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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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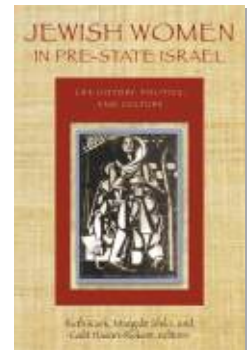
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Introduction

This collection was prompted by a search for the concealed identity of women in the history and culture of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish settlement in pre-state Israel, and by the call for a new national discourse. Issues regarding women and gender have been largely ignored in the historiography of the Jewish community in Palestine and research into its culture.¹ Even today the discourse is overwhelmingly male dominant.² This exclusion of women is the direct continuation of women having been barred from public life in Jewish communities in the past.³ The attempt to establish a new society based on ideological foundations of equality did not succeed, and its lack of realization created frustration and anguish.⁴

The fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel was the catalyst for convening a multidisciplinary interuniversity conference on the topic “Women in the Yishuv and the Early State of Israel,” which was held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It was co-sponsored by the Leifer Center for Women’s Studies at the Hebrew University as well as The Hadassah-Brandeis Institute and The Jacob and Libby Goodman Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel, both affiliated with Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts. The participants, from universities in Israel and the United States, addressed a wide range of topics: history, sociology, historical geography, political science, literature, anthropology, folklore, musicology, history of philosophy, and cinema studies. The forty or so lectures given in the course of three tightly packed days stimulated considerable interest. This peer-reviewed multidisciplinary anthology in English comprises a selection of articles based on the conference presentations.

Reverberations of the second wave of feminism, which also reached Israel, prompted there, too, the desire to reveal the feminine voice and the

genderization of the past. Over the last two decades, we have been fortunate to see pioneering initial studies responding to the invocation “to seek, tell and write new narratives that will give expression to woman’s life, to the story of her activities, to her contribution, and to her naturean the authentic multi-faceted Hebrew-Israeli voice.”⁵ Postmodern contemporary research permeated by concepts of cultural pluralism serves as a catalyst for a revised national discourse, one that also expresses the world of women and issues of gender.

Intense preoccupation with the myth of the equality of the sexes in Eretz Israel, an ethos that has been scrutinized and smashed in extensive research, led to a number of basic questions: What was the reality of life for women in Jewish society in Eretz Israel in the early years? What was the contribution of women to the renewal of Israeli society and culture? What is the place of gender perceptions in the study of the new Eretz Israel identity?

In a stimulating, challenging programmatic article, Billie Melman has called for not being satisfied with seeking out and exposing the hidden half but rather for applying new insights derived from feminist research to create a new historical-cultural narrative.⁶ Her evaluation that “Zionism was perhaps the most conscious and intensive attempt to change the concepts of gender against the background of national realization,” presents the study of “Israeliness” as a gender test case of unique importance.⁷

The original articles in this anthology, each in its own way, forge an innovative response to one or more of the questions presented above and can be viewed as a representative sample, reflecting the state of research in the field. Analysis through the prism of gender should greatly enhance our understanding of the key issues for Israeli society.

This volume is divided into six sections, each chronologically presented.

In the first section, “Constructing the Historical Narrative,” Deborah Bernstein, Yossi Ben-Artzi, and Henriette Dahan-Kalev address issues of methodology and historiography. The first two authors propose a map for future research in this field, while Henriette Dahan-Kalev focuses on the study of Oriental women and informs us of the special problems involving the “other.”

The articles in the second section, “Women and Immigration,” deal with four different groups of immigrants. Michal Ben Ya’akov elucidates immigration patterns of traditional women from North Africa who headed for Eretz Israel in the nineteenth century. Joseph Glass assesses the contribution of women immigrants from the United States to the *Yishuv*. Esther Meir-Glitzenstein sensitively depicts the encounter of young Iraqi women with

their new homeland and the influence this meeting had on their gender identity. Penina Morag-Talmon gives a new reading of the experiences of young women who immigrated to Jerusalem upon the founding of the State and depicts their support systems.

The topic of the third section is “Pioneers and Defenders.” Einat Ramon offers fresh research into A. D. Gordon’s perception of the status of women in Eretz Israel. Henry Near confronts the weighty issue of why the discrepancy between the ideal of equality and the reality in the kibbutz was so disturbing for the female members. Smadar Shiffman’s discussion revolves around the mutual fashioning of the image of the “*halutz*” (male pioneer) and “*halutzah*” (female pioneer). Hagar Salamon weaves a thread from present to past through the Mandate period to the Ottoman era by analyzing the image of a complex feminine figure (Zohar Wilbush), who played a central role in preserving the heritage of Eretz Israel material culture.

The fourth section articles deal with “Education, Health, and Politics” and exposes female activity in these arenas. Margalit Shilo presents the model of the new woman as fashioned in the first school in the country for young Jewish women, the Evelina de Rothschild School, at the turn of the twentieth century in Jerusalem. The studies by Shifra Shvarts and Zipora Shehory-Rubin and by Nira Bartal examine the organized involvement of women in the field of health during the Mandate period. Shvarts and Shehory-Rubin delved into the establishment of the *Tipat Halav* (Mother and Child Health Clinics) and their influence on society, while Bartal focused on the first nursing school in Eretz Israel. The discussion by Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern of the women’s labor movement within the Histadrut is also a study of the obstacles and limitations that faced female political activity, revealing that barriers persist to the present. Hannah Safran wrote about women’s suffrage in the *Yishuv* and the unique contribution of Dr. Rosa Welt Straus.

The fifth section, “Creativity in Word and Music,” is devoted to articles in the fields of literature and music. Orly Lubin provides a new, feminist reading to the writings of the First Aliyah author Nehama Pohatcevsky (Puhachewsky). Tali Asher addresses the masculine and feminine images in Rachel’s poems and their cultural implications. The study by Yaffah Berlovitz presents the biblical narratives incorporated within the poetry of the poet Anda Amir-Pinkerfeld, thereby placing her more centrally in the Hebrew literary map than to date. Hannan Hever proposes a feminist interpretation for *Shirim la-Geto* (*Poems to the Ghetto*) by Yocheved Bat-Miriam, an explication that renders feminist poetry as an authoritative voice in the new reading of national history. A musicological contribution by Yael Shai

and Rachel Kollender considers the role of women in the preservation and transmission of musical traditions in Israel.

The sixth and final section in this anthology is devoted to a discussion of the topic of “Shaping the Collective Memory”. Billie Melman examines transformations in the image of Sarah Aaronsohn and the historical significance of these changes in meaning, tracing them from the past through to the present. The article by Judith Baumel-Schwartz, in which she analyzes commemoration of women in memorials in the State of Israel, concludes this collection.

The editors of this anthology see it as an appetizer and not as a definitive collection; they hope it will spark new research. As alluded to above, many topics await illumination through gender studies. Some topics need preliminary gender examination, while others are already at a stage that allows the execution of more advanced feminist research evolving from existing findings. The aim of this collection is to indicate research challenges and to act as a catalyst for a great deal of multidisciplinary activity in the future.

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