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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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The Study of Women in Israeli Historiography *Starting Points, New Directions, and Emerging Insights*

Feminisms are never autonomous but bound to the signifying networks of the contexts which produce them. —Deniz Kandiyoti¹

For about twenty years now, since the mid-1980s, the story of women has begun to seek its place as part of the general story of Jewish-Zionist settlement in Eretz Israel. We have come a long way since then. Male and female scholars turned, simultaneously, to a number of channels, and by uncovering voices and images, set the foundation layers in various historiographic directions: the stories of female leaders, the development of the movements and institutions that women established to promote their issues, and the daily life of the “ordinary” women. During this period, our historiographic world began to be one of foment and ferment. The “general story” fell apart and is still going to pieces; debates took its place: debates over the starting point of the new “story,” and at the same time, the voices and claims of the other stories, which are trying to assume their rightful place on the agenda of the past and the present. These controversies and others were echoed in women’s studies and raised new questions: Will we — and how will we — continue to bring to light the women’s stories as yet untold — and they are legion? How will we integrate their stories in the new narratives that are coalescing, and how will we fit in with the fashioning of the starting points of the new general story or the many, bustling-inchoate stories around us?

This article will attempt to survey the distance we have come, the milestones we have passed, the directions in thinking and research that have opened, and other channels that deserve investigation.

The Sociological-Historical Search

Historical study of women in the *Yishuv* period, the formative time of the new Israeli society, began as a feminist project, as a compulsion of female scholars to get to know and to illuminate the story of women, which was missing—almost completely—from the historical story of the society as it took shape. We wanted to fill in what was missing, to tell what had not been told, to let the mute voices speak. Article after article began by describing what was missing in the hegemonic story: the absence of the figures of women as leaders, heroines; the absence of women's writings; the absence of any awareness of the women's contribution to the community in formation, and the lack of recognition of their unique, different experience. Like many feminist researchers in other societies, we sought "roots," what preceded our current routine life, what preceded our social inferiority, what preceded our attempts at struggle and organization. As time passed, the study of the past began to crystallize. It can serve as compensation for the silencing and as a source for answers to some of our questions.

Yet, the importance of this first stage went far beyond filling in what was missing. Putting women into the picture changed it completely; at first, only in the eyes of a small circle of scholars (male and female) and readers (male and female), but in time, in the eyes of ever-expanding circles. Integration of women through analysis of their subordination on both institutional and personal levels shed light on the inequality of the society-in-the-making. Thereby, the study of women was unavoidably intertwined, from the outset, with the critical analysis of Israeli society. This analysis gathered momentum at the end of the 1970s, and in the 1980s took its place alongside other iconoclastic projects, and became part of a re-examination of Israel society—its nature, its past, and its messages. At the same time, women's studies gave the first impetus toward social history in place of the exclusivity of political and institutional history.

The study of women in Israeli historiography clearly parallels the initial stages of the study of women in other societies: inserting women into the historical story, making them no longer "hidden from history," and telling "herstory"—as shown to us, among others, by Joan Wallach Scott regarding the history of women in the west and by Deniz Kandiyoti in the study of women of the Middle East.² But this step, which seems so obvious on the surface, was complex and had further repercussions. We integrated new actors—actresses—into a story that seemed to have been told already, and by doing so we added a new perspective to the entire story. We added the

“missing sex” to the community-in-the-making, and thereby uncovered a new community, a community composed of women and men, a community whose masculinity was no longer merely an aspect of national renewal but also a pattern of dominance. We traced the root of the inequality between women and men, contributing to the challenging of the myths of Israeli society in general. We moved some distance away, but not a great one, from the institutional, political, public sphere toward the private sphere, toward daily life. These were imperative steps that had to be taken to illuminate vital aspects in the life of women, and while doing so we revealed the almost total absence of social history in the historiography of Israeli society at large. But most important of all: We began — even if it were the most modest of beginnings — to lay a foundation for getting to know the lives and experiences of women, at least of certain groups of women, in the formative period that preceded the establishment of the state.

Informative and Enriching Debates

The historical study of women in Israel, and for the purposes of this article — academic-feminist research — emerged in the late 1970s and in the 1980s out of sociology and history, in a calm, intellectual atmosphere. Israeli sociology was, indeed, tempestuous in those years, but the eye of the storm centered on the power structures that came into being after the establishment of the sovereign state, and the feminine-gender dimension was marginal to the salient issues of ethnic group and class. The pre-State period, at that time, remained outside the eye of the storm, and with it also the study of women in that period. To be sure, this research was accompanied by iconoclasm, but this did not shatter any foundations. Research showed that women had not enjoyed equal rights, as usually claimed, but it seemed that the putative claim of equality had no deep significance, and undermining it was not taken as detrimental to any weighty factor, or hallowed symbol, within academia or outside it.

This relatively serene attitude to the historiography of the *Yishuv* period changed radically in the past decade, from the end of the 1980s. In the stormy, polarized years of the *intifada*, and afterwards of the peace process, understanding of the pre-State period turned into a no less fiery arena than the controversies of the present and the more recent past. The arguments about the nature and character of Zionist settlement went beyond internal academic debate. These debates occupied public figures and authors, journal-

ists and academics, and created a stimulating, thought-provoking intellectual atmosphere leading into new venues in academic-feminist research as well.

The debates became more diversified. Soon there was a relative decline in the study of historical issues and events, and the discussion expanded into historiography itself, its suppositions, its concepts, its methods, and its conclusions. These debates can be divided into two main categories. One revolves around the group that earned the sobriquet of the “New Historians” and around its arguments on the essence of Zionist settlement, while the other category concentrates mainly on arguments derived from social history and from multicultural analysis. The first type—the New Historians’ debate—revolves around historical writing and historiographical discussion that examined and challenged Zionist settlement. The writers focused on examining Zionist settlement through international comparisons, and they particularly discussed Zionism as compared to other national movements and various types of colonial settlement. The New Historians devoted most of their attention to the Jewish-Arab conflict, considering it the central formative factor of Zionist settlement. In the course of doing so, they posed penetrating questions about the very legitimacy of Zionism and its new national identity. Yet, these radical arguments focused almost exclusively on the political elite, the institutional system, and the dominant ideology. Absent from the New Historians’ discussion is any gender aspect at all, and of women in particular, no less than in the hegemonic historiography that they were challenging.

Alongside the claims by this group of historians, much wider-ranging historiographical debates took place. They expressed the aspiration for multiculturalism, that is, for viewing the past (and hence the present) from different perspectives reflecting the separate experiences of groups with different social status, different interests, and different culture, perspectives that send the researcher to the many, varied groups located outside the *Yishuv* society elites.

Some tried to link these two categories of historiographical debate, but the adoption of the multicultural and the historio-social arguments by the New Historians remained, to a great extent, wishful thinking or a declaration of intent.

To sum up, one may point out a number of primary results and conclusions that crystallized in the historiographical debates carried out largely by the New Historians.

- Challenging the ethos and myths of Israeli society, not only in the sense of certain concrete elements of this ethos but through touching upon the nature of the legitimization of Zionist settlement—not only refuting the

claim of equality in *Yishuv* society, but placing question marks on the reasons for immigrating to Palestine and inserting exclamation points on the repercussions that our coming had on others.

- Placing the discussion of the past on the social agenda, not in a concealed, imperceptible manner, but openly and declaredly. As a result, it was possible to begin examining various narratives of the past, comprehending the way in which these narratives took shape and tussled with each other and their significance for the current politics of identities.
- Turning to comparative research in search of similarities and differences between Zionism and national movements and settlement movements in other times and places.
- Preferring the colonial point of view over others as a way for comprehending Zionist settlement; or alternatively, presenting this point of view as one among other vantage points, which provide — in combination — complex explanations for the existence and development of the Jewish-Zionist *Yishuv* in Eretz Israel/Palestine.
- Calling for multiple points of view, multiple narratives, “multiple voices.” Accepting the fact (and even glorifying it) that there are different ways to be integrated into the national, Jewish, or Zionist narrative and that there are other ways to experience the local story — the story of this space, with its cultural, social, and political definitions, and not necessarily through Jewish nationalism.
- Understanding the inadequacy of historiography that does not go beyond the borders of the elites and the boundaries of their endeavors and interests, historiography that focuses almost exclusively on the institutional system, on the relations between the different elites, and on ideological perceptions, and ignores the private sphere and mundane daily life.

The historiographical debates, and the ferment that accompanied them, constituted a productive, inspiring intellectual context for the development of the historical-feminist discussion. At the same time, this discussion itself nourished and enriched the search for alternatives in historical writing. Reference to gender aspects was not uniform. Most of the facts and claims of the New Historians continued to focus on the political elites, in the formal, institutional sense of this concept, and on the political and ideological history, while completely ignoring any gender aspect. Only at a much later stage did scholars begin to apply a gender view to the Zionist movement, its leaders, and their attitudes (as in the works by Boyarin, Gluzman, and Biale), to the Jewish-Arab conflict (in the works by S. Katz, T. Mayer, and J. Peteet), or

Israeliness that takes shape with the beginning of the Zionist *aliyot* (as in the study by Billie Melman).³

The situation is totally different from the second perspective of the historiographical debates, the call for multiculturalism and for “history from below” moving away from the elites. Here, feminist historiography is an inseparable element and from the outset played a central role in the development of this point of view.

Women’s history, like women’s studies in general, took its inspiration from the women’s movement and from the new feminist agenda. Thus the theoretical-academic dimension and the political dimension were interwoven. Interlinked from the beginning were empirical questions, theoretical questions, and political questions, and the discussions of the aims of women’s history dealt, simultaneously and in combination, with these three dimensions. The main aim in women’s history was to integrate women into the historical narrative, or — with slightly different emphasis — to bring their history to light, focusing on the special feminine experience in different places and different times; what women did, what they felt, what they created, how they reacted to their condition, and how they tried to cope with it and change it. The aim, as expressed by Joan Wallach Scott, was “to give value as history to an experience which has been ignored and thus devalued and to insist on female agency in the ‘the making of history.’”⁴

Some of the researchers shed light on women who were active alongside men, or by themselves, in the organized political and social arena. They added women into the historical narrative that had been accepted until then. Others approached ordinary women, daily life, and the nature of the women’s sphere and feminine consciousness. The main theme is this approach was the presentation of women as agents of action. Many studies presented the ideas, expressions, and activities of the women, as individuals and as a collective. The explanations and interpretations developed by these scholars were taken from the area of the feminine experience. That is, they based themselves on the same factors that research had shown were of particular importance in the lives of women — the private sphere alongside the public sphere, personal experience, the family and domestic systems, and both the emotional and physical support systems that women developed among themselves.⁵

This research into women’s history led to the creation of a wide-ranging, rich, and varied literature. The study of women developed to an impressive extent, yet remained a distinct field on its own — new topics, new questions, new conceptualizations, a stirring, provocative, stimulating discussion — but still it seemed that women spoke mainly among themselves. Women’s his-

tory led the scholars in this field to examine critically the existing historiography in general but did not result in great changes in that historiography, or — as Scott puts it — did not lead to a rewriting of history. The dominant perceptions held sway, with the addition of a new field, alongside the other fields. The isolation, or “ghettoization,” dulled the theoretical sting and the political message in the study of women, a message of changes in thought patterns, which was vital when feminine-feminist history was just starting out.

Toward the end of the 1980s, this internal criticism led to a shift of emphasis from women’s experience to an examination of femininity; not femininity alone, but femininity and masculinity, an examination of the social construction of sexuality. In other words, emphasis passed from women to gender, and from the story of women to the gendering of society. Focusing on gender will make it possible to go beyond the limits of the separate feminine story. Gender studies link sexuality, the social definitions of femininity and masculinity, and the structure of power, strength, and wealth in society, which influence the formation of these definitions, their production and/or their change. Thus, sexuality goes straight to the heart of political history, the field that has thus far dealt, almost exclusively, with the public activity of the masculine elites. The essence of feminist history, according to Scott, is in the gendering activity, in the terms of the forces frequently hidden and unseen, which through construction of femininity and masculinity, organize social action and structure.⁶

Most of the researchers welcomed the political, theoretical, and intellectual challenge found in the concept of gender and in its linkage to all social processes. Other female researchers warn of the limits of the “gender” approach. J. Bennett, for example, argued that gender study as proposed by Scott, ignores the study of women as women, moves away from the material reality of women’s lives while giving preference to representations and metaphors, leading to excess intellectualization and abstraction of the inequality between the sexes. Bennett summarizes the issues with the claim that “The hard lives of women in the past; the material forces which shaped and constrained women’s activities; the ways that women coped with challenges and obstacles — all of these things can too easily disappear from a history of gender as meaning.”⁷

And for Us in Israel

And what can we learn from these developments for the historiography of women in Israeli society?

There are many points in common. The isolation of the study of women in *Yishuv* history is striking and blatant. To be sure, initial steps were taken to integrate this research into the forums dealing with Israeli society and its history in a general manner, with the journal *Cathedra* serving as an example, but this integration is still spotty. It was precisely the jubilee year of the establishment of the State of Israel (1998), a year that saw the production of a plethora of anthologies and conferences, that revealed the scant influence of women's studies on the overall historiographic discourse. Besides a number of highly interesting conferences in the field of the study of women in new Israeli history, the "general" meetings continued to deal with the public sphere and the activity of the elite groups, with no mention of women or gender; as if no new insight or any new, vital information had accumulated for integration into the historiographical discourse in order to consolidate a slightly more "general" picture. Is there room to argue, as Billie Melman does, that this relative isolation and disregard derived from the female researchers limiting themselves solely to the history of women, with no attempt at interpolating women's experience into a more inclusive analysis of formative processes in society at large? Or as she writes:

Instead of focusing on the course of the exclusion and marginality, it seems it would have been more fitting to emphasize gender as a principle element in the Eretz-Israel identity and the Eretz-Israel experience as well as a factor that is leading toward change in social organization and in political and cultural modes of organization. The use of gender as a "useful historical category" does not, of course, have to diminish research into the relevant historical sources and their interpretation. Such empirical research is the heart of history — all history — as a discipline. Yet, the use of gender as a topic for research, and particularly as an analytical tool for investigating historical changes, is vital for dynamic historical investigation of the *Yishuv*. This way one is not forced to discuss the story of the "*Yishuv* women's" experience separately or simply as a narrative of discrimination and lack of equality.⁸

I have no doubt that the concept of gender and the way it is used, as Scott and Melman have proposed, can enrich the historiography of women in Israeli society in particular and of Israeli society in general. It will permit us to anchor women's condition within a wider social context and to examine their activities in light of the systems of relations between women and men and between female and male institutions. It will be possible to understand women's perspective, among other things, as a reaction to the attitudes

and perceptions that surrounded them, the perceptions of men regarding women, femininity and masculinity. Another analytical direction to which the concept of gender may be applied is in the examination of the mutual relations between gender and other formative factors such as class, nationality, religion, and ethnic group; and in the case of Israel, for example, the mutual relations between the construction of femininity and masculinity and the feeling of national belonging, Jewish or Israeli, Arab or Palestinian, or the construction of femininity and masculinity through the encounter of different Jewish publics from Central and Eastern Europe, from Yemen, Turkey, and North Africa. On a more innovative level, it will be possible to employ the concept of gender as an organizing principle for the analysis of central processes, institutions, and structures in Israeli society, which thus far have been totally disconnected from the concepts of femininity and masculinity. These varied applications of the concept of gender do, indeed, appear in the literature of the past few years. For example, a number of researchers have dealt with the gender aspect of the perception of the national revival in the Zionist movement. They stressed the Zionist identification of Jewish existence in the Diaspora with weakness, femininity, and distorted masculinity and the identification of national revival with the revival of Jewish masculinity, and the creation of the new Judaism, “muscular Judaism.” As Daniel Boyarin writes: “The Zionist endeavor was to a great extent the turning of the Jewish male into the masculine type they admired — the ideal ‘Aryan’ man. If Zionism’s political mission was to turn the Jews into a nation like all other nations, then the change in the spiritual dimension was expressed in the attempt to turn the Jewish male into a man like all other men.”⁹

Nira Yuval-Davis deals with citizenship and gender, exploring the dual way in which women are included within general citizenship while also being excluded from it, and on how they serve as the indicators for the limits and continuation of the national collective.¹⁰ Sheila Katz has brought the gender viewpoint to an analysis of the Jewish-Arab conflict while illuminating the way that the imagery of femininity and masculinity and metaphors for femininity and masculinity, openly and covertly, were used in fashioning the national discourse in the Arab national movement and the Jewish national movement, and in the obstreperous discourse between them.¹¹

The significance of the new insight that the concept of gender provides for the study of social structures and the reproduction of patterns of dominance mark new directions for the study of women in Israel. Important to remember, however, is that gendered analysis was taken up in the United

States and other countries in which a wide-ranging, rich, varied body of scholarly literature in women's studies had been written a few decades earlier. The situation in Israel is completely different: the research literature surveyed above should be considered initial steps, only the beginnings of "letting the voice be heard," the beginnings of "institutional history," of mundane life and social history — but only the start; a great many areas have not been investigated at all. I will point out a few such directions.

- Life cycle and accompanying aspects: As yet scholars are only beginning to examine basic patterns of women's life cycle and the social perceptions connected to them, such as childbearing and limiting it, marriage and divorce, childhood, widowhood and singleness, sexuality and the concepts of morality, and social institutions that organize and fashion these patterns.
- Beyond the dominant public women. Research has yet to begin to examine women outside the hegemonic groups: members of the petite bourgeoisie or the urban upper class, largely Ashkenazi, members of the veteran Sephardi public, and members of the many oriental ethnic groups — Yemenites, Moghrabi, Bukharan, and others. Few studies have highlighted their way of life, their relations with their environs, with the men around them, and with the other women in the family, in their own community and outside of it.
- Beyond the "Yishuv period." Feminist historical research has not begun to shed light on women's experience that underwent far-reaching changes with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 — and as a consequence of it. This applies to the Palestinian women whose world changed from one extreme to another — whether they remained in their settlements or became refugees in other settlements in Israel or turned into refugees in camps in the surrounding countries; this is also relevant for the female Jewish immigrants who arrived with the mass immigration from Yemen and Iraq, Romania, Bulgaria, and elsewhere, as they grappled with their life experience as women in Israel.
- Beyond the limits of the discipline. The writing of women's history in Israel grew through a combination of sociological and historical approaches, but these should be linked to other disciplines. A number of anthologies have included articles from various fields of research, thus contributing to an interdisciplinary approach, but we must still strive for methods of analysis, research and writing, which will further develop empirical, theoretical, and conceptual cooperation.¹² Such an interdisciplinary perspective can contribute to a more holistic approach to the topic of our study —

women, their lives and their experience. If we now shift the emphasis in feminist historiography from “the voice of women” to the “gendering of society” without a broad, multifaceted foundation of knowledge about women’s lives, experience, perceptions, and consciousness, we can still lose sight of women as “actors” in society with a voice of their own.

One also may wonder whether this conceptual-analytical turnabout is capable of eliminating the isolation of feminist historiography and of abolishing the marginality of the “feminine story.” Perhaps so. The gendering investigation deals with a cluster of social aspects and not “only” with one sector — and therein lies its uniqueness and explanatory power. Yet, it seems to me that the marginalization of feminist historiography does not stem only from “reductive conceptualization.” Factors that are mainly political — in the broad sense of the term — will determine the impact of the feminist perspective on the public and academic agenda. Cultural, social, and political factors also will define and fashion the context in which we continue to develop the feminist-academic discussion. Feminism, or feminisms, are not autonomous, as in the quote from Kandiyoti cited at this beginning of this article. I hope that we will not just be fashioned by the context in which we are operating, but that we will also shape it.