

## **PRELUDE**

### **IF I WERE, GOD FORBID, NOT RELIGIOUS, I'D WANT TO BE A CEO**

**Winter 1988.** I get into my car at five minutes before ten in the morning. The ten o'clock news informs me that an automobile belonging to Itzik Hadif's father has blown up. Whoever was inside was incinerated. The newscaster says that only forensic laboratory tests are capable of identifying the latest victim in the long-running vendetta between the Pardes Katz gang and the Ramat Amidar gang. "What a day to begin," I mutter to myself. "What could be more banal?"

Almost the end of January. The temperatures are especially low. A hard rain is falling and I am cold in my long skirt. I hope that I have dressed acceptably and that I won't be sorry that I didn't cover my head.

At the corner of Pinhas Rosen and Raul Wallenberg Streets I turn left into the Ayalon compound. The mall and adjoining train warehouses have, during the last two years, become an environmental hazards. Retailers have set up outlets in wildcat fashion, without the necessary infrastructure, and the place has become a jumble of cars driving in different directions.

In the early years of my marriage, I did my shopping in Pardes Katz's *shuk*, the open-air market. The prices were low and it was close to home. When I studied, and then worked, at Bar-Ilan University, I regularly drove down Jabotinsky Road, the main north-south artery of this neighborhood, which was then a non-religious corner of the largely

ultra-religious Tel Aviv suburb of Bnei Brak. I was well-acquainted with its housing projects, which have gone through fruitless renovations in the framework of the Jewish Agency's Project Renewal. I was also familiar with the metal stands that spilled out of the *shuk* on to the adjacent sidewalk, piled high with watermelons, flowers, and fast food. It was not easy to see them in a new, fresh way that would allow me to understand what lay beyond.

The Taboun Bakery stood for years at the neighborhood's northern entrance, on the corner of Mivtza Kadesh and Ha-Yarkon Streets. I'd gone there many times to buy pita with *za'atar*, the hyssop-based Levantine spice, or a Romanian bagel, or a potato *sambusak*, a sort of deep-fried knish. The Arab laborer shoveled the pitas deep into the *taboun*, the hearth-oven, and the Russian saleslady who served the myriad customers, easily blended in with the people on the other side of the counter. Some of the clients were the employees of El-Isra, a high-tech company in the next building over, who wore identity tags on their lapels, others came from Tel Aviv's northeastern neighborhoods, and all these mingled with locals from Pardes Katz and Bnei Brak.

One day I noticed Meir, who sold produce in the *shuk*, had started to wear a white *kipah*, the skullcap that identifies its wearer as religiously observant. It seemed to grow larger by the week. The pictures of rabbis on the bakery's walls also multiplied, as did the signs on the baked goods stating what blessing was to made on each one. Then the Or David Yeshiva started constructing a building next to Maimon's lumberyard. The schoolyard at the nearby religious school was getting more and more crammed with prefab classrooms brought in to accommodate the growing student body. Signs announcing prayer times for workers started appearing at the garages and repair shops on

Ha-Yarkon and Ha-Kishon Streets. An Ashkenazi Hasidic neighborhood had sprouted up next to the community center at the beginning of the 1980s, and Hasidic and other Haredi—ultra-Orthodox—Jews could be seen at the old falafel stand at the corner of Ha-Halutzim and Abravanel Streets. Taken together, the picture was partly familiar and partly different and dynamic, so close to where I was born and where I now lived.

When I sought a geographic location that could serve for a study of Mizrahi Haredi women,<sup>1</sup> I visited Petah Tikva, Or Yehuda, Be'er Ya'akov, and Kfar Saba, but I hoped that I would be able to settle on Pardes Katz.

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This morning, after a sharp right turn from Ha-Yarkon onto Abu-Hatzeira Avenue, I drove slowly. The city had installed speed bumps to protect the children going and coming from the yeshiva and school. Following the directions I'd been given, I turned left onto Ha-Makabim Street, just before the watermelon stands, which were covered up for the winter, and continued straight until I arrived at the school.

The guard at the door let me in wordlessly. A few girls jumped rope in the yard; the rest preferred to spend their lunch break inside, where it was warmer. The building looked dilapidated from the outside, and the interior added to this the dolefulness so characteristic of Haredi institutions. In the corridors, the picture was somewhat different. There were colorful posters on the walls, and the floors were relatively clean, but it was cold. Cold as it generally is in the halls of Israeli schools. The girls looked at me, a stranger in their familiar world, tall in a world of short people. I asked how to get to the principal's office, and they gladly showed me the way. A small group walked behind me giggling. At what? My close-cropped head? My clothes? Or just at a stranger?

The principal's office was hidden behind the teacher's lounge. The entrance was through the secretary's room. Her name was Levana, and she wore a black kerchief over her hair. She invited me in and called the principal from the teacher's lounge. Yona Katabi<sup>2</sup> was tall and thin, dressed in a plaid blue-and-maroon skirt and a blue jacket with golden buttons, under which was wine-colored sweater. She wore a dark, carefully done wig, her face was light and smooth, and her eyes were brown. A pretty woman.

Yona invited me into her room. "Sit down. You're a bit early, aren't you? I'll be with you in just a minute."

A calendar displaying the Hebrew months hung on the wall of her tiny room, as were some small drawings given to her in gratitude by teachers and students. There were two telephones and a few papers on her desk. I also found a copy of *Yated Ne'eman*, the daily newspaper of the Lithuanian-Haredi community. I had never read it before, and I discovered that its language was fairly straightforward, devoid of the pathos characteristic of *Ha-Modi'a*, the Hasidic daily. There were no pictures. I took note of a long article devoted to three soldiers from the elite Egoz reconnaissance unit who had been wounded in Lebanon. About ten minutes later, the bell indicating the end of the lunch break rang. Yona entered the room, closed the door, and said "Now, how may I help you?"

It was about 10:30 in the morning. When I left the room, the clock showed 1 p.m. We sat there for two and a half hours as I froze and listened. I heard Yona's life story, which I will now attempt to recreate.

### **Yona: I Feel Myself to Be Israeli More Than Mizrahi or Sephardi**

My parents came to Israel from Yemen as small children, orphans, in the great migration. My father had the luck to be chosen—one out of twelve—to go to a religious boarding school. He stood out as a student and they send him to the Noam [a religious-Zionist high school yeshiva]. His *ram* [rabbi-teacher] there (you understand these terms, don't you?), who was black [Haredi], understood that he had business here with a special soul, and sent him to a Lithuanian yeshiva. He was a student of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, if you know who that was. And he truly invested himself in the world of Torah, became the rabbi of a large area next to Petah Tikva. So I grew up in a house of Torah, a very Haredi house. My mother was a teacher and now she is a preschool teacher. Her family didn't want my father very much, they are from San'a, not very Haredi. Up until the moment of the wedding ceremony no one knew if the bride would come. The house was, like it is written, father mother and ten children around the table, five girls and five boys, I'm the oldest.

When I told you that I feel more Israeli than Mizrahi or Sephardi, it's because I always studied with Ashkenazi girls, I went to school with them, I studied at Beit Ya'akov [a network of Haredi girls' schools] and at the Wolf Seminar<sup>3</sup> in Bnei Brak. At that time all kinds of religious girls studied there, and a few Mizrahi girls as well. Today it's different. I was a good student and popular and everyone in class respected me. But sometimes, when I walked through Bnei Brak, people would shout "*kushit*" [nigger-woman] at me, or laugh at

me in the bus. I don't have any traumas from childhood or anything like that, I had a very nice and happy childhood. I always felt strong, from a strong, well-known, respectable family. My father was something of a legend in the area, and for me he was a father, a close father, who hugged and kissed and gave love, and also a spiritual father, a guide, my personal rabbi. He died suddenly at a young age, and only then—only after his death—did we comprehend his real stature, the people who were connected with him, the families he nurtured, a book should be written about him, perhaps some day with God's help.

After the seminar I found work immediately. That's not easy, you know, there's a lot of favoritism, it's hard to get a job. I worked in the Independent Education system [a Haredi school system subsidized by the state] with young boys. I kept working after I married and I liked it very much. What can I tell you, before you used the word feminist, I don't know how you define feminist, but I am in favor of women getting out of the house. How many diapers can you change? We received a vocation to help provide a livelihood, so we need to take it seriously, to advance, to develop, the do more. I really push women out of their homes, tell them to go work, do something, fulfill yourselves, you'll be happier, and you won't drive your husbands crazy in the evenings. I'm not afraid of the word career, like you say one of the women you talked to said. It's hypocritical to say that I don't want a career, I want to do things, to initiate, to move ahead. If I were, God forbid, not religious, I'd want to be a CEO.

My three children were born, thank God, close together, when the oldest was two and a half I had three, like bringing up triplets. Then I had high demands of myself, today I take it less to heart, thank God, there is a cleaning woman once a week. But then we were always short of money. My parents couldn't help and my husband only studied, and my salary is nothing. And the children, I was on the run all day, I didn't sit down until they went to sleep. Because of the pressure I wasn't able to get pregnant, so I took a break and then three years later my daughter was born, and that is happiness, happiness that I can't describe. She's also some girl. Something special.

Then I went back to teaching, but not children, in an *ulpan* [an intensive Hebrew course for new immigrants]. I taught new immigrants from Russia, I taught Hebrew, and I enjoyed every minute. I put all I had into it, organized them parties, invited them over to my home. They returned my love, they used to write me letters, I don't want to brag, I don't like that, but they wrote something like "You've got intelligence and charm and beauty," things like that. But the director of the *ulpan* didn't like my standing outness, he had it out for me, he didn't like the fact that I was so active and so well-liked, and my father also said it wasn't good, not modest, to teach men and all that, so I stopped. But to this day I say that adult education is something. Each one has experience and a life story, and understanding, and they appreciate what you do, I liked that very much.

Then came an offer from the system [a school system run by the Mizrahi Haredi Shas Party, Ma'ayan Ha-Hinuch Ha-Torani]. They had a school in the

Sharon region and they needed someone there. When I got there, what can I tell you, people were wandering around, they didn't know what they were doing, a miserable building, a few students. People stirred things up, played politics, didn't further anything. And I, the way I am, I began to push, to organize, to make appointments at city hall, and you know it's a very left-wing municipality and very secular, and they saw me. A girl, I was thinner then, like a young woman, with my face, and they didn't know who I was really. Maybe if I'd been like someone's religious aunt it would have been easier. In the system, too, they want women with kerchiefs on their heads and all that, they aren't used to ones like me. But little by little things began to move, I put things in order, the city promised me a building, the architect would come to my house when I was on maternity leave to decide what I want, what color, what special things in the building, and they put up a new building for us. Think of it, then, eight years ago, they assigned Shas twenty classrooms in the entire country and I received eight of those in the Sharon. That's exceptional.

I started organizing evenings in wedding halls, conventions, events. I didn't see anything except the school that was about to go up. It was a sort of obsession. My husband said that I needed to get some fresh air and encouraged me to go visit a friend of mine from the seminar who lives in the United States. I went—she is very rich—I went there to get away, to catch my breath. I really was under a huge amount of pressure, even my body was exhausted.

In the meantime, people saw the success and wanted to be part of it, they wanted to get their hands on it. I won't confuse you with the details, but they wanted to put someone above me, and I didn't want it. When he arrived and I saw who he was and how he worked, how unprofessional he was, only political, I left. Actually, they forced me to leave because I didn't accept his authority. They said I answered him cynically. It's true, I was very correct with him, I taught him the job, no more. That's it, one day they had an assembly and told the workers no longer to address me and that as of that day I was not principal. Just like that. I had no political backing, I had no one to protect me. I left behind me an organized place, a model, everyone will tell you. Today, in Shas, I'm sorry to say, there is lots of favoritism, they give work to family members, professionalism doesn't always count.

After that they offered me a post as inspector in the system and to be principal of the school here. What can I tell you, this is not it. It's too small for me. I need to do something else, bigger, with more initiative. I changed everything here, brought in good teachers, I put the building in order—you should have seen what it was like before. I drafted a curriculum, a work roster, everything organized a year in advance. But above me there's the rabbi who runs two schools. He's responsible for the money. Have you ever heard of a principal without money? Everything needs to go through him. That's not what I'm looking for. I get along with him but that's not what being a principal is about.

Two days a week I work as inspector of the central region, but people who see me get scared. Yes, I don't know, politics, favoritism, and they're not always ready to lend a hand. They tell my husband, "Keep an eye on her, people are jealous, she should go slowly." If I was a boy, I'd want to study, to be great in spirituality and the Torah. So as a woman I want to manage, to go far, in a big way. My husband doesn't like titles. After ten years in the yeshiva he took upon himself to be a ritual slaughterer in the morning, so he can be free to study from noon onward. He, for example, if we went yesterday on a weekend camp with the students, he won't sit next to me at the table and give a lesson. "That's yours," he says, "you don't need me to talk, that will detract from you." He'll come with me, that he'll do, but he won't participate or push.

So, you know, what can I say, I feel awkward talking about myself all the time. But I want something else, business? Who knows, I haven't tried, maybe yes, I have a friend who markets a health plan to the Haredi sector. She's something, started in diapers, now she's big, successful, smart, a wonderful woman and great friend. I have a social life on top of it all. There are people who never have time. I do, I want to see my friends, to talk, to laugh. Yes, most of my friends are Ashkenazi women, now that you mention it and I run through them in my head, you're right, most of them are Ashkenazi. My son, for example, my greatest happiness is that he was accepted by the Ponivetz Yeshiva.<sup>4</sup> Ponivetz, do you know that that is? What exam he had to pass, and you know how few Sephardim they have? He's

really kind of Ashkenazi, I'm more the Shas one at home. In our house, everything is open, we talk, the children have their say, they can be critical, it's right for you, it's not right for you, true, not true, they have opinions, they talk.

You ask if there's a woman who is a model for me? What can I say, someone I admire? There was my late sister-in-law who was killed in an automobile accident. I looked at her, how she raised her children and worked and developed herself and studied, and did charitable work, too. I admired her. Now they are orphans.

I hope I've been of assistance to you.

We spoke about the most appropriate method for studying Mizrahi Sephardi women. A community study would most likely direct its attention at newly-religious families or at "*mit'hazkim*"—those becoming more religious.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on prominent women, such as the principals of Shas schools, "missionaries" who work to convince other women to become observant, and the directors of charitable networks, would require interviews and would be detached from a specific community or place. I promised Yona that I would be bothering her in the future.

I hurried back to my car, turned the key in the ignition, and put the heater on high. The hourly news report informed me that it was Shimon Hadif who had been killed in his brother Itzik's car. A man who had become religious, a rabbi, the father of a large family.

I did not bother Yona again. But subsequent to my meeting with her I drove to Pardes Katz once or twice a week. The visits continued, with some breaks, for a period of

more than five years, and produced the ethnographic material on which this book is based.

### **From the Gang to the CEO's Office: The Ingathering of Stereotypes**

The trip from my house in a Tel Aviv neighborhood on the east bank of the Yarkon River to Pardes Katz is always accompanied by flashing lights. The Pardes Katz gang, pitas, garages, the open-air market, an Arab laborer, a Russian saleslady, ugly apartment buildings, a yeshiva, a lumber yard, a falafel stand, afternoon prayers. For Israelis, the flashing lights mark a well-known path—the periphery, Haredization, poverty, violence, Mizrahiyut, Shas. The purpose of social research is not to confront all these signals. It seeks rather to see more, to search out the complexities of the fabric understudy, and to decipher it.

Yona's biography is one example of this complexity. She testifies that she was born into a Haredi home. In other words, she does not belong to the current trend of *mit'hazkim* or the newly-religious. Her father attended the Noam, a religious-Zionist school, and then an Ashkenazi Lithuanian yeshiva. She attributes his good fortune to the munificence of fate. It contrasts with the fate of her brothers and sisters, who apparently attended non-religious schools. He made his home Haredi, even though his wife came from a less religious background, became a neighborhood rabbi, and sent his daughter to the a Haredi Beit Ya'akov school.

Yona went to school with Ashkenazi girls, and she cites that as an advantage. Spending time among Ashkenazim led her to identify as an Israeli, taking on a general identity instead of the Sephardi-Mizrahi identity she knows that I seek. Nevertheless, she is aware (largely because I contacted her in her capacity as an educator of Mizrahi girls)

of the discrimination practiced in Ashkenazi Haredi schools. Sometimes people on the streets of Bnei Brak called her *kushit*. When she graduated from her teacher-training college, she was not offered a job teaching Haredi girls. Instead, she was sent to a peripheral institution in the Haredi educational system, a school for boys. Afterwards she taught Hebrew in a course for immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and enjoyed the work immensely. But the director of the program did not like her energetic personality, and her father did not like the idea that she was teaching a mixed-gender class in which most of the students were not religious. She had to leave the job. The growth of the Shas school system created a demand for education professionals,<sup>6</sup> and Yona adjusted herself to the demands of its founders. She was given the post of principal at a school in a city whose population is largely non-religious. She, and the project she was appointed to head, were thus part of Shas's innovative program to establish a Haredi school system that would serve as an alternative to those run by the Ashkenazi political parties

Yona tells a pioneer story, with a cast of characters divided, in unexpected ways, into "good guys" and "bad guys." There is a non-religious municipality that helps set up a Haredi school, an architect who visits the principal's house to make sure that his plans will provide the school's physical needs. There are unprofessional Haredi political hacks, and a Haredi woman, wife and mother, who sees her professional career as a vocation that need not be hidden. Yona's professional path is paved with spitefulness, favoritism, success, pressures, illnesses, and impediments.

At the time we met, she was principal of a neighborhood school for Mizrahi girls. Her superior was a rabbi who ran a private foundation that was not part of the Shas educational system. There was a boys' school in the same compound. Yona's budget

came from a complicated combination of the municipality, the Independent school system, and Shas. She felt that was being given little room for maneuver, and that she was not properly appreciated even though she had turned the school around. The job, she felt, was “too small” for her. Being a professional Haredi woman with proven successes has not changed the fact that she is a Yemenite in a system that advances North Africans, and that she is a free agent in a web of personal obligations and favoritism. Her description of her life outside work indicates a thirst for a social life and appreciation of women who seek to establish themselves professionally and economically. She runs a home that encourages open conversation, and lives alongside a supportive spouse. Ethnically, Yona testifies that most of her friends are Ashkenazi, and cites her son’s acceptance in the primarily Ashkenazi Lithuanian Ponivetz Yeshiva as a very special kind of happiness.

Yona was born in a Haredi home, attended Ashkenazi schools, and was enlisted in the establishment of the Shas school system. At the time we met, she headed the only school in the neighborhood that accepted Mizrahi Haredi girls, daughters of parents who were considered *mit’hazkim*, without a strictly selective criteria. Before her arrival, the school had been in the center of a serious educational scandal—Haredi parents from the neighborhood had sought to transfer their daughters from this school to another one, and were not allowed to do so.<sup>7</sup>

Yona, the girls’ parents, the girls themselves, the neighborhood’s and city’s education officials, and the principals of the alternative institutions are all situated at a Haredi/ethnic/gender crossroads that lies in the midst of a broad and complex social context. The hierarchy of Haredi, ethnic, and gender prestige is not constructed within the

neighborhood. This book does not address the ways in which that hierarchy is created. But the materials of which the book is fashioned testify to the presence of this changing scale of prestige and to its huge influence on those who live in its shadow. The materials, collected from different sites in the neighborhood, seek to find out what defines the standard Haredi, the place of ethnicity in this definition, the effect of gender in the positioning of women who participate in the ethnic Haredi circle, and what sort of Israeli identity all these trace out. It may well be that all these will provide another way of looking at the stereotypes that signaled to me during my first journey into the neighborhood as a research site.

Despite my insistence on carrying out my field work in Pardes Katz, *this is not a study of a neighborhood*. Pardes Katz has a history and a present, but for the purposes of this study it signifies an area in central Israel in which most of the inhabitants are of Mizrahi extraction, a large portion of whom have a religious-Haredi lifestyle.<sup>8</sup>

### **From the End to the Beginning: A Map of This Book**

Current anthropology seldom conducts comparative, intercultural research projects. The research careers of most anthropologists do not allow them to conduct wide-ranging field work in different parts of the world. Most of them are thus located within fixed groups or regions. Time, however, makes it possible for them to conduct comparisons within spaces they have studied and to investigate changes there.<sup>9</sup>

My research work moves among three religious communities in Israel, with a focus on their women. It seeks to discover what they are permitted to know as “believers-observers.”<sup>10</sup> This work has been spread out over 20 years and has, of course, been influenced by the movement from one community to another, as well as by the time that

has gone by. I will thus devote the final chapter of this book to a cautious comparison between my three field work projects. I will attempt to examine whether there is a connection between the cultural, religious, and gender movements in each of the communities, with the basis of comparison being an inquiry into the literacy status of the women in each group. In other words, I will seek to sketch the world of religious knowledge of these women, and its social significance.

The fields of research themselves dictated the centers of my attention. The central focus of my work in the Haredi neighborhood was the gatherings the women held in each other's homes for the purposes of religious study. In the religious-Zionist community, the focus was women's seminaries (*midrashot*, sing. *midrasha*) for religious study. I assumed that in Pardes Katz I would also find a place in which women conduct religious study. That would allow me to compare the nature and progress of the studies to those I examined in my previous research projects. But I did not find such a place.

My hope that perhaps the neighborhood community center hosted women's study groups took me to the office of the center's director, Michal.<sup>11</sup> I learned from her that the community center had no such groups, but that Haredi and religious women from the neighborhood were enrolled in other courses that the center organizes or hosts. In one of these courses, Haredi women were a notable presence, and Michal suggested I attend. That was a starting point. I continued to seek out sites similar to those in which I worked in the communities I had studied before—such as seminaries, home classes, and public lectures for women. But alongside this I recognized that I had to go after the women in their communities and allow them to trace the path and sites of my research.<sup>12</sup>

So, after spending a year in the community center's course for senior secretaries, and having interviewed most of the participants in depth, I followed them into other spaces—to the large neighborhood yeshiva that offers weekly lectures for the public (men and women); to the single-mother support group in the neighborhood branch of WIZO (the Women's International Zionist Organization), to a Haredi women's club that meets in a community activity room, and to the private homes of the women themselves.

This study is therefore not one of prominent women in the Mizrahi-Haredi community, nor of women active in education, politics, charity, or commerce. That is, it is not a study of those women who are at the forefront of the changes in the community that are generally attributed to Shas. Often, when I told people that I was studying Mizrahi Haredi women, my words were translated into: "you mean, you're studying the Shas women." The biography of Yona, school principal, shows that putting the whole story under the rubric "the Shas phenomenon" is too easy a shortcut. Shas is, of course, a presence in the neighborhood and in the lives of the women I met. But Shas's women are not at the center of this book. The center is rather the women whose lives are touched by Shas, as they are touched by many other factors. The work I did with Ashkenazi Haredi women did not produce a study of "the women of Agudat Yisrael (an Ashkenazi Haredi party), and my work on women in the religious Zionist institutions where women pursue sacred studies did not produce a study of "women of the National Religious Party." The same is true here. The nature of anthropological work is to focus on a small and complex community that has a broader context. Even if most of the women here identify with Shas and vote for the party in elections, they are not "Shas women." I thus chose a

neighborhood in which most of the population is Mizrahi, and some of these are religious and Haredi.

My field work thus produced an extremely discontinuous ethnography, which moves among different places while trying to keep hold of a fixed group of women as guideposts. But it did not always succeed. This discontinuity is one of the study's limitations, but also one of its findings. It shows that the Sephardi/Mizrahi religious community is less tightly woven and more open than the other religious communities I studied, and the fluidity of its boundaries is my major finding. Most of the women I studied moved easily from place to place along the path of education and life. Only a narrow path divided the secular public, religious public, and Haredi schools. Families that conduct an open lifestyle see no problem in sending their girls to religious schools. They display great flexibility in transferring children between religious and non-religious schools; girls who attended non-religious elementary schools found themselves in religious or Haredi boarding high schools.

On the face of it, these findings could be examined from the perspective of Mizrahi traditionalism, which does not fear religion but rather weaves it into a complex and varied life space. The cliché from popular Israeli discourse on Mizrahi religiosity is that on Friday nights Mizrahi families recite the *kiddush*, the blessing over the wine that ushers in the Sabbath evening meal, and then turn on the television, which is forbidden on the Sabbath. On Saturday morning, so the stereotype goes, they go to synagogue and then drive—again, a forbidden Sabbath activity—to the local team's soccer game. But this is a very limited reading of the actual state of affairs. This work seeks to show the problematic aspect of the ways in which this cultural flexibility has been exploited for the

purpose of channeling education. It also wishes to present stories of empowerment of women for whom this flexibility opened new possibilities.

These soft boundaries bring into the ethnography elements that may seem not to belong. What are non-religious women doing in a study of Mizrahi Haredi women? And how does a vocational course fit into understanding Haredi literacy? But addressing religion and return to religion in spaces perceived as secular, as well as activities considered secular within the daily life of Haredim, advances understanding of the cultural situation as a system subject to invasions. This system challenges the accepted cultural segmentation in the study of Israeli society.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, we must be careful not to view it as evidence of a tranquil multi-culturalism.

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The book is divided into four chapters. They represent the multiple sites at which I performed my field work. Each chapter stands on its own. The thread that runs through and connects all of them is spun from the lives of several protagonists who appear in each section, of the general subject of women and religious and other knowledge available to them, and of the common geography—the neighborhood—in which they live. The epilogue, as noted above, offers a limited comparison of my three studies.

My work began in the community center, proceeded to interviews, went on to attendance at open lectures offered by the neighborhood rabbi, and ended with my participation in the meetings of a circle of Haredi women. The book, however, goes from the end to the beginning. Chapter I describes my encounter with a small group of Haredi women who founded a social and study framework for themselves in the neighborhood. Chapter II opens into the neighborhood, to the community of women and men, Haredi,

religious, and otherwise, who come each week to hear the lectures of Rabbi Daniel Zer, who heads the Haredi education project in the neighborhood. Chapter III opens up to the worlds of non-religious knowledge on offer to the women who live in the neighborhood. It portrays encounters between Haredi women, religious women, and women who do not fall into either of those categories; between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi women; and between all these and a variety of areas of knowledge that are meant to provide them with a profession. Chapter IV offers eight biographical sketches of women I met in the course at the community center and in the circle of Haredi women. This part also includes the “biography” of the Haredi school for Sephardi girls that some of my protagonists attended. Finally, it offers my own ethnic biography—that of the scholar who has composed this study. The titles of the chapters thus mark a journey among social identities—between who you are and who they want you to be; between what you wish to be and what you have become.

Readers are invited to wander among the book’s different parts and to mark, with their reading, new ways of unraveling the field under study, and of weaving it anew.

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publisher, I once more found a professional and attentive home with Eli Shaltiel and Ilana Shamir, who set out on a journey with me for the third time.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this book, the terms “Mizrahi” and “Sephardi” will be used interchangeably.

However, the choice between them is not without meaning. Religious Jews who themselves, or whose parents, came to Israel from Muslim countries, prefer to call themselves Sephardim—the name of the religious tradition within Judaism to which they belong (as opposed to the Ashkenazi tradition). “Mizrahi” is a regional-ethnic designation drawn from the Hebrew term “*edot ha-Mizrah*” (the communities of the east). This term, which also refers to Jews from Muslim countries, is a category produced by the hegemonic public discourse on ethnicity in Israel. The genesis and subsequent development of this term, and its social and political implications, have been the subjects of research studies (see, among others, Khazzoom 1998). Cultural-political activists generally prefer “Mizrahi” (see Chapter 4, “You Aren’t Born an Ashkenazi Woman”). Most of the religious women I spoke to preferred to refer to themselves as “Sephardi,” although at times, in sociopolitical contexts, they also used the terms “*edot ha-Mizrah*” or “Mizrahi.”

<sup>2</sup> Most of the names appearing in the book have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> In the Haredi world, a seminar is a secondary school for girls. Seminars also offer two or more years of post-secondary education. Most have both academic tracks, leading to post-secondary teacher-training programs, and vocational tracks, usually in sewing. In recent years, some have broadened their offerings.

<sup>4</sup> The most prestigious Lithuanian yeshiva.

<sup>5</sup> “*Mit’hazkim*” literally means “those becoming stronger.” The use of this word to label people of Mizrahi origin who choose to become religiously observant marks them as being people who, with regard to religious observance, are not beginning from zero. The unstated assumption is that even in non-religious Mizrahi families, Jewish traditions and religious precepts are observed to some extent. It stands in opposition to “*hozrim be-teshuva*,” “returning in repentance,” which implies a previously utterly unobservant person who has become religious. The unstated assumption—hardly correct in all cases—is that most non-religious Ashkenazim come from families where there was no observance at all. However, the term “*hozrim be-teshuva*” is not entirely absent from the Mizrahi

discourse.

<sup>6</sup> On this, see Mor 1996, which addresses the training of the professionals who set up the Shas school system.

<sup>7</sup> See Esti's biography in Part IV for more on this incident.

<sup>8</sup> Anthropological studies often disguise their location, in addition to changing the names and identifying details of their subjects. In my previous studies, after considerable deliberation, I decided not to conceal the site of my field work. This time the decision was a particularly difficult one. The fear that readers might view the neighborhood as an exotic, exceptional site, which would reinforce stereotypes, stood against my unwillingness to "defend" it. Social research should not and cannot offer "protections."

<sup>9</sup> On anthropological methods, and the changes they underwent during the twentieth century, see Descola 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See my studies on women in the Haredi community, El-Or 1994, and on women in the religious Zionist community, El-Or 2002. The term "believers-observers" was presented in the latter work, *Next Year I Will Know More*, and refers to the integration of the spiritual-faith aspect of religious life alongside the observance of religious precepts and rituals—faith and practice.

<sup>11</sup> This is my opportunity to thank her, and also apologize. The gratitude is for her having made time for me in her busy schedule, and for having listened to and helped clarify my rather vague program. I also owe her gratitude for the information she gave me about the neighborhood and the policy she pursued there, and especially her recommendation to observe the secretarial course at the community center as a starting point. I owe her an apology because, on one of the first occasions when I gave a public talk on my research, a journalist was in the room. His report on my research caused Michal and other workers in the community considerable anguish.

<sup>12</sup> In the work on anthropological methodology referred to in note 5, the author quotes the advice he received from his teacher, Claude Lévy-Strauss, just before he set out on a research trip to the Amazon basin: "*Laissez-vous porter par le terrain*"—let the field take you (Descola 2005, 69).

<sup>13</sup> For example, the sectorial division that guides Kimmerling 2004.