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from a Distance

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# SYMPOSIUM: WOMEN, WAR, AND PEACE IN JEWISH AND MIDDLE EAST CONTEXTS

## FOREWORD

*Alice Shalvi, The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies*

When I first offered to serve as guest editor of an issue of *Nashim* dedicated to the topic of War and Peace I was confident that we should have no difficulty in enlisting contributors. After all, women are known to be a majority among the peace activists, even though (or perhaps because?) few of them have participated personally in active combat.

What soon became apparent was that women engaged in research or academic work relating to the topic were not at all easy to find. On the other hand, not a few were prepared to contribute non-academic essays once offered the opportunity to do so. In this case (to invert a well-known feminist aphorism) “The political is personal.” Women were able to draw on their personal experiences and responses, even on their biographies and life experiences, in order to express themselves on our topic. The result is, to my mind, a fascinatingly varied collection of contributions constituting a patchwork quilt of reflections on this most topical of subjects. We hope you will enjoy the symposium and find it of interest. We welcome reader responses, which should be sent to [nashim@schechter.ac.il](mailto:nashim@schechter.ac.il) or by mail to POB 16080, Jerusalem 91160, Israel.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE ETHICS OF CRITICIZING ISRAELI POLITICS FROM A DISTANCE

*Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, Stanford University*

If it is true, as Susan Sontag reminds us,<sup>1</sup> that ultimately war is the norm of human history and peace the exception, then I have to regard myself as

fortunate in having been born into a political and geographical situation that allowed me to grow up with a basic sense of stability in my daily life. Indeed, I am among the fortunate few, mostly of European and American provenance, who have never directly experienced the atrocities and terrors of war. Apart from travels to the Middle East and sojourns in Israel (mostly in relatively calm times), the concerns of my daily life have never included the likelihood of a bomb exploding any minute in close proximity or of stepping onto a mine. I have never had to carry a gun, bear the duty of military service, or subject my children to it. I have never even had to face the choice between conscientious objection and military service: as a woman growing up in Germany in the 1970s and 80s, I was automatically exempt from conscription. Mostly, I have been in the position of being a spectator of wars elsewhere in the world, including the Middle East. This life experience of watching war from a safe distance, privileged as it is in this sense, has shaped my ethical conviction that war is the aberration, and peace—a just peace, no less—must be the norm. However unattainable peace may seem, it cannot be relegated to the realm of religious utopia.

Yet the Germany into which I was born in 1965, at the tail end of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, was primarily a postwar Germany. That is, it was still defined by the presence of the generations that had perpetrated and sustained the war effort. The war itself and the totality of its destructiveness remained my generation's reference point, both as a memory of the immediate past and as an active force shaping the cultural and political landscape. Images of bombed-out cities formed the background to the architectural visage of the cities in which we grew up; the Wall divided the country's eastern part from the West; and, most of all, the images and narratives of the Holocaust informed our sense of the world. Though the increasingly realistic fear of an impending catastrophic, nuclear end to human civilization permeated our psychic structure and perspective on the future, the most visible of all actually perpetrated atrocities was without question the murder of the European Jews.

The questions then that shaped our lives focused on this particular past: How could this possibly have happened? How did we get there? How am I included in that “we,” and what kind of “we” can I identify with? Who or what was to blame? More precisely, whom could we believe we had the right to blame? Furthermore, what ethical imperative emerged from having been shaped by German culture and history, and from German citizenship? How

was one implicated in the perpetration and perpetuation of acts of war taking place elsewhere around the globe?

The answers to these questions took many shapes, including the peace movement in Germany, with its commitment to global nuclear disarmament, and work on behalf of those exploited in the name of Euro-American consumerism. But the peace movement in post-war Germany had to face an additional question about wars the world over: How was one to relate to the ongoing struggle between Israel and the Palestinians, which entered German consciousness brutally with the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic games? Could—and can—a German citizen simply indict Israel for the occupation and for its political practice, given Germany's own history with respect to its Jewish citizens? What would be the moral grounds for such an indictment?

My particular geo-cultural location as a citizen of postwar Germany, faced with a war and a genocide that had taken place in the past and thus could no longer be prevented, halted, or undone, led me to choose the path of theology, of searching for answers to the unbearable burden of the incurable past in the realm of religious reflection. That path led me over many years from explorations in Protestantism to Judaism, and finally to choosing halakhic Judaism as the framework of my daily life and to the study of rabbinic Judaism as my scholarly pursuit. I am well aware that this choice may be subjected to the ethical question, articulated, among others, by Henryk Broder, of whether its motivation is not grounded in a desire (however subconscious a desire) to identify with the victims rather than the perpetrators of Holocaust. As Broder put it:

The conversion to Judaism does not simply signify an entry into a different religion. It is at the same time a transition to the right side of history, out of the national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] of the perpetrators into the community of suffering of the victims [*Leidensgemeinschaft der Opfer*]. Could a German distance himself [*sic!*] more clearly from his own history?<sup>2</sup>

Though no one, surely, converts with the overt purpose of escaping onto the right side of history, the question is justified. Generally, I would like to think that the context of my childhood and youth catalyzed the shape my life took, spurring me to study the relationship between Christian Europe

and its Jewish victims. Now that I reside in the United States, which has its own history of atrocities against humanity, the specifically German preoccupation with regarding Jews as victims has lost its force in framing my life. However, while national identification is no longer primary in constituting my identity, this does not amount to a denial of my German background. I do understand my engagement with rabbinic Judaism, which was perceived in postwar Germany as the culture of the victims, at least in part as my response to inheriting the memory of World War II, which led me in a direction that could not be foreseen.

This leaves me at an ethical cross-roads. My conversion to Judaism has not meant leaving behind the political and ethical sensibilities originally shaped by my involvement in the peace movement in Germany. From that perspective, limited as it may be, Israel's occupation of the territories is morally untenable, and that includes the settler movement and the repeated concessions made to it by the Israeli government. But if my political perspective remains unchanged, what difference, politically, does my conversion make? How, ultimately, do I differ from a German peacenik who votes for the Green Party? Or to put it differently, what difference does it make to my Judaism that it is wedded to a political orientation forged in postwar Germany?

I can answer these questions only with some degree of uncertainty, since I am not entirely sure that it matters to me whether I differ from the ethics of the German peaceniks or not; they are no longer my primary reference point. However, as a Jewish woman I regard myself as being implicated in and partially responsible for Jewish politics. What matter to me most are my commitment to Judaism and to furthering the possibilities of a vibrant Jewish culture, my commitment to furthering the cause of justice in the world, and my desire to making those two commitments cohere. The latter has to flow from the former, translating into a commitment to the pursuit of justice as a Jewish woman (who happens to have grown up as a German Protestant), albeit not an Israeli citizen. Conversely, it is for the sake of Judaism that I remain committed to the absolute necessity of political justice for the Palestinians. Such is the goal and ground of my Jewish life—the refusal to dehumanize the other as the enemy, to see only suicide bombers where there are also mothers and fathers, sons and daughters.

By way of conclusion, I do not think that my politics represent a specifically female perspective. If anything, I consider my feminism to belong to

the larger endeavor of furthering the cause of justice in this world. Moreover, I can no longer be so naive as to regard women—and therefore myself—only as victims of wars (which, however, they often are) and men only as their perpetrators (which, however, they often are). My feminism has taught me that a claim to collective victimhood, apart from being historically inaccurate, may have its own problematic political consequences.

In the end, I believe that the primary victims of the “situation” in Israel/Palestine are the children on both sides. They are not only victims of the bloodshed, but they are deprived of the chance of looking at the world as a place in which they can be at home. Midrashic literature often characterizes women—particularly those who took part in the Exodus from Egypt—as being concerned about the next generation and the future of the Jewish people, while men are represented as giving up under the pressures belaboring the current generation. Although we should approach this plot structure with a hermeneutics of suspicion, it may indeed be us mothers who are more capable of acknowledging other mothers, across political dividing lines, as sharing our concerns for the wellbeing of our children. The Women in Black thus substantiate the midrashic idea. Herein may lay our unique responsibility to the future.

#### *Notes*

1. Susan Sonntag, “Looking At War: Photography’s View of Devastation and Death,” *The New Yorker*, December 9, 2002.
2. Henryk Broder, “Zur Hoelle mit den Konvertiten!” in W. Homolka and E. Seidel (eds.), *Nicht durch Geburt allein: Uebertritt zum Judentum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), p. 23.

#### REFLECTIONS ON GENDER IN DIALOGUE

*Galia Golan, The Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya*

There is a general assumption that women are more peace-loving, more “dovish” than men. Studies in North America and parts of Europe have indeed indicated statistically significant gender differences on various questions related to war and peace—for example, in relation to the 1991 Gulf War—as well as to violence and capital punishment. Studies conducted in