

FINALE:

**TWENTY YEARS OF FIELD WORK, THREE
ETHNOGRAPHIES, ONE RELIGION?**

This book brings to an end two decades of work in Israel's Haredi and religious communities. During those years I engaged in three rounds of field work, resulting in three books: one on Ashkenazi Haredim, one on the Zionist religious community, and one on Mizrahi Haredim and religious Jews.¹ All three projects have focused on the connection between gender, religion, and knowledge, each in a way dependent on the unique characteristics of the individual communities I studied. With all due caution as to these differences, I wish nevertheless to look back, to the sides, and forward as well, and see whether trends or directions emerge from the women-religion-knowledge triangle through this period of time and across the different communities. Is there a process of change that cuts across communities, flows from one to the other, creates cross-influences, signals future directions, and suggests specific critiques?

Anthropology, which was originally based on comparative study from a humanist position, with a predisposition to universalism, distanced itself from this type of research during the final third of the twentieth century. At the opening of the twenty-first century, the trend is one of cautious, temperate return to the humanist meta-discourse. This invites, among other things, comparisons between communities in light of fixed parameters (for example, human rights, ecology, or corruption), alongside presentation of the diverse ways in which each parameter appears in different cultures.²

In this spirit, while well aware that changes in the relations between religion and gender must be examined within the precise nature of each community, I will attempt to point to a large canopy that takes in all three groups of women I studied, a canopy fashioned entirely of local materials. It is Israeli, and therefore affected by historical, political and social processes that took place and are taking place in this country. The canopy's warp threads are stretched between the uncertainties about religion's place in the state. These are threads of disquiet, seclusion, alienation, and of the sense of living in a time of crisis. The woof threads interwoven among them mark out lines of integration, serenity, affiliation, and of an overriding experience of being at home.

I will first lay out this canopy, and then I will examine its effect on each of the communities, with a focus on gender and knowledge.

THE ABSENT RABBI

The final pages of this book are being written during Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The sense that this is more than a simply process of evacuating a population from an area that had been under the country's control was exemplified in an editorial cartoon that appeared in the newspaper *Ha'aretz* on August 16, 2005, as the Israeli army and police were evacuating defiant Jewish settlers. Daniela London depicted Theodore Herzl, David Ben-Gurion, and Ze'ev Jabotinsky sitting tensely on a couch, facing a large television screen, and watching the television coverage of the operation. The use of these three fathers of the Israeli state was appropriate to this historical moment. That London drew Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, on the couch hardly needs explanation. The presence of Ben-Gurion, the country's first prime minister and longtime leader of its hegemonic secular labor Zionist camp is also obvious. London

probably included Jabotinsky because the ideological progeny of this forefather of Israel's nationalist right had been in power for most of the previous thirty years. But Daniela London did not draw a rabbi on the couch. Apparently, a religious leader still has no sure place in the Zionist hall of fame.

The three watchers on the couch must certainly have noticed that the vast majority of opponents of the withdrawal were religious. Citizens belonging to a variety of Israeli communities could be seen at the margins or in the more distant circles of the struggle, but as the camera zoomed in to the center of the fight to stay in the Gaza Strip, the people it showed became more and more alike. They were women, men, and in particular teenagers of the religious Zionist community.

In the days leading up to the disengagement operation, the media attempted to unravel the religious community into its different components, to inquire into the mood on the Haredi street and to divide that into its Hasidic and Lithuanian parts; to discern the position of the Shas leadership and how it was translated among its voters; and to discover the position of the Habad Hasidic community, whose political positions differ from those of other Hasidim. An effort was also made to unravel the obvious within the religious Zionist community, to seek out rabbis and laypeople who took stand opposed to those expressed by the movement's central rabbinic figures and political leaders. The resulting picture indeed showed that the opponents of disengagement were of more than one shade. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, Shas's spiritual leader, said the policy was in error, and the party's political leader, Eli Yishai, spoke at a demonstration against withdrawal held in June in Sederot, a disadvantaged, predominantly Mizrachi town near the Gaza Strip. Habad Hasidim collected money to organize opposition activities. But only a handful of

members of these communities stole into Gush Katif, the primary area of Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, and into the northern West Bank, where a smaller-scale evacuation took place at the same time. Lithuanian rabbis warned their flocks against participating in opposition activities (which took place during the summer *bein ha-zemanim* period, in which yeshivot are closed). While most of the Hasidic public identified with the opposition, it did not participate actively. The implications of Israel's dramatic withdrawal can only be deciphered in the future through careful research, but there can be no doubt that, in this trying time for Israeli settlement nationalism, religious Zionism was left alone on the battlefield. This community was born into a decision to tie its fate to that of the Zionists. It thus viewed the state and its institutions as sacred, but found itself fighting the state.

The ultimate significance of the drama will become clear in as time passes but it certainly constituted an earthquake of the type that religious communities in Israel and throughout the world are experiencing with regard to their relations with the secular polity—the state, its laws, its quotidian life, and its extra-religious values. My aim is to examine gender relations at the time of these tremors.

AN ALL-CLEAR SIREN FOR THE ASHKENAZI HAREDI PUBLIC

Haredi society was constructed against, rather than with, Zionist nationalism. Its internal historiography is a tale of a society acting in a state of emergency. It faces enlightenment, secularization, and Zionism, at the same time that it must deal with the destruction of World War II and the national rehabilitation offered by the state of Israel. This state of emergency is a mythic component of Haredi society. It is etched into the community's memory, serves as a stable anchor for the organization of its discourse,

influences its vocabulary, its ways of thinking, and its processes of political decision making.

However, the members of this community apparently understand that this state of emergency has ended. An all-clear siren has been sounded throughout the country. The Haredi world has survived. Not only has it survived, it has grown, developed, and reached unprecedented proportions. The idea of a society of learners has put down roots. The many gardens in which it has grown may have weeds, but for precisely that reason, flowers can grow alongside. The range of plants has come under scholarly scrutiny. The first fruits of that study show that there is a desire to become naturalized within the Israeli space, to normalize daily life. This is apparent in as the Haredi public emerges from its isolated bomb shelters into open spaces, in its growing sense of privacy, in the increasing experience of participation in the middle class (in terms of consumption and leisure activity), in growing participation in the Israeli public space (politics, economics, security, and the military), in its entrance into current worlds of knowledge (academic study, increasing use of the internet), and in cultural consumption (press, literature, film).

This transformation will affect the Haredi community's gender relations and bring them closer to those of the non-Haredi community. This will be particularly notable in the division of labor (more working men, more women in postsecondary education, more professional women). The status of *ba'alei batim*, the Haredi term for observant Jews involved in business and ordinary life rather than studying full time, is rising. This creates a social category that is not exposed directly to the community's leadership, and is thus less vulnerable. Such a category marks out for itself fresh paths within the Haredi world and expands the bounds of its existence. The improving status of *ba'alei batim* families,

alongside changes in national child allowance policies, may in the future influence the size of Haredi families.³ However, women who can now obtain a much broader professional education than in the past still cannot aspire to high-level religious studies. It may well be that, in the decade to come, a generation of academically-qualified women will seek, after going out into the world, to enter deep into their own cultural home, and to study Jewish canonical texts without gender restrictions. The Haredi emergency glossary, which includes the Holocaust, or all the Holocausts, Zionism, the gentiles, the secularists, sexual license and luxury, is always on the table, or on a nearby shelf. But at this time it is not the principal text in the experience of the community's members.

SCHISMS IN THE RELIGIOUS ZIONIST COMMUNITY

In the modern Orthodox, religious Zionist community the story is entirely different, since this sector constitutes a stable part of the middle and upper-middle class in its economics, politics, culture, military service, and education. The emergency and all-clear sirens in this sector are related largely to the extent to which the state adheres to the ideology of settlement in the territories, strengthening Jewish nationalism, and the Jewish nature of the public space. The community advocates these policies from within the state system, which from the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s worked together with the religious Zionist sector.

At the beginning of the 1990s, a fissure began to open between this community and the state, a crack that threatened the dream of Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The first Intifada of 1987-1991, the Oslo agreements, and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin caused a huge crisis for the religious Zionists. Before that crisis was resolved, the community was hit by the second Intifada and the disengagement

from the Gaza Strip. These new crises have caused, and will continue to cause, the rupture of the religious Zionist community into sub-communities, each of which will depict the proper relation between religion and the state in a different way.

At the same time that the settlement dream began to crack, religious Zionism also underwent a feminist revolution. A causal connection between these two important processes is difficult to prove, but they took place in parallel.

The feminist revolution in religious Zionism produced ever-growing participation by women in the community's central arenas: study, prayer, and even halachic rulings (El-Or 1994, 2002). These changes affected the entire community. The road religious women have chosen to take into the fortified strongholds of Orthodox Judaism began with study, continued into synagogue prayer, ritual, and legal rulings, and is now cautiously continuing into the bodies of women and their supervised sexuality.⁴ More and more ceremonies particular to women's spaces (bat mitzvah, the birth of a girl, immersion in a *mikveh*) left distant sites and have approached hegemonic compounds. They have become "issues" discussed between study partners, in synagogues, public organizations, media, and in art. Gender distinction has not eroded, and it remains a high-level organizing principle in the worship of God. But negotiation over the nature of the worship of God has shortened the difference between women's and men's areas of prayer, ritual, and study and has brought all of them closer to the halachic discourse. Women's traditional areas have been neglected to some extent; perhaps they will enjoy a revival once women feel that they are present within the formal spaces that were once reserved only for men. This drawing together of the two sides has produced change in the

halachic discourse, in the sociology of its participants, and in the implications it has for the lives of believers, both men and women.

The schism of the religious Zionist community into sub-communities receives another differentiating characteristic that touches on the relations between gender and religion within the community. Care should be taken not to assume that nationalism and anti-feminism are fully congruent, or the opposite, that growing participation of women in religious life cuts across the sub-communities. Nevertheless, the feminist-religious avant-garde grew and acts within the sector's moderate areas.

WORK TIME IN THE MIZRACHI RELIGIOUS-HAREDI PUBLIC

The relative sense of serenity in the Haredi world (despite the inherit sociological neuroticism of the Haredi situation) does not characterize the Sephardi Haredi community.⁵ It is still working on an emergency and rescue basis. The back-to-religion enterprise—*hit'hazkut* and *teshuva*—has an urgent character. Its terminology is acute, its extent is large, and it seeks to affect all areas of life. This enterprise does not see the mountain peak getting closer or the plain that spreads beyond the mountain. Some of the urgent terminology of this world is borrowed from the always open Ashkenazi archive, while another part has been shaped in the particular history and sociology of the Mizrachi community in Israel. This combination maintains a discourse of disconnection and alienation alongside a narrative of feeling at home, even if the home is at the edge of the house.

The Mizrachi-Sephardi community, which stands at the center of this study, encompasses women and men who live according to the halacha, as well as others who negotiate with that life. It is a heterogeneous community that seeks to bring under a single

roof individuals with varied histories of education, ways of life, and religious traditions. Normalization of daily life is thus the enemy of the Mizrahi Haredi project. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef seeks to distance his people from any such thing. The stereotypical “*Kiddush* and television” definition of the traditional but not fully observant Sephardi Jew is the anathema of *teshuva* convocations. The Mizrahi emergency project seeks to impose the discipline of Haredi standards, malign mere traditionalism, to shake the audience out of its complacency, and persuade it that danger is at the door if it does not realize that the situation is dire. It should be noted, however, that the emergency temperament differs considerably among different communities: the Ashkenazi sense of emergency is not like that of the Mizrahi-Sephardi community. The latter does not so easily give up its daily routine.

Gender relations in this context seek to shape new models of man and woman, unlike those that hang out on the street, and especially on the Mizrahi street of an urban neighborhood or disadvantaged town. They need to be men and women of a new, revolutionary type. Their otherness must be visible. This situation is one of learning, of imitation, of convergence. But, since it comes from a different history of religion-state relations and out of unproblematic Israeli identity, it includes a large measure of flexibility.⁶ The women learn to be Haredi, but their Israeli character colors their adopted Haredi identity. The result is that even if the ideal model Haredi woman is an Ashkenazi one, a new Sephardi-Mizrahi model has been created alongside it, and this new model plays with and reshapes the ideal.

With regard to the gender order, the Sephardi community experiences no real difficulty with providing extra-religious knowledge to women. The first academic college

for Haredi women, which opened in Jerusalem at the end of the 1990s, was the initiative of Mrs. Adina Bar-Shalom, a daughter of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef; her father sanctioned the project. Nevertheless, there is no place today where Mizrahi women can study Judaism and halacha as religious Zionist, modern Orthodox women do, without sacrificing their Mizrahi identity. Such study is not on their agenda; they do not see it as a challenge, it is not consistent with the state of emergency in which they must master more primary learning that will allow them to differentiate and save themselves. These women are currently putting their energy into learning how to be Haredi, but they are permitted to work in a variety of areas that were out of bounds for Ashkenazi Haredi women. Keeping a job is important (for both men and women), because the revolution is social no less than it is religious. Its participants belong to the middle and lower classes and they cannot allow themselves to sever their ties to their sources of livelihood.

The gender-religious change in Mizrahi communities must be sought at the classic sites: at the margins of synagogues, in women's clubs and classes, and in para-religious ceremonies and rituals. There is no point describing this activity in the terms of a "feminist revolution." That terminology is foreign to what is taking place in the Mizrahi Haredi community. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to see how the need for new adherents, the needs of those who recruit and educate them, produces changes and innovations that move between the compounds of traditional women's activity and new places of action.

Placing my three studies side by side shows that the three do not become one. I have found no linear progression along which the three communities I observed can be

arranged. I cannot point to a sweeping trend towards either ultra-Orthodoxy or towards “moderation,” or towards either feminism or the fortification of conservative structures of gender relations. It seems to me, however, that the discourse of civil rights, which was born far from religious communities, and which the religious discourse marked as a threat, has found a place within them. Israel’s Supreme Court remains a symbol of hostility to religion within the Haredi and the extreme Orthodox worlds. But the values on which the Court’s protection of civil rights is based are not foreign to Israel’s religious communities. Social research at the end of the twentieth century shunted aside the socially shared in order to grant recognition to cultural distinctions. Now the field is balancing itself out. A cautious use of universalist-humanist analytical tools may in time reveal, perhaps, that a trend was present here—one about which, however, it is still too early to write.

Notes

¹ Elor 1994, 2002, and the present work.

² Notable among the texts that demonstrate this trend is the special issue of *Social Anthropology* published by the European Association of Social Anthropologists, devoted to the discipline's future: June 2005; also notable is Rabinow 2003.

³ There is no reason to expect a dramatic reduction in the number of children. However, it may be that the desire to break out of the cycle of poverty, the reduction in state subsidies, and the opening of the labor market to men will have a limited effect. Nevertheless, it should be noted that many women in the Haredi sector how have pursued careers have had a large number of children, as a way of showing that neither work nor the home are at the other's expense. To have a large family as well as a career, a woman must be a "Superwoman," the constitutive image that spans two value worlds and their relation to gender.

⁴ This is one of the unique characteristics of this feminist revolution. In the United States, for example, the second wave of feminism that began in the 1970s started with the body and sexuality. In the religious case, it began with study, and only now is cautiously touching on the body and the sexual body (El-Or 2005).

⁵ Paradoxically, Ashkenazi Haredim learned from the Sephardim some of the habitus of serenity.

⁶ A Mizrahi young man who joins a Bratislaver Hasidic sect learns to dress as an Ashkenazi Hasid. He occupies himself with imitation and convergence into a new and different community framework, part of which involves differentiation from "the average Israeli." Nevertheless, these Mizrahi Bratislaver *ba'alei teshuva* do not cut themselves off from the Israeli street, its language, its music, or from work.