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The New Hebrew Women: Women in the Yishuv and the Zionist
Movement from a Gender Perspective (review)

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Margalit Shilo, Ruth Kark, and Galit Hasan-Rokem (eds.)
The New Hebrew Women: Women in the Yishuv
and the Zionist Movement from a Gender Perspective
Jerusalem: Yitzhak Ben-Zvi Institute, 2002. 457 pp.

reviewed by Yossi Goldstein

For over forty years, historiographers around the world have been engaged in serious, probing study of the place of women in the history of nations. Questions like that raised by the editors in the Introduction to the excellent book under review—"Why have historiography and the study of culture overlooked issues of women and gender?" (p. 1)—were raised on American campuses already in the early sixties. The responses given then would be worth a study in their own right, but the questions themselves led to an outpouring of funds and of new research, and thence to the opening of departments of gender studies in practically every self-respecting American academic institution, and later in the European universities as well. This storm of scholarly activity, and the generous funding it enjoyed, brought results, and research into women's history has since been enriched by tens of thousands of studies. There remain many difficult questions, including some that have barely been raised in the parallel study of men, as well as some unique difficulties, such as a chronic dearth of first-hand sources, but in general the harvest has been abundant. The same may be said of historical research on Jewish women, which has produced an impressive number of studies that set out to examine the place of women within historical developments connected with the Jewish people. Even so, as Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander remark in their book, *Major Problems in American Women's History: Documents and Essays* (1996), the work that lies ahead is great.

The study of women in the Yishuv, the Jewish community of Eretz Israel before the founding of the state, has also established itself since the 1990s—

predictably, a full generation after gender studies got underway in the U.S., and on a more modest scale. Nevertheless, in the last decade, as Deborah Bernstein remarks in the present collection, “these women’s story has begun to seek its place as part of the comprehensive narrative of Zionist Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel” (p. 7). This assertion is borne out by an increasing number of published studies, leading up to the volume under review. In my opinion, this collection’s importance to the historical study of the Jewish community of Eretz Israel goes beyond the individual contributions of several important articles, for three main reasons. First, in a number of areas, it provides a basis upon which future research is sure to build, so that its impact may well resemble that of the path-breaking articles of Ben-Zion Dinur, on the historical image of Russian Jewry and the research problems connected with it, and of Mordechai Bar-On, on the history of the Six-Day War. Secondly, it opens the way for interdisciplinary research connected with gender. Israel’s current academic milieu is characterized by that antiquated school of thought which determines that collections should be confined to specific fields, such as history, literature, or philosophy. The present volume is almost unique in its presentation of a wide, interdisciplinary variety of studies connected with gender. Thirdly, the editors assert in the book’s Preface that one of their criteria for acceptance of articles for publication was that they had not already been published elsewhere. Unlike other collections with which I am familiar, they were almost entirely successful in this, creating an exemplary volume that I hope will be a model for others.

The volume’s twenty-four articles are arranged in six divisions, bringing together studies with common or similar subject areas. Naturally, the overall quality of these papers varies, sometimes rather widely. For example, I liked most of the articles in the three divisions devoted, respectively, to “Pilgrims and Immigrants,” “Education, Health, and Politics,” and “Constructing Collective Memory,” while I was less enthusiastic about those in the opening division on “Shaping the Historical Narrative.” The articles by Deborah Bernstein and Yossi Ben-Artzi are excellent, but also somewhat problematic. Seeking to define those areas which, in their opinion, will or ought to be the objects of future research in their respective fields, they end up going into too much detail and remain unfocused. Bernstein concludes, or complains, that “the literature of [gender] studies is still taking its first steps and just beginning to make its voice heard, as it delves into the history of institutions, of everyday life, and of society—but these are only beginnings; so many areas

have not yet been studied at all” (p. 24). But this is surely true of almost any area of research, including those connected with men. Similarly, Ben-Artzi concludes, or complains, that “[The perspective of] gender has yet to make a difference to the understanding of phenomena and processes [relating to the status and contributions of women to the existence of the Jewish settlement movement and to the development of the emergent social structure and cultural *mélange* in Eretz Israel], though it has added a great deal of knowledge” (p. 43). But this is contradicted by the contents of the very collection in which the article appears! Henriette Dahan-Kalev’s article seeks to provide the necessary framework for studying the story of Mizrahi women. Her conclusion, arising from the distinctive position of Mizrahi women, is that “we ought to develop the historical study of difference, so that they will not be swallowed up in the story of women in Israel, on the one hand, or in that of the Mizrahim in Israel, on the other” (p. 60). This conclusion is logical, but one wonders whether the challenge is not too difficult, perhaps impossible.

The articles in the second division are perhaps the best and most interesting in the collection. Michal Ben-Yaakov seeks to give a comprehensive explanation for patterns of Jewish women’s emigration from North Africa to Eretz Israel in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, the proportion of women among the emigrants during that period was very high in contrast to that of men, and Ben-Yaakov inquires into the reasons for this. Beyond the normative Jewish motivations she finds for the women’s emigration—first and foremost, their faith in the unique spiritual benefits conferred by dwelling in Eretz Israel—she explains the participation of many widows in this movement as part of a broader phenomenon of the increasing presence of widows in the holy cities. Further on, she enumerates and explains the difficulties they experienced in establishing their new homes. Her apology for the scarcity of sources on her subject (p. 64), which has almost the nature of a reflex in studies of women, is belied here by the wealth of sources she presents, making this a prime example of an article that could serve as an opening to future studies of the same subject, as she herself recommends.

The same is true of the following article in the same section, by Joseph Glass, which characterizes the reasons for the emigration of some 5,000 Jewish women from the United States to Eretz Israel in the years 1918–1939. His conclusions attest to a continuity between the reasons for emigration described in Ben-Yaakov’s article and those motivating the subjects of Glass’s

research, namely, traditional religious yearnings for Eretz Israel, which spurred thousands of women to emigrate during this period. However, the American women had further reasons for emigration, namely, the desire to take part in the pioneering projects initiated by the Zionist settlers, which spurred the emigration of middle-class women and urban professionals. This article, again, opens the door wide for the study of further important subjects, not necessarily confined to women, such as the classic question of why people would choose to emigrate from a rich, mighty country to one as poor and limited as Eretz Israel. Are the answers furnished by Glass applicable to other groups that emigrated from the “land of unlimited opportunity”?

I also found the articles in the collection’s final division of great interest. Billie Melman depicts the various ways in which the life and, more so, the heroic death of Sarah Aharonson—who shot herself rather than risk confessing to the Turks her family’s spying exploits for the British in World War I—were memorialized in different periods before and after the establishment of the state. Discussing the significance of the differences she discovered, she draws an interesting conclusion that is entirely logical, though at odds with currently accepted thinking:

The collective memory went through processes of pluralization and fragmentation precisely in the period that is usually described as the heyday of the hegemony of the labor movement and its institutions, and of the domination by those institutions of [Israel’s] culture and historical narratives. (p. 432)

In another surprising article, Judith Tydor Baumel describes how women are commemorated in Israel’s war memorials. Her conclusion may seem banal, especially to those who consider themselves familiar with garden-variety Israeli chauvinism:

The plastic memorialization of men—in Israel as elsewhere—tends to uphold the [heroic] myth, while the iconography associated with women in Israel focuses unequivocally on the universal image of the mother, who stands beyond the cycle of violence. (p. 456)

At first glance, the conclusion of the first of these excellent articles seems startling, while that of the second looks remarkably banal. But this is an example of the importance of the collection as a whole: On second thought, it is Melman’s conclusion that proves banal, while Baumel’s is remarkable.

Yossi Goldstein

Have we not been taught that women's experiences in Israel, particularly those of the "fighters," were remote from the ordinary lives of women? And have we not been told that the Labor Party's domination of the establishment of the Yishuv and the state was far from monolithic? We need more and more studies like these to help us develop a deeper understanding of the history of the Yishuv. The collection's contribution to Israeli historiography is thus considerable. The uneven quality of the individual articles does not detract from the overall importance of this pioneering volume.