Rivka put the television in the bedroom, and she doesn't know what to do with herself, she wants maybe to move to a small town far away, maybe become Zionist religious, she doesn't know what to do with herself, she needs direction."

To decipher the socio-cultural meaning of the secretarial course, it would be best to begin with the teacher, Ofra, and then go on to the students. The teacher's voice is the easiest one to track. Its centrality means it can easily take the lead. The students' voices have to be sought out. Not all of them choose to speak in class, and what is said in public is always incomplete. Supplementary methods, such as participation in conversations outside the classroom, listening to non-public chatter in the classroom, and interviews,

amplify the voices of the students and broaden their range. Some of those voices are already heard here. Full interviews with some of the students will be presented in the biographical chapter.

### Ofra

Ofra's centrality was a product of her position as teacher, but it is greater than that. She had a wide-ranging agenda. Both because of her broad education and her perception of herself and her students, Ofra viewed herself as more than a teacher of secretarial skills. In conversations we had before and after class sessions, as well as in ideas and information she shared with her students, she placed herself on a plane where she both brought herself closer to her students and distanced herself from them. On the intimate side, she presented herself as a single mother who had to support a family, as a woman who had not been treated well by life, and who was therefore attentive and sensitive to social and gender injustice. Ofra went to college, received a bachelors degree, and began studying for a masters. "You're doing what I'd like to do," she told me, when I revealed to her my reason for attending the class. Her original plans for her life did not include teaching adult women to be secretaries, or spending her mornings teaching the same material to girls in low-status vocational schools. Because of budget cuts in vocational education programs, and her dissatisfaction with her work, she was trying to expand her skills so that she could teach English in academic high schools.

The vicissitudes of her own life made her sympathetic to her students—women seeking to make themselves more employable in a world that does not pamper them. On occasion she'd pause in the middle of a lesson and offer her critique of society, the state, and its leaders. She read them newspaper clippings describing Kafkaesque cases in which

organizations and public bodies displayed insensitivity to the needs and feelings of individuals. She also wove into her lessons personal stories that displayed her disappointment with the health system, with schools she taught at, or with the social circles she moved in. Her choice to take advantage of the platform she'd been given to speak about subjects that went beyond the limited mandate of secretarial studies revealed that she saw herself as an educator. These subjects mark the seam between her intimacy with her students and her distance from them. The seam runs from identification with them to her critical and active attitude regarding the situations she pointed out. In other words, Ofra perceived her role to be much like that of the "educator," in the sense that term is used in Israeli schools. There, the "educator" is the class's main teacher. In addition to teaching one or more of the central subjects, she is also responsible for the class's social cohesion, and for lessons in which current events and school issues are discussed. Furthermore, the "educator" serves as a liaison between the pupils and the teachers of specific subjects and the school administration. While she was only one of a number of instructors in the secretarial course, she was the teacher who saw the pupils the most, responsible for about two-thirds of the total course hours. Ofra made a point of letting the students know that she was available to listen to each and every one of them at whatever hour they needed her. She told me that they spoke with her a great deal, confiding in her and talking about their personal problems at home, in their marriages, and in their lives. Like a skilled secondary school educator, she knew something about the background of each of her students, and more about the lives of those who chose to speak to her at length.

“There are lots of girls with problems here,” she once told me. “One whose husband was served a court order forbidding him to enter the house, but she’s continually fearful that he’ll show up and start harassing her and the children again. One Haredi woman is depressed, she has only one child and she doesn’t want more children, because she has a very problematic relationship with her husband. And there’s the one whose husband ran off overseas, another one who is divorced and barely manages to feed her children. You’ve got the Russians, who have amazing educations and worked in research but were laid off. It’s not a simple situation here, I really admire the way they’ve pulled themselves together and come here to study.”

Ofra’s teaching style is based on intimacy with her students, her identification with them, and her admiration of them. It is also founded on the responsibility of someone who is not in their place. She took care to speak clearly and with standard Hebrew grammar and syntax. She did not lower the register of her language when she taught the course material. She opened window after window whenever an opportunity presented itself. She spoke in what seemed to be an associative way, but one that bound up and linked the course material with the reality from which the students had come to her and to which they would return. In this sense she was a loyal student of the classic method of Paulo Freire and of the implementers of ideological literacy, who make a point of grounding study in its contexts.<sup>14</sup> What was said was never left on the level of social reality, but rather sought to pull the listeners up by their hair, so that they could see what was being done at a distance that allowed reflection and critique. Saddam Hussein, Clinton, and Stalin, as well as doctors at the health clinic, future bosses, and friends in the imagined office, did not simply drop in on the class. Rather, Ofra brought them in

deliberately. Nevertheless, her desire to empower her students underscored all the more her different placement and her different biography, as a non-religious Ashkenazi with higher education. It was easy for her to trace out the distance with me and opposite them. She could express her aversion to the traditional greeting “Blessed be He who heals the sick,” with which the Haredi women greeted her upon her return to class after an illness—coming as it did from women who didn’t bother to pick up the phone to find out how she was doing. She can make a conscious generalization that “there are lots of girls with problems here,” and express her concern that if the class were not socially cohesive, the students would drop out. More than once she told them that they had been given a gift, an expensive course from a good home at a bargain price. Ofra very much wanted them to complete the course, and expressed her fear that the slack atmosphere and the approaching end of her part of the course, would lead some of the students to give up. “I like you and you matter to me. I want you to finish the course. They gave you a course that’s not cheap, at half price, and you’ve gone more than half way. Go on and complete it.” Giving up, despair, and dropping out are familiar enemies on the battlefield of education for the lower middle class. Ofra spent two decades there and she is committed to its terminology. As such, she depends on personal relations as the basis for motivation: “I like you and you matter to me.” It was almost as if she said “do it for me” or “I know that at this point you are, in no small measure, doing it for me.” Ofra was concerned that she was leaving a group of individuals who had no personal motivation to carry on, and who also lacked the strength to support one another. Since she did not limit her instruction to providing professional skills, but also saw herself as an educator, she acceded to Ruti’s request for a short discussion of the situation of the group.<sup>15</sup>

This instantly transformed the lesson from vocational education to a “social lesson”—the kind conducted in Israeli schools to discuss social relations within the class. The adult women in the class were thus plucked from their position as autonomous women and placed in the position of teenage girls. It is hardly surprising, then, that most of them refused to participate in the discussion. Their resistance, which will reappear with even greater force in the course’s other modules, as I will portray below, was generally somewhat less strong in Ofra’s classes. But here they chose to refrain from speaking, to say “I don’t have anything to add,” or to deny the existence of the problems the discussion was supposed to address. The few that spoke used “coffee break” as a metaphor for the lack of class cohesion.”<sup>16</sup> The coffee urn that either arrived or did not arrive with Hannah, the cookies that weren’t approved as kosher by the rabbinical authority accepted by the Haredi students, the automatic segregation during breaks between the non-religious smokers outside and the religious women inside, were all inauspicious indications that the class was not cohesive. During the talks, most of the women insisted on denying that the class was divided by age, ethnicity, and level of religious observance, as Georgette proposed. Lydia rebuffed the expectation that they be everyone’s friend: “Each one has found a friend, and that’s just fine, each one with her own business and that’s just right for me.” Rachel, a Haredi woman, declared: “I don’t have any problem talking to anyone,” thereby hinting that she had no program of connecting or disconnecting from the others. Whatever happened naturally was, in her view, acceptable. Rachel was reinforced by Tali, Lydia, and Hannah, but Ruti and Miri continued to resuscitate the expectation of a community of mutually supportive women, as they had experienced in the previous course. Miri’s therapeutic terminology, “We’re

bringing up problems to solve them, not to make them worse,” or Ruti’s emotional outburst: “people feel they’re being exploited.... There’s no help, or cooperation, each one looks after herself,” did not resonate with most of the women. The girls agreed only that students should not create a disturbance by talking in the bookkeeping class, and that the coffee break should be organized better. Their attempt to turn them into a class in the school sense of the word, or into a community in the dynamic sense of that word, did not succeed. Ofra was burned into their memories as a good teacher and an educator with a personal touch. On the social level, most of them maintained their refusal to be “together.”

I conducted individual interviews about a year after the course ended. After hearing the women’s life stories, I concluded by asking them what they thought of the course. Their memories centered on Ofra’s module, and on her personality. The selections below are taken from interviews with the Haredi women, for most of whom this was their first exposure to a non-religious teacher. Most of them praised her pedagogy.

Sarit:

Ofra knew how to teach difficult material, she knew how to be considerate. In my case, she understood me with regard to having gotten married during her course, so she went over the material with me, taught me, sat with me, explained, it was very hard for me. She guided me and I passed her tests easily. I learned from her how to approach the boss, how to approach the whole job of being a secretary, with regard to filing, administrative work, secretarial work, how to conduct the secretarial job itself, how to go about

managing all the paperwork, how to address people who come to you, how to talk, what to do, to consult, to ask. In other words, lots of things. It gave me a lot, like they say.

Bracha:

The truth is that I really enjoyed Ofra. She was like one of the girls, took everything easy. She taught in a way that pulled you in, because when you get down to it the course material is really boring, maybe the secretarial stuff a bit less. Because you're going to be a secretary, so you need to know what the characteristics are, what's what, but the theory of administration is really boring. It was really our lucky stars that she taught us that in a really nice way, with stories and jokes and her own personal anecdotes. It was always interesting with her in class, I really liked her classes and if you remember I participated, and got a 100 from her. I worked hard, I liked the correspondence (and it doesn't matter that today I don't know how to write letters), but in class, believe me, I had heaven's help, I wrote letters and she was really enthusiastic about them.

Some of the Haredi women were uncomfortable with Ofra's educational enterprise of broadening horizons, whether because it was not oriented to the purpose of the course, or because it seemed to them a violation of modesty.

Hani:

Ofra barely taught us anything, that is, she taught, but she told stories until in the end, before the test, she got pressured and began to shovel in the material.

I mean, it's nice and they're her stories, but it was pointless. We came to learn and she tells us stories. The whole subject of being a secretary is stupid. It's things they could give you to read and you'd know them, you don't need a teacher for it. How to relate to people? To the boss? That's idiotic. Letters are actually important, and she didn't really develop that, didn't give us enough exercises. Today you only need to teach computers and budgets. That's what they want from you.

Oshrat:

I'll put it this way, there were things I enjoyed hearing, but there were things I didn't. I mean, okay, for example a married woman, who knows those things, so it's ok. But there were single women among us. I didn't even know at first that she was divorced. I didn't dream of such a thing. Even though she talked so much about divorced men and women and all that, I didn't imagine that, until one day someone told me that she was divorced, I was in shock. There were a lot of subjects that she shouldn't have talked about, for example if I was a single woman, I wouldn't understand it all. I mean, two friends of mine who are single asked me all sorts of questions and all that. So, what, can I wriggle out of that? I gave them a short answer. There were subjects she shouldn't have gone into. I mean, we came to do a course. So, okay, you say something here about the family, there a bit about her life, but she went way beyond that, and then the time was up. Sometimes the time was really used up. We'd get too much off the curriculum and forget ourselves.

Lydia, a young non-religious woman, one of the smokers, experienced Ofra's teaching in a complex way:

Maybe practically we should have focused on how to write letters, that was interesting and Ofra knew how to teach that well. The fact is that most secretaries just type and answer the telephone. There's no Japanese or Chinese management involved. But that's what was nice about her, she went beyond. She didn't just teach you that you need to make coffee for your boss. She said that, because that's what you actually need to do. She brought up all sorts of things that are in your unconscious. I mean, you know you need to do them. Her stories come from real life and she tells them good, she teaches from the stories, I mean it looks like it's not related but it's related, that's an astounding thing with her, she knows how to do it really well. That Ofra is a great woman.

Whether they internalized her comprehensive method, opposed it, or enjoyed parts of it, most of the women were, first and foremost, students. Some of them had returned to this status after many years away from it, while others came to the course straight out of high school. The next section seeks to examine the social implications of the opportunity to study again.

#### What Will I Tell My Children?: Regression, Growth, or Repair

The opportunity to become a student again is a complex one. It always involves a touch of regression, and it generally also offers an opportunity for repair, as Lydia, a non-religious single woman, said:

To sit down and study, open a notebook and start writing, it's a wonderful experience, it was fun for me. Really, each time I came home from the course I had a kind of smile on my face. I felt that I was doing something for myself, investing in myself. If I missed a class, I'd make sure to make up the material. Today, for example, I didn't go to work, but if, say, it was a class day, I'd go. I went there with a fever, sore throat, just so that I wouldn't miss anything, and it's not high school, no one forces you to go, I went because I wanted to, it was more important.

Other women described the pleasure of once more buying school supplies, and the optimism that it produced—new notebooks, pens, highlighters, loose-leaf binders. They took notes carefully, copied from the whiteboard, peeked at their neighbor's notebook if they missed a line, took home friends' notes to make up what they missed. Often, when I looked at them, I saw rows of bent backs and rapidly writing hands. It looked like a classic picture of "the diligent student." At the same time, they also played the role of schoolgirls in that they were constantly checking their status by always coming late. At 6:30, when the class was supposed to begin, only five or six had arrived. They sat in the foyer and gradually drifted up to the classroom and arranged the chairs, which were generally upside-down on top of the desks. After they sat down, a steady stream of women came in until seven, followed by dribs and drabs that ended at about 7:30.

When the midterm and final exams approached, the tension in class increased. The tests and certification were always presences in class, and were metaphors of the subject of education and training for adult women. On the one hand, the course, which had been designed without reference to this specific group of students, established a strict

standard that determined who had met the course requirements and who had not. On the other hand, those who mediated between the curriculum and the classroom—the teachers and administrators who moved the course along—imbued it with local values, which both broadened and narrowed its objectives. All the women had, in one form or another, gone through the Project Renewal Office (located in the middle of the neighborhood, next to the open-air market). Heli, the community worker, who knew some of the women, encouraged and urged them to sign up for the course. In her view (and that of the organization she belonged to), a person who embarks on vocational training signals her willingness to live normative life. She displays movement and rejects stasis and decline, and accepts an opportunity for self-repair. Of course, one could claim that Heli encouraged the women to register for the course because she wanted to demonstrate that her project is effective and successful, and needed “good numbers” at the end of each year. But it is not this view that motivates my interpretation. I rather seek its implications for the social fabric that I observed. The certificate, Ort Career’s reputation, and the possibility of passing an external examination administered by the Ministry of Labor, were often cited by the women as serious and practical reasons for taking the course. But, as will be shown below, their training was, in the end, conducted in a “therapeutic” way. The women were perceived as having experienced failures in their pasts, as women who, more than they needed accredited studies, needed “repair.” “What’s wrong with you?... I won’t let you fail,” Ofra told them.<sup>17</sup> In her course, hard work, handing in homework assignments, making up material, and listening in class were not aimed at the moment of truth of success or failure, or at their ability to demonstrate that they had mastered the course material. The tacit and explicit messages were connected to trying—both the

students and those who taught them. They had to demonstrate motivation. Motivation “to do something with their lives.” To sign up for the course, to show up for classes, to make an effort. Not as students, but as women who were undergoing treatment and edification, that was sufficient. If they also created a cohesive social atmosphere in class, displayed mutual assistance, and formed a supportive community (as in the previous session, the one Ofra recalled to me), that would have meant more than success or failure on exams. The women, for their part, at first related to the exams as a serious matter, and felt the normal anxieties about them. Ostensibly, they seemed to understand that if they failed, they would not receive their certification. But they quickly realized that was not the course’s objective, at least not the objective of the course in its local incarnation. After some give-and-take between them and Ofra (during which they expressed their concern about the complexity of the material, which prompted Ofra to promise that she would not fail them), Sigalit exposed the proceeding by saying “In other words, it’s not critical.” And Miri added: “Okay, that puts our minds to rest.” This clarification did not, however, cause them to take the course lightly. They still wanted to get good grades. Rivka, who got a 90, was disappointed: “What will I tell my children?... In secretarial I got 100.” In my interview with her, Bracha recalled her grades with satisfaction, although she confessed that, a year after the course ended, she didn’t know how to draft a letter. Sarit proudly recalled that, thanks to Ofra’s help, she earned high grades even though she missed classes. In this case, the grades are not being shown to parents or girlfriends—they are taken home to husbands and children as a form of proof that “Mom is doing it.”

Sigalit (a non-religious single mother), whose tough life taught her, more than anything else, not to lie to herself, presents an extreme and stark view. She does not

represent the rest of the women, but she depicts the complexity and cruelty of the experience they all underwent:

I used to go to Project Renewal and Heli would tell me, “Why don’t you do something with yourself? Why not study something?” So I told her that I don’t know, like...I can’t sit and study and be concentrated on material when my whole life around me is not a life. I live with my mother, it’s crappy, I don’t have a cent, I’m always telling my daughter that I can’t afford this, I can’t afford that. Do you think I could get my head straight for studying? Really, Heli. A person who goes to study, why does he do it? To invest in himself. I can’t come and say “I’m investing in myself.” I haven’t bought clothes for a year. So how can I go to something that is my future? My career? It looks too big for me. So she tells me, try, because you... in other words, you’ve got potential. And then, like...I don’t know, it could be that at some point I started the course to please my mother, to show her that it’s not just my sister who can learn stuff, and again my intention was outside, for others, not for myself, I didn’t say, here, I’m going to build my future.

Don’t misunderstand me. I worked hard. That is, I’d come home and copy everything down nicely in my notebook, but I didn’t like it deep down. My sister, who studies because she likes to, would tell me, “So, are you learning new things, are you making progress?” I’d tell her: “Okay, to organize an office. Like, big deal. To put papers in order.” It didn’t really interest me. The family always said that I don’t study, and I need to do something with myself? Okay, here I am doing something with myself, I go twice a week and

I study, okay? Like, did you get that? Like, *c'est tout*. Big deal, here's a mother with kids who's studying. It's just a stigma. Here, you get out of the house, away from the children, you have time to yourself. By studying? So it'll be by studying. But don't think that I told myself, that here I'm going to make something of myself, wow! Tomorrow I'll have a certificate. Maybe because of my attitude I dropped out, I stopped in the middle of the English. So I won't have a certificate, hell, even that way I can't find any purpose to my life. Certificate, no certificate. Profession, no profession, you can always work in cleaning, in the post office, sorting mail, you can always tell yourself that all work is respectable, even if you know that it's not exactly true. That today, if you don't have a profession, then...I don't want to say they don't respect you, but life works out better when you have a profession, and you have experience.

In many ways, for me, Sigalit's words subsume take in the entire process. She visited the Project Renewal office to take care of pressing matters. Sigalit wanted to receive a rent-controlled apartment, so that she could move out of her mother's house and begin to live. Other women went there to receive financial aid for school payments, to buy books, and to cover other education expenses. Their connection with Project Renewal was goal-directed, and often produced results. The very fact that they went there produced a connection with Heli and with other programs run by the "Project." Sigalit reads these programs as asking her "to do something with yourself." She says that her participation in a support group for single mothers saved her, so she does not disparage activity, and her biography shows that she has not refrained from taking action. But she

quickly realized that taking the course is first and foremost a symbolic matter. It is something that signals to the environment that this woman is making an investment in herself. In the present, she leaves home in the evening, in anticipation of a future of some sort. Weighed down by the burdens life has placed on her, she deciphers this action with cynical clarity. She asks Heli: how can you invest in your life when you don't have a life? I haven't bought clothes for myself, so how can I invest in my future, in an imaginary career? She is aware that she wanted to show her sister and mother that she could also study, but that she actually didn't want to. It doesn't interest her. She knows that she is not realizing a dream, that filing papers is not exactly her fantasy. The price she is asked to pay in order to repair her self image seems too high for her, and the issue of having or not having a graduation certificate does not confuse her. "Big deal," she says. "Here's a mother with kids who's studying." The things she had to go through as a mother of children are much more serious.<sup>18</sup> They help her strip the pedagogical move and display it in its nakedness. Towards the end of her monologue, she returns to the secure point of intermittent jobs, which can always be described as honorable. But there, too, she does not lie to herself. While there really is no work that shames those who do it, "Life works out better when you have a profession, and you have experience."

Sigalit did not drop out of the course because she was afraid she'd fail the final examination. She dropped out because she took the course seriously. To invest in a career, she believes, a woman needs to be relatively free of other concerns, and to be internally motivated. The class included some women who met Sigalit's criteria, but they were a minority. Most of the women came to the course for indirect reasons, as Lydia, Aya, and Eveline made clear.

Lydia (non-religious, single): “I saw that I was sitting at home between one job and another. at the Project they said that there’s this course, and I said to myself, so let’s do it, why not. You had to go first to that diagnostic workshop, okay, I did that and continued. I told myself that I don’t see myself working in it, but the certificate won’t hurt.”

Aya (non-religious, single): “Like, the course for me is a drop in the sea, it wasn’t worth much, I knew it all. Ofra and I actually spoke most of the time about other things. For the married women, it was fun, to get out of the house two nights a week, it made the year for them. It didn’t matter what they studied, didn’t matter what they did, they’re housewives, mothers, they got away from their kids, they came, they saw other women, listened to Ofra—and you have to admit that she knows how to teach a class—and they got something out of it.”

Eveline (married, five children, Haredi): “I really enjoyed it, to get out of the house, the sociability, the girls were really nice just to sit and study, to clear your head, to get out of the tension and pressures of home.”

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Lydia spoke to the point. The proposal that she take the course caught her between jobs, and she saw it as an opportunity. Aya, who went to school at a kibbutz, had a high school diploma and had taken courses from the Open University. She joined the course out of consideration for Heli. It was something of a display of gratitude, an offer of help with the inauguration of a new program, in return for assistance she had received over the years from the Project. Aya distanced herself from the other students and connected with Ofra, the teacher. From this vantage point, she decoded the women’s

literacy process using therapeutic language. It was not the course's content, but the fact of study, getting out of the house, in the company of other women, being exposed to Ofra's education, that was important. Eveline confirmed Aya's approach. It was nice for her to get out of the house, clear her head of other pressures, and meet other women.

The course's goals and their realization pass by Sigalit, Lydia, Eveline, and their friends. Undoubtedly, the very decision to sign up for the program, active participation, exposure to all four units and their exams, as well as to get away from home, enjoy social encounters, and the new friendships created as a result, all come together to form something real. The research literature shows that the experiences and sense of repair that such programs provide are not matters of little consequence.<sup>19</sup> The original program sought to confront the women with the agenda of repair that complemented the course. In other words, there was an attempt to make the process transparent and point out that receiving the certificate was not the only important outcome. The course, they were to understand, was also a personal-family-community process. The diagnostic workshop that preceded the course was meant to treat the women's perceptions of themselves and their environment. The professional aspect was to come after that. Nevertheless, the professional part of the process continued the therapeutic character of the workshop. For some of the women this was reasonable or unimportant, but for others, Sigalit in particular, there was something unfair, demeaning, and regressive about it.

Below, especially in the context of the English studies and the awarding of the certificates, the reader will see further and varied opinions on the tension between the course's explicit objective and its therapeutic character, and on the tension between the need to meet established standards and the lowering of expectations with regard to the

students. At this point, and in summary, it can be stated that the lack of an explicit and immanent connection between the course's two agendas was detrimental to its success. Something in the overall literacy project was flawed. Literacy research refuses to separate processes that grant knowledge or accreditation from the abilities of students to change their places in the social reality they live in. Every program of study acts simultaneously on all levels, and is always part of the social, cultural, and political context. Incongruence between these levels can lead to a variety of results, ranging from dropping out to alienation to apathy to denial. The girls in this class, the second time the secretarial course was offered, seemed to refuse to cooperate with the personal repair (or "rehabilitation") endeavor that infused the course. This refusal was expressed in the class's "lack of cohesion," tardiness, disturbances in the classroom, and in the failure of the social ceremony of the "coffee break." This type of "resistance" may indicate that, while many of the students enjoyed getting out of the house, that was not their principal objective. They definitely expected to face external standards not tailored specifically for the "disadvantaged." When they comprehended that the course had been modified in a therapeutic direction, they took it as an insult.

This interim summary does not mean to suggest that thought should not be given to linking the curriculum to the reality in which the students live. But such connections should empower the students, rather than the opposite. Additional examples of empowerment and diminishment will be seen in the descriptions of the English and computer classes.

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The move to the English and computer classes, and in particular the act of decoding them, deflects the emphases made so far. Up to this point, the class issue has (in a general way) guided my reading of education for adult women. Now I will attempt to deconstruct the category of class into its cultural components, while preserving the category of gender (as in the secretarial and administrative skills class). The significance of the presence of religious and Haredi women in the class will be more dominant, because of the move into marked areas of knowledge—English and computers. Furthermore, most of the women are Mizrahi Israelis. In other words, as Israelis, they are “not in the West,” and as Mizrahim in Israel, they are on the margins of this non-Western periphery. This deviation connects to the theoretical prelude to this chapter, which examines the position of education for non-Western women in the age of modernism and globalization.

## **2. PARDES KATZ AND BRIGHTON BEACH**

### **Jerry**

It is almost 6:30 when a tallish, thin young man approaches the gaggle of women sitting in the community center lobby. He’s dressed in khaki pants, a blue shirt, and a checkered jacket; his shoes are Dr. Martens. He looks foreign. He bends over slightly and asks (no one in particular) if this is the group that is supposed to take English. He speaks with a British accent, and smiles. The girls answer in the affirmative. Turning towards the exit, he promises to return in a few minutes. All the women smile awkwardly. They are flustered, disconcerted. A male teacher, that hasn’t happened yet, a male teacher, young, nice looking. “Wow,” Suzy laughs, “Awesome, awesome, I’m telling you girls.” We go

up to the classroom, arrange it, and fiddle around with the newly-installed air conditioner to see if it can be used for heat. It can't. The room isn't full and a few more women drift after the lesson begins. I sit next to Rivka, after checking to make sure that she does not want to save the spot for Eveline.

The teacher places a huge cardboard carton on his desk and draws loose-leaf binders from it. He passes them out and the girls page through them. They seem to be very impressed that he has given them such well-organized material in the very first minute of the course. He writes "Jerry" in the top left corner of the whiteboard. A murmur of "Jerry" runs through the class. Some of the women read the name and said it out loud, while others ask "What? What? What are they saying? What's that? What did he write? What does it mean?"

"It's his name, his name," Rivka says. "His name—Jerry."

Jerry walks to the back of the classroom, forcing everyone to twist around in their chairs. He looks at his name and begins to speak in Hebrew: "Yes. That's my name. I come from England. I'd like to ask that each of you write her name in English on white paper in large letters and place it on her desk."

"But why are you talking from there? We can't work this way," Lydia says.

"I'll go to the front in just a minute."

The girls begin the labor of writing. There is a rustle of consultations. Some wrote their name in Hebrew, or had one of their friends write it for them. Some wrote their name in very small letters that Jerry is unable to read.

"This is how you start? I need to begin from ABC," Sigalit says. Everyone laughs.

“I’m asking,” Jerry says quietly, “in order to know if I need to speak in Hebrew, which is not so good with me, or whether I can speak in English, so I’m asking each of you to write one sentence, it doesn’t matter what, a short sentence, and I won’t read it, but you’ll say it out loud and I’ll know how your English is.”

There’s a much greater hubbub now. The girls lean one over to the other, turn around, gaze with wonder and admiration at those who are able to write, quietly and independently, a sentence of some sort. The show begins.

Limor is the first one to read, and does so happily: “My name is Limor, I am 23 years old, I work for a very famous company.”

“Amazing,” says Lydia.

“Good.” Jerry asks in Hebrew: “At what company?”

“At Mor,” Limor answers.

“Is that famous?”

“Yes, here it’s famous,” Limor answers.

He goes from one to the other. Some pass, with an embarrassed smile. Others say things like “My name is Sara, I have three children”; “My name is Nicole, I have six children”; “My name is Rachel, I have a daughter”; “My name is Eveline, I have five children and my husband live [sic] in Haifa.”

“Wow, five children? But you look so young,” Jerry says. Eveline blushes.

There’s unease in the class, along with the great awe of those who are able to speak fluently. At least a third of the women ask not to speak. Jerry gets the picture and from this point onward speaks in Hebrew. He notifies them that this is not a course in spoken English, but rather in English correspondence. So they don’t need to worry about

their speaking ability, the most important thing is that they know at the end how to write a letter in English. He asks them to open the notebook to the first page, where there is a letter layout, which he calls by its English name. He goes over the layout with them, trying to explain to them what it is, until one of the women finally catches on what “layout” means and gives the Hebrew translation. The minute she says the Hebrew word out loud, everyone feels much better, because they know the term. From here on out they continually make comparisons and translate Jerry’s words into those they know from the Hebrew secretarial course.

The lesson proceeds slowly. Most of the women succeed in understanding what an address and other such elements are, but there are other basic terms they don’t understand. Rachel gets fed up. She turns to me, smiles, and says: “Forget it, I can already see how this is going to go, it’ll take hours before something moves here.”

Sigalit, who generally studies assiduously and remains silent during classes, is very unquiet today. “I hate English, really hate it, they need to teach us the basics before all this stuff.”

Rivka answers her from the back of the room: “Sigalit, stop it, that’s not nice, that’s enough, whatever you understand you’ll understand, in the end you’ll know it, it’s not nice to talk that way, get the right attitude.”

I look at Jerry and wonder what brings him here, why is he teaching them? Does he need the job? Is he a new immigrant to Israel who can’t teach in the school system because he doesn’t have a teaching certificate? How does he feel in this class?

Helena, who came late, knows English fairly well, but has trouble with pronunciation. For example, when Jerry explains salutations, he goes through the options:

Dear Sir, and so on. Helena asks if you can sometimes write Dear Colleague, but she pronounces it “College” and he doesn’t understand. I repeat her question with standard pronunciation and he says yes, you can do that, but this makes the class tense. It’s not written on the sheet, which only lists Mr., Mrs., Miss, and Ms. They want to know what “colleague” is, and I have to translate it to Hebrew. Jerry explains to the women why the term “Ms.” was invented, and uses the term “politically correct” (in English). They don’t relate to the meaning he offers them, and stick to the rule of whether you know or don’t know that marital status of the addressee. He takes care to pronounce “Ms.” so as to distinguish it from “Miss,” but this elicits laughter. “*Biz,*” says Ruti. “Sounds like ‘*biz.*’” Miri, sitting next to her, laughs and gives Ruti a little shove on the shoulder: “You think he knows what *biz* is?”<sup>20</sup>

The lesson goes slowly.

Jerry says: “Here, after the space we have the date [he says the last word in English]. What does that mean?”

Suzy (who is not religious): “A date is a rendezvous, no?”

Jerry laughs. “Not in this case. It’s the date.”

Everyone laughs, and Sarit (who is Haredi) says: “Of course, Suzy only thinks about dates.”

Eveline, who sits behind us, leans forward and says: “It’s fun to study with a man teacher, we never had one before. With you there probably are, it’s something, isn’t it?”

“What, you never had men as teachers?” I ask.

“No.”

“Weren’t there rabbis?”

“Sure, there were rabbis, but not like this.”

I manage to get out something about the differences in achievement in mixed and single-sex classes. I tell them that studies show that girls reach higher levels of achievement in single-sex classes. They marvel, and smile, and say, so there’s something positive about a class with just girls. When Jerry calls on one of the women, they are flustered. When he turned in our direction, Rivka and Eveline both eagerly try to answer.

Rivka, to Eveline: “Go ahead, you answer, he started up with you, not with me.”

Afterwards I recalled that at one point, when Eveline said that she had five children, he told her “but you look so young.”

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Two weeks went by. When I returned for another lesson, there was no one around and I was afraid that I’d flubbed and missed an announcement that this week’s class was cancelled. It was already 6:20 and I was the only one in the lobby. Then Haya came, and she was also concerned that no one else had arrived. She sat next to me and told me about Jerry and how things had progressed since the first session.

“In the third class the girls were giving him a hard time, and he’s one who works with his head. Instead of getting upset, he simply stepped outside. He said that he didn’t care, he’d get his salary, but he wasn’t prepared to work that way. Then, the next time, he arranged the seats in a semicircle and that gave us a feeling of togetherness, and it was a great lesson. We asked him to translate every word for us, because a lot of girls don’t understand what’s written there, so he translated and there was really a feeling that we were working. He himself told us that he felt that we were cooperating and all that.”

Jerry arrives ten minutes after me, takes the key and goes up to the classroom. There are a few girls downstairs, and they let him deal with the routine stuff like getting the keys to the room. Rivka and Georgette admit that they skipped a lesson or two “because it’s hard and frustrating.” The classroom fills up slowly, with girls coming in much later than they usually do. I get smiles, queries of “where were you?” and “what’s new?” I sit next to Sarit, who recently got married, and Bracha and Tali join our row. For the first time, I find myself in the midst of my target population—religious Mizrahi women.

The purpose of this section of the course is to teach English correspondence. The approach is to teach formulaic key sentences, from which the women could compose a standard letter for any purpose. It seems like a useful strategy. Jerry asks for volunteers to write, on the whiteboard, the letters from the worksheets they were assigned as homework. These were letters in which the paragraphs had been scrambled, and the task was to put them in their proper order.

Georgette and Sarit go up to the whiteboard. One receives a red marker and the second a green one, and they copy their homework onto the board. The others are amazed at the two women’s willingness to volunteer. Jerry walks among the students and checks the homework, and the women talk among themselves while the volunteers complete their task.

Miri to Ruti: “What are you worried about, in any case if there’s an office that needs a lot of correspondence in English they’ll take someone with English as a mother tongue.”

Ruti: "My mother tongue is Moroccan." Miri laughs and leans over to Shlomit, who sits beside her, and they all laugh.

Ruti: "I had my daughter help me with the homework. What can I say, I felt retarded. My daughter looks at the homework and tells me that it's first-grade stuff."

Eveline and Rivka sit down facing me. Rivka is wearing a sheer black blouse over a white one, a rare combination for a Haredi woman. She seems to be starting to make an outward display of what's going on inside her.<sup>21</sup>

Eveline leans towards Helena and says: "What happened to you today? You've abandoned us? You're sitting so far away."

Helena helps the girls around her, moving from one to the other. Until today, she has generally sat with her sister or alone. The other girls would giggle at her accent when she spoke, or display impatience with her erudite comments.

Before the class began, Haya told me: "That Russian girl knows English. She might be the only one who knows. She has a degree in biochemistry or something, and she's still studying, because once they fired her and she wants to have another profession."

Georgette and Sarit sit down and Jerry examines their letters. One letter is a request for the catalogue of a fashion collection, and the second requests an application for a subscription to the Liverpool opera.

The latter letter states that the writer especially likes Mozart and Haydn. But the women skip over the content of the letter without comment. They need to fill in the blanks, so the letter's meaning is not really of interest to them. Despite the fill-in-the-blanks method, based on connecting formulaic sentences in the correct order, it would

seem that success requires an understanding of what the sentences say. Georgette has mixed up the two letters and Jerry points out her mistake. Sarit has succeeded, so Jerry only marks a place where she should have used a capital letter. Now he divides the class into groups of four and gives each one a letter-writing task. Before setting them to it, he asks for a volunteer to read out loud the newspaper advertisement to which the letter is to be a response. Haya raises her hand and says: "Worse comes to worse, if I make a mistake you'll correct me."

There's barely a word she reads properly. Her performance cuts me to the quick. She sounds like someone who is deliberately attempting to do a bad job. The mistakes are almost unbelievable. It sounds like it must be harder to read the way she is reading than to read correctly. The other girls try to correct a word here or there, if they think they know the correct reading. For the most part, they don't know. Beyond that, they don't know the precise meaning of each word. But by applying their intelligence to the context, they succeed in understanding, more or less, what the advertisement is about, without missing too much.

No one laughs at Haya when she reads. Eti can't find the page on which the advertisement appears and says "I don't have page 28." "It's next to page 29," someone calls out, and everyone laughs.

Jerry translates some of the words, such as "sun," "south," and "beach." His tone moves from professionalism to faint derision to a certain amount of alienation. They don't know their compass. For example, some are able to say "southeast," but even in Hebrew they can't associate the word with the correct direction, so they guess. The letter the groups are to draft is supposed to be an order for a summer cottage in Brighton

Beach, England, in response to the advertisement. Eveline identifies the word “Beach” and immediately says “Aha, Miami Beach.”

I’ve been assigned to a group with Sarit, Bracha, and Tali, and they want me to help. As religious Mizrahi women, these three women represent the focus of my study, and I have an opportunity to work with them. But I decide to remain passive, because I know they will manage, one way or another. I prefer to help Lydia.

Lydia is one of the young non-religious women in the course. She always sits with Suzy and Haya. All three of them take the course very seriously. They work hard, hate it when other women chatter during lessons, and bring snacks for the coffee break. In short, they’ve come to learn. But they’ve been edgy ever since the English class began. They are pressured and feel isolated. On edge, they keep interrupting Jerry and asking for help. He interprets their behavior as a disturbance rather than as resistance. He is very cynical towards them and has a hard time understanding where they are coming from. I ask him if he minds if I switch places to sit with Lydia, and after a moment’s hesitation he shrugs his shoulders. I take my chair over to her. Her eyes have filled with tears, and she asks me to wait for a moment. She goes out (to wash her face?), and when she returns she tries to explain why she’s pressured. I tell her: “Lydia, stop it, let’s get to work, I understand that this is hard for you, but don’t take it to heart, we’ll talk afterwards.” (Jerry has allotted only 15 minutes for the task). Lydia isn’t able to read the ad. *She simply cannot read English.* She can’t identify the letters or associate them with their sounds, so she can’t even fill in the blanks. I take advantage of the fact that she nevertheless understands some of the words that I read for her, and I try to show her how to use them to fill in the blanks. We manage, more or less, to complete the letter in the

time given, and she copies from the pages in the loose-leaf notebook the partial sentences she needs to complete the letter. She takes care to write neatly in pencil, and she's almost compulsive about erasing every word in which even a single letter is incorrect. During the break she approaches me and suggests we have coffee in the smokers' room. The other two members of her threesome are there, along with Miri and Ruti, who are older. None of the five knows any English, and they use the break to reassure each other.

Lydia: "Look how upset I am. The course coordinator told us, okay, if you want, you can do another course in English afterwards, in the meantime go just to show your faces and I'll pass all of you. But I haven't come here just for them to pass me, I want to learn, so what am I going to do on the test? Hand it in blank? Do you get it? I'm serious, this course is important for me, I didn't come here just to get through it, if that's what I wanted, okay, I wouldn't have a problem, but that's not where I'm at."

The two older women try to calm her down, but don't succeed. I also do my best. "Lydia, I understand you completely, I've seen how serious you were in Ofra's class on administration, and I realize that it's frustrating. In the meantime sit and listen, I'm sure you'll get something out of it. Don't do anything on the exam, hand it in blank, and then sign up for the English course they promised you. Don't worry, in most offices you won't have to write English. Don't take Jerry too hard, it seems to me that he's the weak one and that you're the strong ones. He's just scared. Reassure him, go to him after class and tell him that you aren't asking questions to annoy him, but because you really don't understand, so that he'll calm down."

Lydia: “Do you think that I don’t know how to read people? That I didn’t read him? I see exactly how he feels. But he’s missing the target here, he should be more sensitive. When the girls disturbed him I got them to be quiet. Doesn’t he get it?”

### After the Exam

As I approach the intersection across from Pardes Katz’s bustling open-air market, a Subaru with a huge photograph of Arie’h Der’i pasted up on its back window cuts in front of me. The driver, who holds his arm fully extended out of his window, barely advances. He gets on my nerves. Some moments pass before I make out that his extended hand holds a cassette tape. I realize that he is probably selling recordings of Der’i’s “*J’accuse*” speech. Customers are not lining up. In fact, while posters for the different religious parties are plastered all over the neighborhood, there is no evidence of excitement. Israel (although not its media) is tranquil as the 1999 elections approach, and so is Pardes Katz.

The community center’s parking lot is unusually crowded. A pickup truck painted in the colors of the Maccabee Tel Aviv soccer team stands on the sidewalk, and the sound of loud dance music comes from the back side of the building. Swarms of children pack the fenced-in basketball court and the area around it. Play equipment has been erected in the court, and for a few shekels the children can gain admittance and have a good time. Most of the children are not in Haredi dress, but some of the boys wear knitted kippot (which labels them as members of the Religious Zionist community). It turns out that the pickup truck in the Maccabee colors is in fact a mobile video cassette store. It doesn’t sell Arie’h Der’i. Instead, it has children’s movies, cartoons, and the like.

I enter the lobby at 6:15. Suzi, Lyida, and Haya sit in one corner. They smile at me and I approach them and sit down.

Lydia: “Where have you been? You haven’t come for a long time.”

“Actually, I was here last week, but none of you were.”

“That’s true, I wasn’t here on Monday, but I came for the English exam, and what can I tell you, my fears were for nothing. The exam was really okay, open-book, fair. In the end Jerry came out all right, he tried, and gave us a really easy test. I didn’t just barely pass—I have a feeling that I did really well. Anyway, if they give an English course like they promised, I’m signing up. I’ve got to learn English from scratch. I want to complete the credits for my *bagrut* [high school graduation] diploma, because the course for making up twelve years of high school study gave me only two units of math, and math is like bread for me. It’s nothing, a piece of cake, so I want a full *bagrut* diploma, because any job you might want these days requires a *bagrut* diploma.

“Maybe you should take the course they offer here, the prep course for the psychometric exam [the Israeli equivalent of the SAT]? I saw that a course began two weeks ago.”

Lydia: “Yes, but I don’t know if they let you take it if you don’t have a *bagrut* diploma. The truth is that I want to study to be a lawyer, but it just seems so long to me, four years of study, and then you have to work for someone for a few years until you can open your own office. It’s too long.”

In the meantime the other students have arrived. No one is absent. Rivka sits next to me, Miri, and Eti, and the atmosphere has really improved. The claim that the group wasn’t cohesive, made when the course began, seem to be unfounded. The women smile

and enjoy each other's company. The young women mix with the older ones, the religious with the non-religious. Lydia chides Miri for not having shown up for the English exam, telling her that it was easy and that it's too bad she was scared to take it. Miri, for her part, claims that she didn't show up for another reason entirely.

In the meantime, Miri goes to the community center office and begins making phone calls to find out why the computer teacher hasn't shown up. The girls complain about the management of the course and some say that you get what you pay for.

Suzy: "I wouldn't recommend to anyone to take this course, they really treat us like nothings."

Lydia: "The part on administration. You have to admit that there were new and interesting things that opened my eyes. But in general, it doesn't give you much, what really counts is experience, that's what counts in the end."

Miri emerges from the office and the girls gather around her. "The computer course," she announces, "will begin after the elections."

### **The Social Meaning of English Study and Its Ability to Bridge Differences**

English (in Israel) is the language that everyone wants to know in addition to the official language. The higher one's social status, the greater one's chance of knowing English well. The language most valued by all classes is the one that distinguishes between more and less preferred groups (Ben-Refael 1994, p. 183).

After five months of learning administration, office work, and bookkeeping with female teachers, the women took courses in English and computers. These two units were taught by men. Both men were, by chance, young, good-looking, and non-religious.

The first meeting with Jerry, the English teacher, was heady and awkward. His strangeness as a man among women, as an immigrant from England among Israelis who were mostly Mizrahi, and a non-religious person among women who were mostly religious or traditional, made his entry into the class especially difficult—even more difficult than the always difficult entry of a newcomer into an established group. The fact that he wore a sports jacket (not common in the wardrobe of non-religious Israeli men), and that when he entered the class he handed out organized loose-leaf binders containing the course material, marked him as a “professional” who took his work seriously. In this way he established his position with regard to the women, but he also constructed an additional wall of foreignness.<sup>22</sup> The power relations between the teacher and students were affected by this foreignness and by the threat it created. This was enhanced by sexual tension among women who were not accustomed to being in the presence of a young male teacher. The fact that this teacher was an English teacher, and that he spoke and wrote English as soon as the class began, strongly and immediately located the event in a distant, fantastical area, connected to places in which English is spoken. Such places are associated, in peripheral locations like Israel, with “America,” even though Jerry is English. “America” is the land of movies, and even more so of television. It is a place of money, drama, and uninhibited gender relations. So, instead of being something on a calendar, a “date” became a rendezvous with a man, and a letter asking to rent an apartment in Brighton Beach in England became a letter to Miami Beach, Florida.

The students' contextuality drew the literacy event into distant places that they knew only through popular culture. Dialogue with a man in a small, crowded classroom elicited giggles and embarrassment. When they were asked to present themselves to him, all married women chose to mention their name and the number of children they had. The single women tried to tell him where they worked. Yet, and perhaps for this reason, when he told Eveline "But you look so young," her friend interpreted it as "starting up." Such a comment would not have been made if all the women in the room had been religious—because religious women of Eveline's age generally already have a number of children, and because, out of modesty, religious women don't make personal comments of this type. In this context, in the presence of a young, non-religious male teacher, Rivka took Jerry's comment to be a "line." For me, of course, it was a routine comment—non-religious people are always amazed by the fact that young and good-looking Haredi women are mothers several times over.

Eveline was the one who whispered to me that it was fun to have a man as a teacher. She didn't perceive the rabbis who had taught her at school as "men." When I tried to speak to her seriously about the differences in academic achievement between girls who study in mixed-sex schools and those who study in girls' schools, she was surprised to hear that there was something good about women being schooled separately. For a moment she was proud, but she did not want to ruin the fun she was having with the new situation she found herself in. The teacher's mini-prejudice—the common assumption that a woman with children loses her beauty—leaped over modest Haredi discourse and the stereotypes of the non-religious community and appeared in the classroom as a flirt. The success of girls in single-sex schools was a surprising fact but

not sufficiently persuasive. Apparently, faced with an unfamiliar teacher, the women did not apply traditional moral criteria, but neither did they adopt alternative moral standards. The discourse of political correctness—for example, the discussion of the form of address “Ms.,” which makes it possible to refer to a woman without inquiring into her marital status—did not serve as the basis for a discussion of the status of women in our times. The event was located outside any practical context of their lives. This made possible a simulation or illusion that connected America, Miami Beach, dates, good-looking men and unsupervised gender relations. Jerry was vicarious overseas vacation. The non-religious women in the class were acquainted with the territory from movies. The Haredi women knew it from what little television and film they had managed to see and from what they heard from relatives and friends who live in Haredi communities overseas. They perceive such people as entirely kosher Jews who are able to live as Haredim and live well also. In America, far from the political-social intensity of Israel, Haredim allow themselves a freer lifestyle, evident in the way the women dress, and in the adoption of habits and customs that would be considered unacceptable in Israel.

The subjects of the letters they had to compose dealt with distant content worlds. They ordered tickets to the Liverpool Opera, encountered Haydn and Schubert, inquired into a summer vacation at Brighton Beach, and ordered a winter fashion catalogue from a clothing manufacturer. None of them had ever done anything of the sort in Hebrew, much less in English, and did not see herself as likely to do any of them in the near future.

The gender fun with the American flavor took them away from themselves. It may well have been possible to take advantage of this for study that would, in the end,

connect with the lives of the students. But the moments of connection had entirely different accents.

The Pain of Landing, or Lydia's Tears: Stratification in the Knowledge of English

The fun of dating in Miami Beach, and the presence of the dreamy-looking teacher, lent the class an erotic dimension. But the class was in turmoil for another reason as well. The women felt uncomfortable, and their discomfort seemed to be rooted in resistance and frustration. In the third lesson, Haya told me, Jerry had to leave the class and issue a warning. In the fourth lesson he searched for a pedagogical response to the tension—he organized the room in a different way and changed his approach. A number of students were tardy for his lessons. Some skipped several sessions, and three stopped attending in the middle of the course and did not show up for the final exam. Sigalit dropped out of the secretarial course entirely. In an interview with me she said: “The truth is that I had a hard time with the whole course, but in the English class I gave up.” Many of the students were restive, but this was especially the case with the non-Haredi Mizrahi women. These were Lydia, Suzy, and Odelia (the three of them twenty-something, single, and not Haredi), Sigalit (27 years old, a divorced mother of two, not Haredi), Ruti and Miri (in their forties, also not Haredi). These six women were also the ones who occupied the smoking room during class breaks, and they became the most prominent non-religious clique in the class.

In interviews I conducted between six months and a year after the course ended, the women spoke of their feelings with a somewhat distant perspective. Lydia, for example, described the experience of studying English as follows:

English, he did what he had to do, even though everyone said that he didn't teach. He had to teach us business English, not the ABCs. Now I, I have a big vocabulary, if you talk to me I'll understand, and when he talked I understood, and when he said insert the word this way or that way I did it, but the class was pressured, a huge amount of pressure. Because no one knew. The majority just don't know how to read, me, too, but I at least made an effort. I looked for ways to connect with him, they didn't. They said, I don't know how to read, I don't know how to read. Poor guy, he did what he was supposed to do, and he was an amazing teacher. I don't know where he found so much patience. I couldn't face that kind of pressure, with everyone shouting at him, and inside you've got three students who know English well. The two Russian sisters, they knew English well and it was so easy for them, so they stopped coming to the classes because it didn't interest them. Still, in my view he did amazing work and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed taking the test, it was fun to do.

Bracha, who is Haredi and attended Or Hayyim schools, offered a similar description, even though there were some differences between how the non-Haredi and Haredi women experienced the class:

Now, with the English it was really hard for me, because when I came into the course I asked and I said explicitly that I am not good in English, that I don't remember anything, that in tenth grade I finished with English. But Heli told me—don't worry, the English is no big deal, God will help, don't worry. Okay, at the first lesson he brings us such a binder, I open it and I don't

understand a word. Hey, I'm about to give birth, always it hurts me here and there's pressure there and you know what a first pregnancy is, you make a fuss, you don't have strength, and I was working too, and it wasn't a simple matter at all. I worked as a cashier and I sat at the register all day, depressed. It was very hard for me in the English class, because it was already towards the end, and you're heavy, you know, and my mind is on the baby and what I'll buy him, and what I'll do with him, and how I'll dress him. But, okay, we got through it, look, when it comes down to it he was a nice teacher. At the beginning I took something in, I managed, there was Ms., Miss, Mr., okay, I managed that. After that it started getting hard. Then I had the baby, but still, with heaven's help believe me, I went back. The truth is, I was a real blockhead when it comes to English. And you can't say anything, I really tried hard in class, really tried hard. I mean, I wanted to know, but I don't know. What can I do if I don't know English? I just can't. They offered me a course in spoken English, but I don't know the ABCs. I can't, I don't have the strength. I don't get along with English. And besides, what will English give me? If I was going to work with English then maybe I'd do something with it, and I'd have someone to talk to, do you understand? Then you don't forget, but the minute I'm not studying any more, I don't remember a thing.

Sarit, Tali, and Hani (all of them Mizrahi Haredi women in their twenties) coped with the assignments relatively quietly. In the interviews they reported that they had a hard time remembering material they had studied in high school. Yet Tali—who is single and works in the Shas school system, although she herself attended the state-religious

school system—said: “But in the big picture, beyond a work here and there, I understood what was going on.” But other women had an easier time: Rivka and Shlomit (Ashkenazi Haredi women who were educated in Haredi Beit Ya’akov schools for girls), Georgette (a religious Zionist who attended an Alliance Française high school in Morocco), Eveline (a 35-year old Haredi woman who went to school in Morocco and in Sephardi-Haredi schools in Israel), and Rachel (a 33-year old Haredi woman who attended Sephardi-Haredi schools). Helena, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union, displayed the most comprehensive knowledge of English. Even Shoshi, who attended Or Hayyim schools, managed.

I manage with English. I manage. True, when you don’t speak it you forget, but I managed just fine, because it was a little bit like high school. But there were students who were in shock in his class. I did very well on the exam, because it was a really idiotic test. Do you know how much copying there was?

His lessons were actually pleasant. In my opinion he’s a really good teacher, he covered the material well. He had a very good way of teaching. Even girls who really didn’t know, like Sigalit, who left in the middle, at first she really listened to him. Or Lydia, who gave up at the beginning, afterwards she somehow succeeded. He tried to draw everyone in.

Ben-Refael’s claim, quoted at the beginning of this section, presents the language as a stratified parameter. The small, unrepresentative class at the community center fits his thesis. This test case organizes Israeli stratigraphy such that the non-religious

Ashkenazi woman (here in the form of a stereotypical exaggeration—a Russian immigrant) stands at the top of the literacy ladder. Behind her are the Ashkenazi and Sephardi Haredi women. On the bottom rung of the ladder stand the non-religious Sephardi women. This manifestation of stratification does not derive from the economic side of the term “socio-economic,” but rather from the social side. Ruti and Miri are in relatively good economic positions, better than those of the other Haredi women in the class (Ashkenazi and Sephardi), and better than that of Helena, a new immigrant who was unemployed at the time I interviewed her. Neither were Suzy, Lydia, and Odelia worse off than Sarit, Bracha, Tali, or Hani. The stress, then, is on their “cultural capital,” which they acquired in the schools they went to, in their long-term exposure to different educational institutions, and perhaps also in their self-images as people who are going somewhere, to some place other than where they are now.

Lydia’s tears expressed the profound despair that overcame her.<sup>23</sup> She came to take a course to train her to be a senior secretary after taking courses at the community center to complete high school. She dropped out of the vocational high school she attended at the age of sixteen and a half, dragging behind her, as most of her friends do, the failure of the state-run system. She subsequently picked up occasional work in the textile industry and in cleaning. At the time of the interview she worked in a supermarket. In previous section of the course she had stood out as a serious student. She sat in the front rows, was concerned before tests, and was proud of the good grades she earned. The encounter with English took her back to her past and sent out troublesome signals about the future. She abruptly became the one who doesn’t know and doesn’t succeed. The letters of the Latin alphabet were a mass of black symbols that did not come together to

produce any meaning. They were accompanied by the recognition that there are things you can't skip over with just good will, guidance, or a young teacher. It was precisely her seriousness, her refusal to coast through the course or to count on the fact that the teacher would make sure she passed, that produced her hardest feelings about the English class. She sought comprehensive correction, demanding to be taught from scratch. In class she discovered that a course of this type cannot deal with past damage. She, and the other students, were again confronted with the old distinction between the European Ashkenazi who knows (Helena) and the Sephardi cashier who doesn't know.

The English class whetted the stratified structure and the division of power it involves. Before the women began studying English, Helena and her sister were two foreigners who had no friends in the class. When they offered erudite answers to Ofra's questions in the administration class, on academic or other matters, the other women reacted with impatience, and sometimes with a giggle at their heavy accents, and their stereotypical Russian-inflected Hebrew. Then the class was divided into veteran Israelis and immigrants, and obviously the former had the upper hand. The class heard the knowledge that Helena displayed in her answers as a patronizing annoyance. But this was not the case in the English class. The women suddenly began to seek out Helena's friendship and when she moved to a seat farther away, Eveline said: "What happened to you today? You've abandoned us. You're sitting so far away." Haya mentioned to me that Helena was "the only one who knows," and make note of the Russian woman's degree in biochemistry. As if to add further tinder to the bonfire of the Russian intellectual stereotype, Helena passed by Haya and me on her way to the library, where she wanted to return and take out a book (in Hebrew) before class started.

Lydia's tears are not just one more detail in the stereotypical Ashkenazi-Sephardi game. Her tears are a sign of impotence from someone who strives. They come from one who has discovered that, in order to move into a respectable office, she must overcome impossible obstacles. She made her demand of the teacher in a mature and sensible way: "teach us from scratch." She took her request to the course's administrators. The teacher was subject to curriculum that did not meet her demands, and he also grew more and more despairing as time went by. He perceived her requests as a disturbance (when I told him that I was moving to sit next to Lydia, he shrugged his shoulders and said "Okay, but she doesn't really deserve it"). The administrators, who were also victims of the system that brought its failures to their doorstep, offered Lydia a solution that infantilized her. They promised a "sure pass," when what she wanted was serious studies.

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The social reproduction makes itself evident in the conversation that took place after the final exam. Ostensibly, this was a breezy conversation between those who had passed. But it was, in fact, melancholy. The division of knowledge between those who know and don't know English did not change. The course did not enable the dissemination of this knowledge in a more egalitarian way. The fact that the exam was easy, with books open, and the fact that the teacher passed everyone, produced dreams with no grounding in reality. Instead of marking real goals that it might be possible to act to achieve (such as those marked by Lydia before the exam), the result was new, distant ideas of the Hollywood and Miami Beach type. Math became "piece of cake," and law school seemed possible, just too lengthy. There were still thoughts of completing a *bagrut* diploma, of another English course, but connecting them to a distant and far-off

dream made it less likely that the women would actually take action on them. Helena remained with her good English, and the Mizrahi-Haredi women with their rudimentary English, insufficient for office work. Lydia and the girls from the smoking room still had zero English, and I remained with Lydia's offer to make me tea after I tried to help her.<sup>24</sup>

The stratification described above seems to indicate that the Sephardi-Haredi education offered by the Independent school system is better than the state and state-religious education offered in the neighborhood. I have no comprehensive grounding for this finding. In the cultural context of this study, however, it seems that the framework, the perception that one belongs to a certain cultural group, and that this affiliation marks out a path of life, constitutes a more relaxed cultural identity that allows a more stable literacy experience. This is a hypothesis that needs to be tested. What is already clear at this point is that the pedagogue displayed in the class itself did not bring about a change in the stratification as I have described it.

### The Cultural Pedagogy of the Language

The fact that Jerry passed out organized loose-leaf binders at the first lesson made a good impression on the students, one that the women I later interviewed cited. In each binder were the entire unit's worksheets, and all the material that would appear on the test. The method the curriculum taught was a "fill in the blanks" strategy. Jerry's major effort was directed at identifying the three parts of a letters: the salutation, the body, and the **complimentary close**. He presented a few basic templates (request, complaint, inquiry, invitation, etc.) for each section. The students were meant to learn to identify the characteristics of each section, which was supposed to aid them in filling out the scrambled dummy letters that he presented to them.

Such a teaching method has a great deal of logic to it. It is meant to give students who have a rudimentary knowledge of English quick access to the preparation of standard office letters. In the case before us, at least two-thirds of the students lacked basic English. The result was that the lesson turned into a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, an attempt to put the missing limb in the right place while blindfolded, using only touch and guesswork.

The students' will-power and intelligence enabled them to learn the game relatively quickly and thus to pass the test, but it also produced dissonance between their sense of inner knowledge and its external manifestation. Most of them realized that they didn't identify many words, that they only understood "sort of." Most of them could not relate to the contents of the letters, which portrayed worlds irrelevant to them, and with which they had and would never have any contact. The encounter with these worlds did not come in order to enrich them or to open a window for them to other worlds. The Liverpool opera, for example, landed in their classroom only in the context of finding the letter's beginning, middle, and end. Ordering a summer house in Brighton Beach was accompanied by the teacher's desperate attempt to speak to them about how English people long for the summer, the south, the east, the north, and the west. But the women, who understood that what was important was what words to put in what blanks, viewed his attempts as a annoyance and a waste of time—just as they viewed Helena's attempt to add the term "colleague" to the greeting, and Jerry's cultural analysis of the term "Ms." Ruti was prepared to go from Ms. to *biz*, but her neighbor told her immediately that there was no way the English teacher would know what a *biz* was.

Jerry's English class began after the women had already studied together for some four months and were open to each other. When he asked them, during the first lesson, to present themselves to the class in English, he created an awkward moment. Nevertheless, some of them were glad of the opportunity to display their knowledge, and felt no embarrassment about their heavy accents or even worse mistakes. Others chose to remain silent. During the lessons, when someone wrote on the whiteboard or read out loud, she did not become the object of criticism or ridicule. The women were patient with each other, and even made encouraging remarks about those who sounded fluent, or who wrote rapidly (for example, Georgette, whose mother tongue is French). The women evinced nervousness, frustration, and especially resistance in class—but not embarrassment. When Ruti expressed her concern about her ability to work in English, Miri reassured her and said that an office that needed it would in any case look for a secretary who spoke English from birth. "My mother tongue is Moroccan," Ruti answered. Her friends laughed, but not to embarrass her. The laughter released pressure, but also confirmed that there were probably not many offices interested in a secretary who knew Moroccan. Still, Ruti chose to tell her friends about her mortification when she asked her daughter to help her with her homework: "What can I say, I felt retarded. My daughter looks at the homework and tells me that it's first-grade stuff."

They felt a great sense of relief after the test. However, their actual achievements were disconnected from their expression on the exam, even though it was clear to the women that the teacher had arranged for them all to pass. When interviewed, they confirmed that "it's not serious" and "I obviously don't know a thing in English." Yet the course completion certificates they received from ORT showed a "pass" in English—

including the report cards of those students who did not show up for the exam because they thought they couldn't pass. Their criticism of the course was therefore twofold: the course did not offer what they needed, in a serious way, and in the end they received grades that did not relate to their actual accomplishments. In fact, none of the women in the course went on to take the Ministry of Labor exam that would have qualified them officially as senior secretaries. Apparently, the knowledge the course imparted was not sufficient to do that.

There was only a small chance that they would have to draft a letter in English in any future job. The chance that they could do so successfully if so required was even smaller. But the confrontation with this hole in their education was immediate and painful. They were faced with the failure of their former schools and of their current educational framework. This time the gatekeeper was a young, foreign male teacher who came to class with organized English notebooks and good will. But he, too, took them on a detour around the fence, instead of giving them the keys.

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Braj Kachru was among the first to address the power relations inherent in discussions of World Englishes (Kachru 1985, 1987). Building on Foucault's (1980) analysis of power, Kachru offers four parameters for the power of English: the demographic and numerical distribution of its speakers, positive and negative values attributed to the language, its functional role, and the accessibility it provides to other forms of communication. Jordanian linguist Muhammad Raji Zughoul (2001) uses these parameters to trace a tension between the functional and cultural or status/prestige powers of English in higher education in the Arab world. Zughoul claims that the status of

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English is rooted in the region's colonial history and the language's current status. During the colonial era, English was a sign of "proper education" among the middle and upper classes, and of "good breeding" among the lower classes. Attitudes towards English and the (Western) cultures it represents were fraught with local, national, religious, class, and gender struggles.

The tendency in most Middle Eastern universities, says Zughoul, is to stress the functional value of English. This blurs cultural negotiations with English, veiling local power relations. Looking at both utility and cultural prestige may help determine whether it is possible to use an external language as a tool for conducting internal relations. English in this case might be a site of both prestige and resistance—deferential not to the symbolic master of the language (the "West"), but to dominant local parties.

Such studies, conducted in the non-English world, follow the path of Kandiyoti,<sup>25</sup> and seek to understand whether and how external worlds of knowledge and their cultural tools influence the reorganization of internal social relationships.

Such an approach was proposed by Norbert Francis, an anthropologist, and Phyllis R. Ryan, a linguist, who studied English as the international language of prestige in Mexico and how it ranked among students in the National University in Mexico City and in a rural setting.<sup>26</sup> The attitude toward English in Mexico, Francis and Ryan maintain, moves between love and hatred, and is affected by politically and economically charged relations with the United States. Students seek some mastery of the language because it is required for certain jobs or by certain educational programs. In the Third World, Francis and Ryan argue, English is perceived as a tool, a device for the generation of profit. Its acquisition does not necessarily indicate Anglicizing intentions.

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Francis and Ryan's study is interesting for its dual target population. The urban students differentiated between the language and its associated American culture. When American culture did come up, students referred to it negatively: "Those Americans," "the gringos." The situation was completely different in the rural area. The natives were trying to resuscitate the local language, Nahuatl, after hundred of years of linguistic oppression by Spanish. Francis and Ryan report that students were glad to circumvent the foreign domestic language (Spanish) and link to a remote language (English). Like students in the city, they perceived the language in cultural-political terms. But, while English in the city stood for the cultural conqueror, in rural areas that position was taken by Spanish. Rural students were not embarrassed to speak imperfect English, but their imperfect Spanish embarrassed them. Learning English in the rural area was accompanied by the hope that it would help students acquire higher education. The connection to English, the researchers argue, was tantamount to a link to the affluent, the faraway, the multicultural, eliding local tensions between the official state language and their native Nahuatl. As an interviewee from rural Malintzi said: "We speak Nahuatl amongst ourselves, Spanish with 'others,' English with the world, and Latin with God."

Similarly, Mennonites living in northern Mexico also strive to learn English and reject the acquisition of Spanish.<sup>27</sup> Their language is a traditional Germanic dialect; and English is viewed as a way of transcending the local, which is foreign to them, and linking with other Mennonites in the United States and Canada. The role of English as a cultural marker is clear, but the significance of that culture is ascribed according to the socio-political status of the local group.

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### English in the Haredi World

A similar situation exists among Ashkenazi Haredi Jews in Israel. Many speak Yiddish amongst themselves, Hebrew with “others” (nonreligious Jews), English with the world, and *loyshen koydesh* with God. They too perceive Hebrew as a local language charged with cultural meanings. Hebrew, the language of their sacred books, was secularized by the Zionist enterprise and is considered a street language, “their” language, that of the secular Zionists. The canonical manifestations of Hebrew in literature, poetry, and research are unfamiliar to the Haredim, who do not expose themselves to it. *Heder* and yeshiva pupils learn Hebrew on the street; only at an older age do they study it somewhat systematically. The most complex modern Hebrew they read is in the popular press and on the internet.<sup>28</sup> Haredi women, whose literacy status is lower, are exposed to Hebrew earlier and in a more systematic manner.<sup>29</sup>

The prestige of languages in this case is not dependent on the speakers’ cultural background, but rather on their gender. Haredi Ashkenazi men often master four languages—Yiddish, Aramaic, Hebrew and *loyshen koydesh*—while women know Hebrew and a little English. The men dictate the linguistic hierarchy, with Yiddish at the top. English is in many respects external to the system. An Israeli Ashkenazi Haredi man who attended his community’s most prestigious educational institutions is not meant to know English.<sup>30</sup> The status of English in the ultra-Orthodox world is based on its being the language of “our brothers in the Diaspora,” those who dwell in Jewish communities scattered throughout the English-speaking world. English also is associated with images of affluent relatives visiting from abroad, of celebrations such as weddings, and of shopping in the United States. English is sometimes viewed as “the other Yiddish,” another language that

helps Jews communicate with Jews in other places. It is not imbued with the local and current.

The situation is more complex for ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Jews, for whom Hebrew remains the sole language. Ladino, the language of the Jews in the Balkans and Spain, is not used. The Arabic dialects spoken by Jews from different parts of the Islamic world have been expunged by Zionist education, and French, which served some of North Africa's Jews, did not get passed on to their Israeli-born children. Hebrew thus remains their only language.<sup>31</sup>

For Sephardi Haredim to gain a command of English, the language must be included in the curriculum of the schools they attend. Here, too, women are exposed to it in a more methodical way than are men who study in yeshivot, and here, too, it is considered a language that enables its speakers to leap over secular Hebrew, the language identified with the "other," Ashkenazi-academic culture.

As opposed to Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox who can shift between Hebrew and Yiddish, the majority of Sephardi ultra-Orthodox are confined to Hebrew (save a small number of those who study in Ashkenazi Yeshivot, where they master Yiddish). When Sephardi ultra-Orthodox turn to English, they discover that even though they have no cultural "problem" with it, the education they received in the state schools makes it difficult for them to master it. Once again, the advantage of the middle and upper-middle classes, of the secular and Ashkenazi, and of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox is conspicuous. English provides a pathway to achieve prestige, but for the Sephardi, the road toward it is laden with obstacles. The very fact that it is a difficult-to-acquire, valued resource strengthens the differentiation drawn by Ben-Refael (1994).

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When I made another visit to the community center in November 2000, the director updated me on innovations and changes made during the intervening year: “There is an English course, but you’ll be surprised to hear that the women aren’t running to sign up. They have a trauma from it or something. In general, it is very difficult to attract adults to the classes here. We don’t have a whole lot of success with them, except in the area of sport and the gym, and computers.”

The next section of this chapter will thus look at computer studies.

### **3. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TYPING, USING A KEYBOARD AND KNOWING COMPUTERS**

The sorry attempts in the 1970s and early 1980s to inculcate what was called “familiarity with the computer” by teaching the computer’s structure and programming, for all intents and purposes “ruined” the subject.... One of the consequences of these botched experiments is the erroneous idea, so widespread among the public, that programming is something that can only be done by “computer people” and that it is, as it were, connected to the computer’s structure (Givon 1995, pp. 18-19).

The computer study unit will be discussed here, with two reservations: 1. It was difficult to produce rich ethnography from the computer course, because the material produced in these classes is thinner than that produced in the English lessons; 2. The juxtaposition of English and computers will be largely symbolic (iconic-cultural). Despite

the frequent tendency to think of computer study as a kind of language study, in actual fact the parallel is hardly so simple.

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Yehoshafat Givon trains teachers and college graduates to use software for the composition of information. His experience impelled him to formulate a conception that describes different forms of literacy (mathematical, environmental, social, humanistic) as a network. These are areas of knowledge that do not derive from a single source, but for which one can identify identical overarching principles. He proposes an addition to the list of basic literacies—algorithmic literacy, which involves the process of programming functions and activities. He argues that “use of the computer” cannot be separated from an understanding and command of this form of literacy. The disconnect between the two is a barrier to correct and empowering knowledge of a central tool that (ostensibly) stands at our service.

The women in the community center’s secretarial course were a classic target group for a course in computer skills. Like many other men and women, they learned “to use” the computer. Givon’s claim is a radical one—it proposes to raze the barrier between “computer people” and the rest of the world.

The computer has profound and broad philosophical significance as an organizer of knowledge and possessor of “intelligence.” But beyond that, computers are work tools in everyday places. The image of the computer thus swings between its being an infrastructure device that makes the world go round and a routine piece of office equipment. It oscillates between being, on the one hand, a point in an infinite network of knowledge and communication charged with values (both helpful and dangerous) and, on

the other hand, a vital domestic machine alongside those that do the laundry and keep food cold. The symbolic array attached to “the computer” affects the way it is used within certain populations, and its usefulness. It is thus necessary to consider the symbolism and practice of “computer familiarity,” and the question of whether this partial act of “use” contains any empowerment.

### **The Teacher: Asaf**

It’s 6:30 and I still don’t see anyone. I ask the secretary, as I’ve already done several times, and she recommends that I proceed to the computer room on the second floor. A few children are finishing up their computer class and the teacher walks among them to make sure that they have turned off the computers correctly. Among them, at the tables, are a few of the girls from the course. They gaze at the just-extinguished computers. Some of them turn them back on and amuse themselves a bit by setting up the word processor. In the meantime, Georgette informs me that the teacher divided the class into two because of the small number of computers available. The beginners meet on Mondays and those who already have some knowledge of computer use meet on Wednesdays.

Fifteen minutes late a 30-year old man enters the room. He’s dressed in fashionable khaki pants and a blue shirt. His hair is cut short and is speckled with gray. He’s really good-looking.

My name is Asaf. I want to apologize from the start if I talk too slowly or repeat myself several times. I teach groups of different ages and with different levels of knowledge, so I first need to see what the situation is. I

might drive you a little crazy at the beginning, when I say everything ten times, but with all due respect for you, please be patient with me, because I'll walk among the computers. My experience is that these repetitions are very helpful. I ask that you listen to me and write the things down. It's very tempting to look at the computer and play with the mouse and to try everything I say before I've finished.

Asaf speaks entirely to the point, explains methodically, and offers background on the Windows operating system. He tells the women a bit of computer history—Apple's approach as opposed to that of IBM, and says something about other software applications. His presentation is organized and interesting. Even though I know some of the information, I feel that I am learning. The women listen to him with concentration and attention. He writes each concept on the blackboard in Hebrew and in English.

Rivka has a computer at home, Shoshi learned a little in high school, and Georgette has some experience with her son the soldier's computer. Anna, Helena's sister, worked with large computers in the Soviet Union. Tali learns with her students in a Shas school. When Asaf takes up the subject of the "shut-down protocol" and how he is "about to execute," I imagine him standing as a sergeant before a platoon of soldiers, and I leave.

On Monday I go to the beginners' class. Strangely, more non-religious women are concentrated in this group. For a moment I think that this was one more instance, as the English lesson had been, of the non-religious Mizrahi women having been less exposed to literacy. But then I discover that some had chosen to take this section for reasons of convenience. Miri and Ruti, for example, know how to use a computer fairly well. Miri

works in a kindergarten where children try their hands at various computer applications, and at home she has a computer and plays with it. Here, too, she spends the long minutes before the teacher's late arrival to play solitaire. Ruti also fiddles with computer in front of her. She opens her notebook and tries to reproduce the actions they studied in the two previous lessons. When she gets stuck she calls Miri, who easily extricates her from the problem and explains a few more things about how to enlarge a window or minimize it. Bracha and Rachel, the two religious women in the room, don't know a thing about computers, and they sit facing black screens.

The class waits for the teacher, Haim, and I tell them about my favorable impression of Asaf, the teacher of the other section. It's already a quarter to seven and no one has arrived. When the classroom door opens (it's kept closed because of the air conditioner, which chills the room to a decidedly low temperature), who enters but Asaf. He apologizes for his tardiness and announces that Haim was unable to come. Ruti leans over towards me and I confirm that this is Asaf. "Good-looking," she says. Today Asaf is wearing nice jeans, a white Ralph Lauren shirt, and brown shoes with side buckles. He holds a leather briefcase. "Okay," he says, and smiles at me, "at least I know one person here." I remain until the break, hearing him repeat some of the things I heard already.

Asaf progresses to the subject of folders, libraries, and files.

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A week later, eight women sit in the computer room, the two Russian sisters and six Haredi women. The lesson focuses on the word processor Word, although the opening minutes are still devoted to identifying important buttons, and to opening and saving a file. Asaf once more requests: "Girls, please, don't touch the computers, don't play.

Listen to me, you will have time to do that.” Asaf passes out the words to a well-known song by the songwriter Naomi Shemer, “I Haven’t Yet Loved Enough.” The women are assigned to type three verses. They apply themselves to the assignment enthusiastically. Shlomit, who is Haredi, had a baby just eleven days previously and she is already here. She is quick, and thin, and smiles shyly when Bracha asks her who is caring for the baby. “Her grandmother,” she answers. Hannah arrives late, as usual, and finds herself without a computer. Three of the computers in the room are out of order. She takes a chair and sits next to Bracha.

Suddenly there is a knock on the door. Heli, the coordinator of vocational training, enters with two more women and introduces them: “This is Tziporah [she wears a wig], the director of the city welfare department, and this is Dalia, a colleague of mine.” Then she turns to the two women and says: “And here we have a course for senior secretaries.” She turns to Asaf and says: “They know how to type, right?” Without waiting for an answer, she tells Tzipora: “Most of them went through diagnostic workshops.” Then she turns to the class and says: “A month from now you’ll have an impressive graduation ceremony.”

Asaf’s face flushes slightly, and Tzipora, who senses the women’s silence and a certain hostility to what is taking place, tells them loudly, as if speaking to elderly people or children, “What’s wrong with you? You look so tired, sleepy.”

When they go out, Asaf follows them and speaks to Heli. When he returns to the classroom he says: “Okay, all I do is teach Word, why should I get involved in that, let’s go on, no sense wasting time.”

## **The Cultural Meaning of Computer Applications**

Observing a literacy event involving computer studies is not at all a simple matter. The dialogic structure changes. The teacher stands before women who sit in front of computers. My axis of scrutiny becomes complicated. I can listen to the teacher, but the students' response is not directed at him, or at the other students. They respond to the computer. My observation of six lessons thus produced a fairly thin body of ethnography. Nevertheless, clear lines emerged from the observations and they enable a certain amount of generalization.

Asaf, the teacher, has experience in this literacy situation, and he asks the students to be patient. He apologizes in advance for repeating the same thing many times, and more than anything else he asks them to restrain themselves, to suspend their dialogue with the computer until the end of his dialogue with them. The matter of touch, of stroking the mouse, of pressing the buttons on the keyboard, of looking at the screen become a temptation, a stimulus that can be responded to immediately. But, the teacher says, restraint pays off; holding off touch and action now will produce a more successful operation in a little while. Contact with the computer, and its operation, were also a parameter for dividing the class into two groups, advanced and beginners. The distinction did not lie between those who knew computers and those who did not, but between those who had already touched a computer and those who still had not. Bracha and Rachel, for example, who sat for half an hour facing black screens while waiting for Asaf, differed from Ruti and Miri who played solitaire, or Haya, who carried out, following her notebook, the operations learned the previous week. In sitting with black computer screens, they broadcast that they had not gotten over the barrier of touching the computer

on their own, that they were still waiting for mediated contact under the supervision of the teacher. Perhaps this is the phenomenon called “avoidance,” or fear of computers, something that is not a problem for children, who are quick to touch.

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The computer course consisted of twelve three-hour sessions and provided an acquaintance with Windows, Word, and a bit of Excel. Four of the twenty women in the secretarial course have computers at home. With the exception of Helena and her sister, none of them had previously learned how to use a computer in any systematic way. From my observations in the class, and according to the test given to them at the end of the course, most of the women succeeded in cracking the code of personal computer use. In their final exam, they entered a complicated text (words, a table, and a picture), saved it in a specific folder, retrieved it, attached it to another text, and organized data in Excel. During the classes, it looked as if most of the women enjoyed the activity. The individual work, the immediate results, the rapid progress, and Asaf’s manner of teaching all contributed to a sense of accomplishment.

Asaf viewed the students as adult women who sought to learn. He structured his lessons smoothly, assumed that his audience was intelligent and interested, and addressed his pupils with respect. He seems to have designed his opening lecture for a general audience. He did not relate to their identity, their age, or their lives, did not ask about their doings, and barely mastered their names. They came to learn, and he came to teach. To a great extent, his approach succeeded. Unlike the women’s other literacy experiences, there was something in the computer class that assumed that everyone was equal before the machine, and that addressing the students’ specifics (that is, relating to

their age, class, ethnicity, or extent of religious observance) would be of no help. Asaf was insulted by the attitude of the visitors from the municipalities because, for him, the students were a regular audience, not part of a welfare project. The fact that the curriculum assumed that they were beginning from square one allowed them to begin at a reasonable starting point and advance. That was not the case in the English course, in which they felt that they had begin from the middle and that the “black hole” would never be closed.

Facing the big word “computer,” in the presence of the myth that “today you can’t do anything without computers,” and lacking the ability to distinguish between computer applications and other activity involving computers, the students felt as if they had covered a huge amount of ground. They entered the classroom, turned on the devices, found the folders with their names that they had saved during the last session, opened the files they had saved, and worked. But the sense of partial success came together with a feeling that they had only gotten close to this vital skill. They felt that what they had gained was not sufficient for real computer use in a future job. Bracha recalled the course in my interview with her:

I liked the computers, even though it also pressured me. We did a little bit of that in the Or Hayyim seminar, but I forgot it, and I was afraid. I don’t have a computer at home, and how will I manage, and certainly all the girls there know computers. I didn’t like to be one who didn’t know. I didn’t want to be the weak one in the class, you understand? To feel that I don’t know anything, and I’m ashamed to ask. I ignored it. But the teacher was really okay. I didn’t feel that I was lagging behind. There were a lot of others who

were more behind than me. I actually knew the material well. In the end, what we learned was nothing. I knew that stuff from my classes at the teachers' college, and it turned out that I remembered a bit. I got what was new, the material wasn't so hard, not all that much. I thought we'd need to do touch typing, tik-tak to start typing letters and I don't know how, how will I get along. But in the end there was no touch typing, they only promise. At the beginning I was in the weak group. They asked us to assign ourselves, and I never like feeling myself at the top, so I said okay, I'll go to the weak group, I really don't know computers. But afterwards I felt it was too much, because they really didn't know anything. The teacher told us, press enter, and they start to look for enter. What's enter, where's enter? I said, hey, I'll go to the second group, these don't even know how to turn the computer on and off. It was better in the second group, I managed better. He went through the material faster, spoke to the point. It's just too bad that it was so little. They didn't plan the course right, they gave too much in secretarial work and they should have focused on bookkeeping and computers, because that's what they look for in secretaries. You go to look for work, they aren't interested in all those issues, they want to see practically how you work with the computer. If you look for every letter, hey, who needs a girl like that? We needed to practice a lot more on the computers and especially learn touch typing.

And Eveline:

The main thing is computers and English, and there wasn't enough of that. For example, I know a little English. That is, only from school and from the

bit of French I know maybe that helped me. But I didn't know computers at all, and just then I had a down period when we began to learn computers. I got pregnant and I didn't come, because I was very weak, once bleeding, another time just blah. But beyond that, the course got bogged down in places that weren't important, and there was no time for the important things. Computers are the main thing, after all. So they say go learn typing from a disk at home, but it doesn't work. My daughter has a computer, we made a financial commitment and bought one for her, but I don't see myself sitting and practicing at home.

The positive impressions left by the course came from Asaf's personality and teaching method, as evidenced in Suzy's comment:

Computers was fun. At first we argued with the teacher, but they switched him and they brought in Asaf, the teacher of the other class. That Asaf is simply amazing, a nice person, and he knows how to teach the material.

Shoshi deconstructed his pedagogy:

They brought us a good teacher. At first they played games with us and brought us an older teacher who wasn't so great. Then they brought Asaf and it was excellent. He's serious, he teaches too well. You know, he would explain things that, say, he would dictate to us? Then he would say: "Put the mouse here and do this and turn it to the left." Ridiculous things, you know, and you say to yourself, what's going on here? Okay, we got it, go on, just say it, say what we need to remember and let's get it over with. But it turned

out that he was right with all his repetitions. He explained all the computer's systems, and all the computer's memory, the processor, all those things. As annoying as it seems at first, who will explain that to you? He is a meticulous teacher who explained everything. The truth is that he told us that he also taught deaf people, and that's why he talks that way. He was affected by that. He speaks in a clear voice and he always repeats what he says. It actually bothered me that he always repeated himself, it drove me crazy a little. But all in all it didn't bother me to hear it again because in the end it helped.

Even though Shoshi mentions that Asaf once taught deaf students, and that he might have become accustomed to clarify through repetition as a result, she does not claim that the method was inappropriate or insulting to her class. She felt that she "got it" the first time and that, hey, it was possible to proceed. But she favorably remembers Asaf's comprehensive introduction, the precision of his teaching, and acknowledges in retrospect that he knew what he was doing.

### **Computers and Haredi Society**

Any standard home computer can turn, at the press of a button, into a movie projector! The television is a monster in the Haredi home and perhaps, it might be said, the danger of DVD is even worse than television. The former is difficult to hide from parents and teachers, but [young people can ostensibly use] the portable computer to write Torah studies like diligent scholars, but when the supervisor has his back turned, a single mouse click

can switch to showing a movie. Who needs television and VCRs—there are computers.<sup>32</sup>

A directed gaze at the class's Haredi women did not reveal any apprehension that computer studies was liable to bring them into contact with undesirable worlds of content. I expected, for example, that Asaf's use of a song by Naomi Shemer, a prominent representative of Israeli secular culture, would arouse some sort of reaction, but the women simply saw it as a random text that they had to put into the computer by punching on the keyboard. No mention was made of the internet, even though two of the computers were on line, and sometimes the women played with them. Asaf, however, did not teach internet use in any systematic way. The sense was that they were learning to use a device stripped of meaning.

Tziporah, the Haredi director of the city welfare department, was brought specifically to visit the computer class. Perhaps that's the way her schedule worked out, or perhaps Heli wanted to wait until the course was in its final phases before showing it off. It was easy to see that Heli wanted to create a special atmosphere for her visitor in the new computer lab the community center had built and even air conditioned. She brought the delegation to the "site of progress." The objects in the lab were presented to Tzipora as women who had undergone a diagnostic workshop and had been found suitable for a course for *senior* secretaries. In Heli's view, sitting next to a computer is connected to "typing," a word from the world of pre-computer office work. In the same breath, the coordinator concluded with the important detail—the ceremony: "A month from now you'll have an impressive graduation ceremony."<sup>33</sup>

For Heli, as a person devoted to the subject, her speech was free of cynicism. She was not there to make things worse. But the women felt as if they were being put on display for public officials, and they refused to supply the goods. Tzipora, the boss, who expected a display of high motivation during her “captain’s inspection,” a show that the women were redeemed and joyful, found an alienated class, and a corporal loyal to his students and not to the redemption project.

The Haredi director of the welfare department had no problem entering the computer lab. “Computers,” as an icon, are portrayed in Haredi society as a “smart instrument.” A priori, the computer has the status of an intelligent tool. Haredi men claim that it is easy for them to learn programming, because the logic it demands is similar to the logic demanded by Talmudic study.<sup>34</sup> This places the computer alongside the Talmud, and both get upgraded. The computer becomes Jewish and the Talmud becomes high-tech. The fact that computer studies do not require prior, culturally-based knowledge has helped. Haredi men who study computer sciences need to study mathematics, which is also seen as “value-free.” But there is no need to study literature, history, or philosophy, and the English required for computer operations is spare and iconic.

Nevertheless, the computer has become a problematic device, and the Haredi discourse about it moves from “look how we are taking it over” to “look how it is taking us over.” This began principally from the inception of inter-computer communication and the internet. Today one can state with certainty that what television was unable to do to Haredi society, the computer has done. Haredi families own computers at levels similar to that of the population at large. Some of these computer owners are linked to the internet, which they use to watch television, read on-line newspapers, listen to the radio,

or watch movies on dvd disks (censored or not). Many of them participate in chat sites, assume aliases, and go out in the world's uncensored spaces.<sup>35</sup> While rabbis have called on their flocks to abstain from web surfing and from watching movies, Haredi individuals continue to do so.

In his survey "The Computer Polemic among Haredim," Neri Horowitz concludes that there are more elements supporting the use of computers than those opposing it.<sup>36</sup> The debate within Israeli's Haredi community over the use of the computer, cds, and/or the internet renews the arguments made in previous debates over the place of various technological innovations in existing worlds of knowledge and values. To a certain extent, it can be juxtaposed with polemics that once raged in stormy kibbutz assemblies over whether commune members ought to be allowed to have radios, and later television sets, in their rooms. The debate reveals what Orthodox Judaism, in its various guises, views as knowledge or study, and what level of prestige male and female knowers enjoy. For example, is knowing where a passage is located within the Talmud an essential element of the study of that work? Must the craft of learning include ascending a ladder, taking down the necessary volume, and paging through it, or is this process to be considered a waste of time that can be saved by looking up the passage on a cd? Is the development of imagination a pedagogical goal or a risk (here, in the context of computer games for children)? Is viewing a picture or a movie a meaningful element of learning, or is it a product of the "evil impulse" and therefore to be repressed? The polemic also reorganizes the Jewish hierarchy of knowers. Talmudic literacy marks male scholars as the top of the pyramid of knowers. Computer literacy, which is better, if possible, to

avoid, is open to women and men who need the computer of their work. Housewives, Torah scholars, and especially children should keep their distance.

Haredi spiritual leaders are not unaware that the computer, and the internet in particular, can create non-geographical communities that crosscut through all parts of the Orthodox world. Nevertheless, despite the strong temptation to use the internet to disseminate Torah Judaism, Haredi society's major religious leaders have severely forbidden its use, even to realize this potential. The *havruta* (study partner), the flesh and blood community, eyes that "guard themselves from evil" symbolize hugely powerful social supervision that the intimacy of the computer screen threatens, Horowitz argues. A series of articles by Tamar Rotem in Israel's daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*, under the general heading "The New Haredim," included an article in the internet.<sup>37</sup> Rotem portrays "Inner Rooms," a forum, run by Haredi journalists, as a lively platform on issues within the Haredi community and in Israeli society as a whole. Alongside announcements of the marriage of a particular admor's daughter, or a new ruling by Rabbi Elyashiv, the Lithuanian Haredi community's senior legal authority, appears an article cut and pasted from a non-Haredi daily newspaper, a discussion of the recitation of verses from the Mishna for the soul of Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon, and a lighthearted but critical essay by a woman on the daily life of a Haredi wife and mother.

At the beginning of the third millennium, many Haredim use computers in their work. As computer instruction within the community develops and improves, Haredi schools will produce computer technicians, programmers, and computer-literate teachers and office workers in larger numbers than the community itself can employ. This creates a potential for Haredi integration into the larger national labor market, in high-tech and in

other production and service sectors. At this point in time, rabbis still have reservations about computer studies for men (although this has not kept men from learning and using computers), but are less concerned about computer literacy for women. This creates a situation in which those who are less important can benefit from the acquisition of knowledge and power that is forbidden to men, or at least delayed until a later age, usually at the end of their twenties, when they cease to be full-time students.<sup>38</sup>

The specific case of the students in the secretarial course shows that, in terms of values, the women did not feel they were crossing a boundary. In terms of literacy, this test case points to a possible success in inculcating computer literacy in a public with mediocre general education, and in a public with cultural constraints (such as religious or Haredi Jews). The fact that these adults are not familiar with computers does not make them feel uncomfortable or embarrassed when they have to learn these skills from the start. On the contrary, the fact that an older woman approaches a computer indicates movement, “progress.” It shows that this woman is not afraid. We can therefore agree with Yehoshafat Givon’s position. These women should be provided with algorithmic literacy that will allow them to engage in programming. But even this initial process of gaining basic familiarity with the computer holds within it the possibility of empowerment.

Asaf and Jerry, who found themselves in a secretarial course in Pardes Katz, represented worlds of knowledge marked as vital for normative citizens of this era. Both of them taught according to a curriculum that did not take into account the specific nature or culture of their clients, and the two units of study they taught left the students with a sense that they had not received enough of these important tools. But while the lesson

plans that Jerry used assumed that the students had some prior knowledge of English, Asaf's were formulated for people who had never operated a computer before. The women were able to make this huge leap into the world of computers without difficulty and with some enjoyment, while they were unable to make it over the hurdle of their ignorance of English created by the school system. The lesson of this success and failure, and its context for the relationship between identity, class, power, and the right to know, will conclude this chapter on the Ort Career course.

#### **4. CLASS IDENTITY AND THE RIGHT TO KNOW:**

##### **EDUCATION'S PLACE IN THE LEAKY PACKAGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT**

Ongoing critique, and the recognition of the repressive elements of progress, are the conditions for a process in which the answer to the question: "what is enlightenment?" is updated in accordance with such critique (Bishara 1997, p. 17).<sup>39</sup>

In 1784, the German newspaper *Berliner Monatsschrift* published a debate over the nature of enlightenment. More than two centuries later, Azmi Bishara edited a collection of articles on the same subject. Bishara's book is refreshing. It brings together the principal points of that debate and pushes them forward toward post-modernism and the critique of enlightenment. Tracking the development of the Enlightenment debate displays its power and pretensions, its achievements and failures, and in particular its ongoing relevance from that time to ours.

The Enlightenment program sought, in its utopian aspects, to propose a program of life that would offer redemption and happiness to those who achieved it. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the separation of reason from religion and metaphysics, and the creation of an independent epistemic system, brought together intellectual movements that had already spread through the Western world, but which from this time forward received new meanings. The time that has passed since then has revealed how problematic the Enlightenment dream of happiness was, but no less so, how deeply it became rooted in the life experience of the West—and not just in the West.

The standard Enlightenment package, which ties (scientific) education to secularism, democracy, and capitalism, has been unraveled and rewoven in various ways. Time, place, and historical contexts have shown that there is no linear link between the constituents of this package. The separation of enlightenment from religion did not mandate atheism and was not necessarily tied to democratic rule. Capitalism was not always enlightenment's best friend, and the West has not remained its only home. Beyond the abundance of criticism of enlightenment thinking and the enlightenment enterprise, enlightenment stands as an unchallenged value. Francis Bacon's statement that "knowledge is power" has invited many interpretations of the nature of knowledge and of power, as well as of the nature of the link between them. But today it is difficult to find a philosophical theory, or a cultural group, that declares ignorance as its preferred option. Sociology (as opposed to philosophy) thus addresses the ways in which enlightenment is decoded into practice, the ways it is disseminated or prevented, as well as accessibility to it and the barriers it creates against sources of power and resources. Enlightenment, as a

philosophy, is identified with the modern age and modernism, and it is what sociology puts to the test.

Weber explained modernity as the division between the fields of science, ethics, and art (esthetics), and as the division between experts in these fields and the public at large. Habermas attributes some of modernity's failures to these divisions. They come from the separation of ethics, art, and science, cut off "from the tradition, continuously developing, naturally and hermeneutically, from daily action" (Habermas in Bishara 1997, p. 108). In other words, experts have taken knowledge and left the public with but little of it and its findings, with the imperative of obedience to experts, and with an incentive to consume their products.

Yet, Habermas argues, the enlightenment project should be repaired, not eliminated. A correct tie between enlightenment and cultural tradition will direct modernism into new channels, different from the domineering channel of capitalism. Such a tie will revitalize and critique the values of enlightenment, will offer the citizens of enlightenment paths towards appropriation of their own cultures, and will renew the enlightenment program. Failure to make this effort, which seemed to Habermas when he wrote (1980) as a very serious danger, would lead to neo-conservatism, explicit or under the disguise of post-modernism. Both of these leave vacuums, rifts, and disconnections that invite ethnocentrism and religious extremism.

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Weber had already visited Pardes Katz's class of women learners. Now we'll see what happens when Habermas visits the neighborhood. Were he to walk its streets (and know how to read them), he would discern its religious public space. The growing

presence of religious institutions and observant people could serve as a proof of his claim about the increasing power of religious extremism in a place where there is alienation between the “stream of tradition” and the enlightenment enterprise. Such an interpretation is consistent with a critique of the enlightenment enterprise as a tool of Zionist agents, as proposed by Israeli post-Zionist sociology. This interpretation reappears in explaining the rise of the Shas movement. Such a reading undoubtedly elucidates some socio-historical phenomena. But it is planted firmly alongside powerful agents (the state and its institutions), with the enterprise’s clients depicted as silent, manipulated objects. Anthropological work can not effectively understand the comprehensive activities of state institutions. It can make a contribution, however, by examining modes of acceptance, translation, interpretation, disregard, or resistance, as they appear during the course of encounters between the disseminators of the program (enlightenment, religious, or any other) and its consumers. I sought out this relative advantage at the two sides of knowledge dissemination where I did my field work.

These two sites—the neighborhood community center and Rabbi Daniel Zer’s yeshiva—operate in the vacuum between the state and its citizens. At first glance, it looks as if the former seeks to take hold of and revive parts of the enlightenment-Zionist project, while the second seeks to strip away that project and offer a religious alternative. But closely tracking both sites reveals the complexity of the cultural battle and the relative power of the clients. Neither institution’s agenda is homogeneous. Rabbi Zer does not demand that Pardes Katz’s inhabitants give up their aspiration for enlightenment in order to attend his lectures and send their children to his schools, and the community center does not demand that they set aside their religion in order to participate in its

courses and programs. Many in the neighborhood frequent both institutions in parallel, and their movement between the institutions and outside them redraws the contours and meanings of both enterprises.

Habermas offers an example how a social group appropriated for itself, and refashioned according to its own measure, cultural knowledge resources that had been the preserve of experts. His case study is a group of workers described by the writer Peter Weiss. These workers attended a course on the history of European painting at a night high school program in Berlin at the end of the 1930s. Their initial awe of the course material turned into a recognition that they needed to find a link between the material and their life experiences, and that the way to do this was their own original thinking. The ideal correction, as Habermas describes it, resembles critical pedagogy of the type advocated by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his school.<sup>40</sup> The values remain modern (European painting), the method remains study (a night high school), but the study should take into account the observer's point of view and lead towards empowerment. Such study allows those who engage in it to interpret their world more sharply and critically as a result of their encounter with knowledge assets that may not have been produced in their own fields. The canon is not challenged and is certainly not eliminated. Instead, it is supplemented by layers of interpretation that come from the "horizon of experience" of other lives. The students, for their part, hurdle the barrier of alienation through a process of appropriation, and are meant to be enriched thereby. That is Habermas's positive scenario.

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The focal point of this chapter's ethnographic segment is the community center. It serves as a metaphor for an arm of the enlightenment program that operates alongside state institutions such as schools, welfare offices, and Project Renewal. As an institution, the community center repairs the damage done by the social production line of the first half of the day by offering afternoon and evening educational and cultural activities. The community center, identified with the establishment, is used selectively and carefully by the underprivileged population. Rotem, who in her series "The New Haredim" tracks that community's changes, did not overlook this.<sup>41</sup> "A notable change has taken place in the Haredi attitude towards the community center, which used to be perceived as an establishment body," she writes. In the 1990s, the community centers' parent body revised the way community centers were operated. Instead of being run in a centralized fashion, control was placed in the hands of each neighborhood's inhabitants (and was operated by local residents who took the same training course previously used to train outside directors). This changeover was especially notable in Jerusalem. The residents prepare a schedule of activities that matches their needs, and position the center alongside other legitimate community institutions unitary cultural policy. The Haredi community center, like those in non-Haredi neighborhoods, offers dance classes for women, exercise and diet programs, and a library. Unlike non-Haredi community centers, the activity it sponsors is based on gender distinctions. The books in the library are classified in a different way, and the dances in the dance class are of the type that Haredim dance at celebrations. The community center of Mea She'arim, Jerusalem's flagship Haredi neighborhood, teaches sewing and crochet. It has tried to organize a "youth movement" for teenagers, and offer English and computer courses. The integration of a conditional

recognition of the value of knowing more with changing leisure needs has created a new and different public in the enlightenment market. This public chooses content from what the market offers, in accordance with its relative power in relation to other groups using the same community center.

The enlightenment market itself underwent a dramatic metamorphosis at the end of the previous century. Over the space of two decades, the 1980s and 1990s, Israel's undergraduate population increased by 140 percent, from 50,000 to 120,000. This growth was made possible by the entry of new actors into the higher education market, in addition to the six research universities that were the sole providers of undergraduate degrees until the early 1980s. The students themselves were a product of natural increase and mass immigration.<sup>42</sup> The new actors were four-year public colleges, mostly in outlying parts of the country, teacher training institutions that turned into degree-granting institutions, private institutions offering primarily professional education in law, accounting, economics, and business administration, and branch campuses of foreign universities. This change in Israel's higher education map made it possible for members of the middle class who had not excelled in high school, and whose parents could afford the high tuition of the private institutions, to gain an academic professional degree. It offered a second chance to the country's haves, thus increasing economic inequality. At the same time, the new public colleges opened up higher education to the have-nots of the geographical and cultural periphery, reducing educational inequality. But the public colleges offered, for the most part, degrees in lower-status white-collar fields, which will exacerbate economic inequality in the future.

The limited test case described in this book lies on the margins of this metamorphosis, and it functions as a miniature case of globalism and the privatization of Israeli education. The state (the Ministry of Labor), public bodies (the community center, Project Renewal), and a private firm (Ort Career) collaborated to create a body that transports the civil normative in a territory perceived as being invisible to the higher education enterprise. The ethnography of the secretarial course is an example of a mix between deliberate yet slipshod action, in that it marked a unique target population but offered it a standard study package. If the intention is to naturalize heterogeneous cultural groups into the education market, the efforts should be diverted from areas of identity to areas of class and power; they should work on paths of integration and invitation into the centers of work and knowledge without demanding cultural entrance tests for those knocking at the gate. Recognition of the components of the students' identities and of their gender is a requirement for the teaching's success. Such success lies in the possibility of "surmounting differences," but it does not have to be a technique of "expunging difference." English and computers, perceived as knowledge with a low "value quotient" (although I have shown that this is not entirely the case) would be good places to start, but they are not sufficient.

Gender, religion, and ethnic origin are highly significant cultural and political factors. Yet they do not lead automatically to any predetermined place. Access to and control of resources should not be conditioned on cultural uniformity. Changes involved in the redistribution of resources, education, and economic participation are difficult, slow, and sometimes seem impossible. Changes in identity and image are faster, available, and comforting. Changes of this second sort should not be dismissed, so

identity should not be made a condition for joining the struggle to redistribute resources. This struggle, formulated in terms of culture, is usually tied to class, and these ties of cultural dependence should be undone.

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The next chapter will therefore be devoted to the personal stories that link culture and knowledge—the biographies of some of the participants in the course described in this chapter, and of the two coordinators of the Haredi women’s club. These biographies offer personal stories about national processes, a small-scale history of women’s education on the periphery, in the country’s geographical center. Chapter 4 focuses on the students and their families, and on they select, chose, or obey their actions on the paths of literacy.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Berkovitch & Bradley 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Henry 2001; Pinar 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Abu-Lughod 1998a.

<sup>4</sup> The placement of cultural research conducted in Israel in the Middle East context may not be surprising. Perhaps it ought to be. Generally, social research in Israel seeks to connect, on both the theoretical and empiric levels, with the West. I could have carried on in this mode by conducting an exchange with general-Western theories of education and gender. Situating my research in the Middle Eastern context is a choice that can be taken in two ways. Since my subject is religious people, and in this case religious women of Mizrahi extraction—that is, of Arab ethnic origin—my decision to place them within a Middle Eastern context can brand them as fundamentalists. On the other hand, it can place my analysis outside the general Western discussion and inside the literature that focuses on the local. In so doing, it can empower insights and amplify critique of the center. Both possibilities must be kept in mind. On the challenge of feminist-Arab research to research in Israel, see Motzafi-Haller 2000.

<sup>5</sup> A commission appointed by the minister of education to propose a general reform of Israeli education—popularly known as the Dovrat Commission—issued its recommendations in 2004. One of its provisions was that the funding of non-public schools be conditioned on their implementation of a basic core curriculum, which would teach students secular knowledge that the commission deemed vital.

<sup>6</sup> Baumel 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Stadler 2001, Lupo 2003.

<sup>8</sup> A detailed description of one attempt to provide Haredi women with an academic profession (social work) is at the center of Dahan 2004. More recently, in January 2007, a committee of rabbis that oversees postsecondary education for women issued a ban on B.A. equivalent programs. Such programs were offered in Haredi institutions for teachers who wished to specialize in specific academic subjects. Graduates of such courses benefited from a salary increase. The rabbis will need

to address the resulting discontent within their community.

<sup>9</sup> The qualifications of those who work in the system, and their proper administration, have often been a subject of controversy. What little published research that has been done indicates that El Ha-Ma'ayan makes an effort to employ professional teachers and to send established teachers to complete their qualifications while they continue to teach (Mor 1996).

<sup>10</sup> The Haredim call such kinds of knowledge *hashkofa*—philosophy. They include within this, insistently, all secular intellectual, reflexive, and critical fields.

<sup>11</sup> There is no institution that offers religious studies specifically for adult religious women of Mizrahi ethnicity. The SeLaH Institute in Bnei Brak, for example, offers classes for adult women, but most of its activities are aimed at newly religious women, and the teaching staff is largely Ashkenazi.

<sup>12</sup> El-Or 1994, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Keep in mind that Sigalit is not religious and that Bracha is. Sigalit also attended the community center's support group for single-parent mothers, where she was exposed to popular psychological literature and to feminist critique.

<sup>14</sup> On Freire and ideological literacy, see El-Or 1994, p. 90; El-Or 2002 pp. 258-260.

<sup>15</sup> Ruti and a few of the other women had previously participated in a dynamic career counseling program offered at the community center. This course, the women I interviewed told me, was very successful, and the participants developed close relationships. Ruti, Miri, and Rachel hoped that the secretarial course would in some measure repeat that experience, and were frustrated by the fact that other students had signed up for the course with only instrumental expectations.

<sup>16</sup> On the metaphorical place of the terms “cohesion” and “togetherness” (both translations of the Hebrew *gibbush*) in Israeli discourse, and its place in school discourse, see Katriel 1999, pp. 148-167.

<sup>17</sup> In regular classes, the exam often serves as an incentive, a stick, and a threat. Many teachers like, throughout the year, to invoke “the day of judgment.” In Israeli schools, teachers begin warning

their students about the national bagrut high school graduation exams as early as junior high school, while in high schools they talk about university entrance examinations.

<sup>18</sup> This matter is expanded on in Chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> On the significance of education for adult women and mothers, see Luttrell 1997.

<sup>20</sup> *Biz* is Arabic for cow udders, a popular Mizrahi barbeque delicacy.

<sup>21</sup> I learned from Eveline about the changes Rivka underwent before and during the course, and afterwards heard about them from Rivka herself. I received her full life story about a year later, when I conducted in-depth interviews with the students. Rivka's story is not included in the biographical chapter. It is a complex story of growing distance from the Ashkenazi-Haredi community, divorce, heavy debts, and a search for another way to live.

<sup>22</sup> Israeli society values professionalism, because of its own pervasive penchant for improvisation. The women admired Jerry's orderliness because the course occasionally ran into technical problems that made the women feel they were being taken lightly. However, Israelis are accustomed to informal relationships, and in an adult class the students expect the teacher to be friendly.

<sup>23</sup> On the place of "tears" in anthropological research, see Roth 1989, El-Or 2002, Chapter 3, footnote 11.

<sup>24</sup> Lydia's offer "to make me something to drink" pained me. It marked the known and the concealed in field work—power relations. In an instant, my "help" became part of an exchange to which I bring knowledge of English and Lydia offers refreshment in return. It is reasonable that she was grateful, since I didn't have to help her. But her need to give me something in return, and the way she chose to do this, deepened the hidden lines that divided us.

<sup>25</sup> Kandiyoti 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Francis & Ryan 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Francis & Ryan 1998, Hedges 1994.

<sup>28</sup> The Haredi population's growing naturalization into Israeli society is changing their attitude to Hebrew. Their involvement in the general labor market, their integration into state and municipal

institutions, their growing leisure consumption, and the growth of the market for on-line newspapers and magazines has changed that status of Hebrew in their lives. At the moment, this is an empirical change that does not require a revision of the relative prestige of their languages. On the accelerating naturalization of Haredim in Israeli society, see Sivan and Kaplan (eds.) 2003.

<sup>29</sup> On the unique nature of Haredi education for girls, see Elor 1994, Porush 2001. Bogoch 1999, Isaacs 1999.

<sup>30</sup> A comprehensive study conducted by Shimon D. Baumel (2003) found that English studies in the Haredi sector are linked to students' status and their sense of their place. Girls study English, as do some Sephardi Haredi children who attend the system's less prestigious institutions. Boys in the Habad Hasidic sect learn more English than other boys do because it is seen as a tool for their work in Habad's enterprise of sending emissaries all over the world. English studies can take place in small groups after the hours designated for formal education. Adult men may gain a certain command of the language through independent study, via computer, friends overseas, or through other channels.

<sup>31</sup> Leon (1999) describes the social changes that Shas made as a revolution. He stresses its Israeli nature, and assigns a central place to Hebrew as the only language the Shas revolution speaks.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted, in Horowitz 2000, from the pamphlet *Tzav HaSha'a*, 1999.

<sup>33</sup> After the fact, in their interviews, most of the women described the ceremony as "pathetic." A year previously, when they applied for the course, they were invited to attend the graduation ceremony of the first course, and were very impressed. "With us it was slapdash, they canceled, postponed, and in the end shoved it in somewhere," Suzy said.

<sup>34</sup> Rotem 2002.

<sup>35</sup> In May 2005, the press reported a scandal surrounding the family of Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi, Shlomo Amar. Rabbi Amar's daughter struck up a relationship with a young Haredi man via the internet. Other members of her family opposed the liaison and intervened violently to end it. The incident once again brought up the issue of Haredi gatekeepers' inability to control the new spaces

opened up by the internet. It should be noted that there are Haredi forums that seek to conduct a new but sober discourse on the community's life. There are many websites run by Haredi bodies and institutions who use the internet to disseminate their programs, and there are religious studies sites as well.

<sup>36</sup> Horowitz 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Rotem 2002a.

<sup>38</sup> See Iris Porush's historical study of women's entry into the community of readers of literature in Yiddish and other languages, including the new Hebrew literature of the Enlightenment. Porush argues that the devaluation of women as a public, and the diversion of the rabbinical gaze from them during the Jewish Enlightenment, allowed them to read texts that were forbidden to men. This, she claims, is a secondary benefit of their weak status (Porush 2001).

<sup>39</sup> Bishara 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Freire 1981, quoted in El-Or 2002, p. 207.

<sup>41</sup> Rotem 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Shavit et al. 2002.