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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Ethnic and Gender Identity of Iraqi Women Immigrants in the Kibbutz in the 1940s

In the 1940s, a few thousand Iraqi immigrants took their first steps in Eretz Israel among the settlements of Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad (United Kibbutz movement). For a large part of these *olim*, the kibbutz was only a way station before they moved on to the city; but there were others among them, mostly individuals who had been members of the Hehalutz Zionist movement in Iraq, who wanted to make their home in the kibbutz and even hoped to see large-scale immigration absorbed into it. These *olim* joined the kibbutz within the framework of some twenty settlement training groups (*gar'inei haksharot*) and a number of youth communities (educational units of Youth Aliyah) from Iraq. Each training group had between twenty and forty members, one-quarter to one-third of whom were young women.¹ The *haksharot* of Iraqi immigrants, similar to those of other immigrants, were part of an extensive system for training youth in a kibbutz toward the goal of establishing new settlements and reinforcing existing ones.

The *haksharah* members lived on the kibbutz itself, in cabins or tents set aside for them, and they worked together with the kibbutz members in the various branches of the kibbutz. The kibbutz appointed *madrikhim* (counselors) for them who helped with the ideological and social unification of the *haksharah* members. In addition, they were eligible to study one day a week or a number of hours each day. Each *haksharah* maintained a separate group framework and managed its own independent social life.

Ultimately, the attempt at "Bavli settlement" (these immigrants were called "Bavli" [i.e., Babylonian] to differentiate them from Kurdish Iraqi immigrants) in kibbutzim failed, and by the mid-1950s only a minimal number of these immigrants remained in them. Also, from among the hundreds of young people who came to the kibbutz as part of Youth Aliyah, during the

period of mass immigration (1949–1951), few stayed on.² For the *olim* themselves, their sojourn in the kibbutz was a formative experience that fashioned their identity as Israelis.

The heroines of this article are the young Zionist women who immigrated from Iraq in the 1940s and who followed the same path to Zionist realization as their male colleagues. In this paper, the process of settlement in the kibbutz will be viewed from the standpoint of these women, while keeping in mind the world of values and culture from which they came as well as the changes in their behavior and identity that resulted from joining the kibbutz. The focus here is on three sets of change:

- The shift from ideological concepts to actual realization: In Iraq the members of the Hehalutz movement had been inculcated in the national and social values of socialist Zionism. But mundane reality in the kibbutz was far less heroic than it had appeared in Iraq. This article will examine the influence of the gap between the ideology and the ways it was implemented in the *hakhsharah* groups.
- The intercultural shift: The ethnic and cultural component in the world of the Iraqi *olot* will be reviewed while examining the shift from the values of a patriarchal, conservative, Eastern society to a society that espoused a utopian, egalitarian, Western ideology.
- The modification in their status as women: In this context, the influence of the change on the immigrants' gender identification will be examined.

To clarify these issues, we will draw a social portrait of the *hakhsharah* members, while focusing on the status of the young women and the factors that enabled their immigration to Eretz Israel and their joining the kibbutz.

A Social Portrait of the Women Immigrants (*Olot*)

The great majority of the *hakhsharah* members belonged to the Hehalutz movement that operated in Iraq from 1942 on. They came from the lower- and middle-middle class, and were sons and daughters of petty merchants, craftsmen, and office workers in civil service or private companies. They were urbanites from Baghdad, Basra, and other cities, and most of them had secondary school education.³

These young people joined the Zionist movement in search of an existential solution during a period of national identity crisis and economic and so-

cial distress. In the 1940s, the Iraqi Jews' feeling of security had been shaken. The pogrom against the Jews of Baghdad in June 1941 and the policy of discrimination and deprivation in distinctly Jewish fields of the economy, such as commerce and banking, created a sense of ongoing crisis. Moreover, knowledge of the Holocaust of European Jewry undermined their sense of physical security, and the youth sought alternatives to the existing patterns of the Iraqi Jews' way of life.⁴

The solution offered by the Zionist movement was a Zionist-Socialist one that set as the ideal *aliyah* to Eretz Israel and realization in kibbutz. The youth were educated in the values of the Labor Movement with emphasis on self-labor and a communal living framework. The young persons saw themselves as the vanguard whose duty was to be the bridgehead for absorbing the mass immigration from Iraq, and the way to do that, they felt, was by establishing kibbutzim — in which, so they believed, the members of their families and other immigrants would find their place.

This portrait depicts the female movement members as well. The joining of the kibbutz framework by these young women, who had been raised in a conservative, traditional society, obliged them to make a personal revolution, which must be viewed against the background of the characteristics of Jewish society in Iraq and the status of women within it.⁵

The Jewish woman's status in Iraq was determined by the family framework, which constituted a basic unit in Jewish and Muslim society there. A woman was greatly dependent upon her family, particularly on her father and her brothers. Civil and political rights were denied her, and from the time she was born she was educated toward fulfilling the roles that society thrust upon her, those of wife and mother: marriage and running a household, bearing children, nurturing and educating them.⁶

But from the 1920s on, after Britain had conquered Iraq, it was possible to discern cracks in the traditional structure of Jewish society resulting from the penetrating influence of Enlightenment ideas and the beginning of modernization processes. Most noticeable were changes in the field of education. Operating in Iraq was a modern Jewish education system, founded in the second half of the nineteenth century by Alliance Israélite Universelle. Its curriculum equipped the pupils with European languages and educated them in modern values. The Alliance wanted to accelerate the modernization process in Jewish society by educating the girls, in an attempt to replicate among the Jewish communities of Islamic countries the accepted values of conservative, bourgeois society in middle and western Europe toward the close of the nineteenth century. Among other things, it wanted to estab-

lish the image of a new woman — educated, homemaker, helpmeet, outstanding in diligence and cleanliness, gentleness, and modesty. They expected her to raise and train a new generation of educated, enlightened people.⁷

At the end of the 1940s, girls made up about one-third of the eighteen thousand Jewish pupils; among the economic and social elite, there were already by that time a number of women who had studied medicine or pharmacology in universities outside Iraq.⁸ Yet, beyond providing dignity and prestige, education's influence on the basic situation of the woman was limited, mainly because a young middle-class woman usually was not permitted to go to work. There were few working women among the educated, and when they married, they, too, left their jobs. Most of the young ladies sat at home after completing their studies, waiting for their intended bridegroom.⁹

In this situation, the educated young women were torn between the Western worldview along with the set of expectations they had been imbued with in school and the traditional values instilled in them by their families and according to which they were supposed to behave. These conflicting messages frustrated them. Some of the girls wanted to rebel against the path drawn for them by their families, and part of them found an answer to their personal distress within activities offered by the Hehalutz movement, the only Zionist movement operating in Iraq in the 1940s. In the Zionist national and social platform, they saw the way to solve the Jewish problem in Iraq and, at the same time, also the problem of their status as women. Among the female members of the movement were high-school students and high-school graduates as well as illiterate young women from the lower class for whom membership in the movement gave them a chance for evening courses and the acquiring of basic education, in Hebrew. Likewise, there were girls who wanted to escape from social and economic distress or from a family or personal problem, and immigrated to Israel with the help of the Zionist movement.¹⁰

The active participation of the young women and the responsible roles they filled as group leaders and in the movement's institutions, together with their exposure to education that advocated equality and the special emphasis placed on the equality of women, led to the cultivation of the members' feminist consciousness, to enhanced self-confidence, and to enhanced recognition of their right to stand up for themselves by waging an internal struggle against traditional, conservative thought. Simultaneously, a change also took place among the young men who belonged to the movement; they were taught to change their patronizing, arrogant attitude to women, to consider them equals, and to thereby help them acquire self-confidence and gar-

ner strength for the conflicts at home. Internalizing the egalitarian system was difficult for the men, no less than for the women.

The more egalitarian values were internalized among the *haverot*, and the more that equality pervaded movement activities, the greater became the gap between the two worlds in which the young woman lived. After a few years, she had to choose between marriage and *aliyah*. The first route typically was taken by a large part of the *haverot*. The second, rebellious path was characteristic of the activist members and of *haverot* who came from Zionist families. It was not easy to obtain the parents' permission enabling their children's immigration to Israel, and it was especially difficult for their daughters. In some cases, a bitter struggle was waged within the family. In general, however, the girls emigrated with their brothers or other relatives, or followed after them, even gaining a supportive attitude from their parents.

The heroines of this article, who rebelled against the traditional-oriental framework in the name of new social values identified with Zionism and European culture, revolted as both women and as oriental women. Among them was a nucleus of self-aware young women with great stamina and devotion to continuing the struggle to achieve their national and social goals. To lay out a picture of the world of these *haverot*, we will deal with areas that played a central role in their milieu and daily life after they had immigrated to Eretz Israel. We will describe these areas while focusing on the young women's point of view at that time as well as in the memories they drew on in retrospect many years afterwards. With the help of this material, we will attempt to discern what changes took place in the way of life, endeavors, and public involvement of the *haksharah* women in Eretz Israel in comparison to their lives on the eve of their immigration and to see how these changes influenced their identity.¹¹

The Shift to Kibbutz Life

Zionist-Socialist consciousness and the perception of the kibbutz as an ideal framework for realizing national and social aims were basic components in the worldview of the *haverot* in the *hakhshara*. They greatly admired kibbutz life and the encounter with this lifestyle led them to write enthusiastic praise, such as the following lines that one young woman wrote at the end of the *hakhshara* year in Giv'at ha-Sheloshah.

If we look a bit at kibbutz life, it seems that the aspirations we dreamed of for so long are now being fulfilled in this new lifestyle. There is no difference be-

tween poor and rich, pauper and patrician, all live together a life of freedom and cooperation, with everyone sharing one grand goal — redemption of the land. . . . I never thought I would live this way: among many fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters who live jointly a cooperative, egalitarian life, on a large piece of land on which are found Jews from all kinds of countries, who work by the sweat of their brow in agriculture. . . . By our lives, the lives of a laborer in the kibbutz, we feel the beauty of nature, the taste of communal life, the realization of Zionism, and building up the country. . . . One forgets the difficulties in this type of life through love of nature, labor, and homeland.¹²

The ideological enthusiasm reflects the educational indoctrination process the immigrant trainees had undergone. The kibbutz was presented as the ultimate and only way for achieving both the national and personal solution. The longer the young people had been in the movement in Iraq, the deeper was their attachment to kibbutz life. City life, in contrast, was depicted as the continuation of Diaspora life and was vehemently disparaged. Special contempt was poured on the suburbs of Tel Aviv, particularly Shekhunat ha-Tikvah — which in those years was the first refuge for immigrants arriving from Islamic countries, among them many people who had abandoned the kibbutz. This vilification of urban ways was an effort to reinforce the identity of the young immigrants with the kibbutz, its way of life, and its values.¹³

Egalitarian Labor

As for all other new people joining the kibbutz, for the young *olim*, too, the physical labor was hard and the initial stages of adjustment were exhausting, but these hurdles were anticipated and perceived as part of the realization process and as a test every pioneer had to go through and overcome. Working the land was seen as an ideal that embodied something of the return to nature, purity, and joy of life, and by means of which the personality of the new Jew would be constructed.¹⁴

Idealization of the life of labor is found in most of the articles by the young immigrants, young men and young women alike, particularly in essays written during the early stages of *hakhsharah* life. In a letter to her brother, who had remained in Basra, Shoshana Murad [Mu'alleim] described her feelings on her first day of work in Ashdot Ya'akov:

We weeded and this was the first in my life that I held a hoe in my hand. How happy was I from the work, from the captivating landscape, and the bright sun and the fresh air. . . . I worked, singing, for at least two hours, and later my

back ached and I couldn't open the fingers of my hand. I wish you could see me now, you would see my happy face and hear my laugh, since I would be yearning for that time.¹⁵

Ruth Iliya described working in the tomato field:

"To faraway fields, to work" I went out at sunrise. . . . I live in an egalitarian commune. Before me are distant fields, wide and verdant. And in the middle of this plot, I began to work. This was the day for tomatoes. . . . In the morning I weeded Section A, bent over all the morning hours, destroying the foes of the tomatoes. The tender seedlings need enough nourishment. After the weeding I opened the water. The young seedlings drink their fill and are merry with their bright green color. . . . Working in the garden is not just labor. It is also an ideal and thought and even part of the activity of the world labor movement.¹⁶

Despite the difficulties of working in the fields, or perhaps precisely because of them, this effort became a symbol of change and of the pioneering, egalitarian outlook of the young women; it is what motivated them to demand their being employed in "masculine" field work. One of the male members of the group explains their motives: "It was the *haverot* themselves who wanted to engage in working in the fields, because in the Diaspora they had been housewives and when they came to Eretz Israel they wanted to make the greatest revolution of their lives. They longed for the field and plain, the trees, the landscape, and the wide open spaces. . . . And in the beginning they did achieve their goal but only for a short time. It so happened that no one wanted to work in the services: sanitation, kitchen, dining hall, laundry, and so on."¹⁷ This explanation informs us of the nature of the relations that coalesced between the men and women in the *hakhsharah*: The men did not mind if the women stepped into the "masculine" jobs, but they were opposed to doing their part in areas defined as "feminine." One of the *haverim* even reported that the dispute over this caused a number of women to leave, because they refused to work in the services.¹⁸ The women's battle was apparently short-lived and ended with the men's victory.

But the young women did not always fight for their right for equal work. At times they simply hoped that they would be made part of it. The process is illustrated in an unpublished essay by Ruth Iliya.¹⁹ This *haverah* tells about taking apart fencing and moving materials out of an army camp located near the kibbutz when the army forces were about to be evacuated from the camp. The narrator saw the *haverim* leaving on tractors and a pick-

up with tools in their hands: “I envy them, I said to my friends, why didn’t they make us part of it? They don’t need the girls, one of them answered. I was heartsick but continued to work.” A short while later it became clear that they did need the girls. Apparently by order of the army the evacuation was to be completed by evening, and everyone was called to help with the work. “We were overjoyed,” points out the writer, and she describes the joy of labor: “Our hands were scratched, blood flowed, and our faces dripped with sweat. I paid no attention to it,” and she sums up: “I will never forget this day, the first day I felt the taste of life in Eretz Israel, the first day we worked outside with the fellows, the first day my friends sensed the responsibility they bore and began to think about their future.”²⁰

Ruth’s closing words reflect the situation that developed in the *hakhsharot* and that also prevailed in the realm of labor in the kibbutz — a gender division of labor between men and women. The “hard” work, the professional, prestigious work with field crops, which was perceived as productive endeavors, efforts that produce a marketable, profitable product, were considered the bailiwick of the men; while the drudgery of the routine, exhausting service jobs — ones the men considered easy — generally were the lot of the women.²¹ In the Syrian-Babylonian *hevrat no’ar* (youth community) in kibbutz Bet Oren, the relations between the boys and girls became extremely tense because of this issue. A young woman who worked in the clothing supply branch described the situation: “The boys bothered us a lot. They saw [me] sitting on the chair all day and thought I was wasting time, but they did not know how much your back hurts after sitting bent over all day, and how red your eyes get from doing repairs.”²²

The shift to physical labor and to services engendered problems of adjustment particularly for the middle-class girls, since in Iraq they had had little to do with running the household, and the housework usually had been done by the older female family members or maids and servants.²³ Such difficulties are described by Dalya, a *hakhsharah* member in Bet Ha-Shitah: “For the young women the work was harder, and especially for me. No matter where they assigned me I didn’t manage to finish a day’s work without tempers flaring. In the kitchen I did not know how to wash the floor and the dishes, in the clothing supply shed I was bored from sitting nine hours, in the duck enclosure I had no friends except mother Elkind and the ducks. So they arranged for me to try out in the garden. I was supposed to take the hoe and use it around the cabbage plants. What a sore sight was the row they gave me to do. . . . I finally learned how to hoe, and I liked this work detail . . . the last experiment was the in the laundry. Here I was successful.”²⁴

Dalya's description reflects the turnabout in the female immigrants' way of life, and set against this background is a picture of the past. Dalya, who had been a teacher in Iraq, remembered longingly: "It was a clear night. I went back to the tent and lay on my pillow. I began to think about what I had to do tomorrow, which classes I would be seeing and what I had to correct and to prepare. I went to the table to take a book and suddenly I drew my hand back: I remembered I was no longer a teacher but just a simple laborer. For a minute I was sad about this change, I thought that then I had been happy: I read a lot, I gave parties, I competed with the others in what I wore, I saw many movies, but the main meaning of life had been missing."²⁵ It must be noted that the working conditions of the teachers in Iraq were not easy and their salaries were minimal; Dalya's memories, however, were suffused with nostalgia, and we can learn from them mainly about the sharp pangs of adjustment to her new life. In some cases, in response to these adjustment difficulties, the kibbutz refused to place the girls in permanent branches of work, arguing that they did not take the work seriously. This attitude hurt the *haverot* and their motivation.²⁶ Another difficulty derived from their new social situation, which made it necessary for them to take economic responsibility for themselves: For the first time in their lives the girls had to worry about their livelihood—while in the traditional society, as part of the extended family, their fathers, brothers, or husbands had been responsible for it, and not the women.²⁷

So it was that the fight for equality in work constituted the spearhead of the women's struggle for equality in the kibbutz. The way they sought to implement this equality was by conquering the "masculine" type of jobs in their attempt to prove that they had considerable strength even for tasks demanding physical effort. They asked to work in the field and with the field crops, and they considered working in the services, the customary jobs of women in the kibbutz, denigrating.²⁸ But in the end, the *haverot* of the Iraqi *hakhsharah* achieved no more than the kibbutz women, and they, too, worked in the dairy barn, the vegetable garden, and the chicken coop, but they were found mainly in the services: laundry, clothing supply and repair, kitchen, childcare, and so on.

Social Life

The *hakhsharah* members considered kibbutz society as a lofty cultural model, not only because they had been educated in kibbutz values in the Zionist movement, but also because it symbolized for Eastern immigrants

the Western culture that they admired, after having been exposed to it in the modern schools of the Iraqi Jewish community. A member of the *hakhsharah* in Giv'at ha-Sheloshah invoked this concept in an essay printed in the kibbutz newsletter: "To be sure, the physical labor is rather hard, since we have not gotten used to it yet, but the new way of life and *its level of culture* give me the strength to stand firm in the face of all these difficulties."²⁹ The kibbutz was also aware of this feeling: "The young fellows feel that we are Europeans and they want 'to catch up' to us, to rid themselves of feelings of inferiority."³⁰

Yet, despite their education toward life in the kibbutz and their basic willingness to change and adapt and in spite of their preknowledge and preparation for their new life, the immigrants found it difficult to understand the complexity of kibbutz society and to decode the set of internal symbols that molded it. The shift from a closed, hierarchical family structure, in which each member had a set, clear role and standing, to the more open and egalitarian kibbutz framework, whose internal hierarchy was not unequivocal nor obvious, stimulated great admiration along with astonishment and confusion. One of the young women wrote: "In the early days it was hard for me to understand and take in everything. I looked and there was the *mazkir* (chief kibbutz administrator), the physician, the teacher, the laborer—all eating at one table in one dining hall; we were not used to such equality in Iraq. . . . And even more: each member can express his opinion at the general meeting, the young women take part in social life as a complete equal to the young men and other things like these that seemed strange to us."³¹ Obviously, the young immigrants wanted to apply the kibbutz way of life to the *hakhsharah* society, including the set of relations between men and women. Moreover, it seems that the immigrants not only wanted to do so but were even asked to do it, by means of the overt and covert messages transmitted to them by kibbutz society through the *madrikhim* and other kibbutz members.

In line with that, the *haverot* of the *hakhsharah* were asked to demonstrate social involvement, to participate actively in the meetings of the *hakhsharah* group, and to volunteer for the various committees alongside the young men. But adjustment to this joint system was difficult, for both the men and the women. The young women found it hard to shed their feelings of inferiority, insecurity, passiveness, and timidity toward initiative in which they had been educated and to adopt assertive patterns of behavior. For most of them, kibbutz life seemed "too free."³² The boys had difficulty in coping with the girls going beyond their traditional roles and, even so, encouraged them to

do so — under the influence of the movement education and the social pressure of the kibbutz, and even the movement's leadership in Iraq.

The changes demanded of these young people affected every aspect of life, including dress, sleeping arrangements, friendship and intimate relations, observing Sabbath and holiday, and more. Implementing them created internal dilemmas. Shortly after they came to the kibbutz, the girls had to replace their clothing, since items had worn out and because the dresses they had brought from Baghdad were unsuitable to their new location.³³ The clothing storehouse offered them blouses, dresses, pants, shorts, and so on, sewn according to the best fashions prevailing in the kibbutz at the time. The shorts troubled and confused the young women who, on the one hand, wanted with all their might to look like kibbutz members, and yet, on the other, were aghast at the extreme abrogation of the rules of modesty in which they had been raised. Naomi, a member of the *hakhsharah* at Gevat, wrote in her diary: "The first second I was taken aback, as if they had dressed me in *sha'atnez* [biblical prohibition against wearing a combination of linen and wool] 'How can I dare show my legs?' I was terribly embarrassed, I asked for a skirt, and only after a long while was I bold enough to wear pants."³⁴ The reservations of another young woman, Shoshana Murad, were soon shed. The day after she reached the kibbutz she was already wearing shorts. This is how she describes it: "First of all I was embarrassed to leave the room but I made myself do it and went out and no one laughed at me . . . since all the girls were dressed like that and the pants were more comfortable to work in."³⁵

In a number of *hakhsharot*, the idea of common sleeping quarters was raised. In Ashdot Ya'akov, a few of the fellows brought up the issue: "We spoke with the young women and young men about arranging to have the men assigned to the same rooms as the women. Many members agreed, so in each room we put two young men and two young women. Some of the women did not agree, so we left them by themselves because we did not want to force them. . . . At first this was hard, hard for young men and for the young women. The members complained, but everything is all right now."³⁶ From other *hakhsharot*, whose members were younger and had not had any previous Zionist training, came reports of a different set of relations. In the *hakhsharah* at Bet Oren, which was rife with harsh conflicts between the adolescent boys and girls, there were thoughts about dividing the group into two separate ones, but ultimately integration between the sexes was achieved.³⁷ The case was the same in the Bavli *gar'in* at Ein ha-Horesh; a female kibbutz member who was their counselor tells of the difficulty in incul-

cating them with Zionism and socialism when the system of relations between the sexes had not yet changed, “when it was not yet clear that the *haverot* of the *gar’in* who refused (and that was already an achievement) to clean the boys’ rooms did not deserve to be hit, and the girls did not understand that they were allowed to participate actively in the discussions relevant to them.”³⁸ In another example, a *gar’in* member at Sdei Nahum left his shift because he had been assigned guard duty with a girl.³⁹

The issue of sex education also created inner struggles, or as one of the *haverim* put it: “Extremely delicate, incisive questions were put.”⁴⁰ At Ashdot Ya’akov, a proposal was made to discuss the topic at a general meeting of the *gar’in* members, arguing that the fellows were thinking about this issue or that they did not know anything about how to relate to a young woman or girlfriend. But the *gar’in* rejected the idea, claiming that the members were not yet mature enough for a public discussion of this subject and that it was preferable to have a private talk with each of the people grappling with this topic.⁴¹

The shift from a society in which the norm was complete separation of the sexes to one in which there prevailed a great deal of sexual involvement was extreme. It seems that the change among the Bavli members came about in imitation and obedience to the norm in the kibbutz and not from true self-awareness, certainly not from organic growth of the idea. Moreover, we can assume that the relations between the sexes were more intense than the impression given by the newsletter, and even from reports in the *hakhsharah* journals. In private letters, there are allusions to young men and women who were expelled from the *hakhsharah* for behavioral problems.⁴² We can presume that neither the *madrikhim* nor the group members themselves enjoyed raising these topics publicly, certainly not in material distributed to the kibbutz members. Even when the issue was raised in the *hakhsharah* newsletters, it was done to demonstrate how the problem had been solved.

An additional problem involved religious observances. Most of the immigrants came from traditional homes where religious customs were observed but which had a lenient attitude to the weakening of religious observances among the younger generation. It was accepted that clerks employed in public service worked on the Sabbath, some young people ate nonkosher food outside the home, and many of them only attended synagogue on holidays.⁴³ These secularization processes were not accompanied by opposition in principle to observing tradition and there was no antireligious ideology. In the Kibbutz ha-Me’uhad settlements, to the contrary, the nonobservance of religion and tradition were an integral part of the fashioning of a secular way of life and *weltanschauung*. From the writings of the *hakhsharot* members, and

from talks with them, it turns out that, in general, this issue did not bother them, and they had no complaints about nonkosher food, working on the Sabbath, the lack of a synagogue on the kibbutz, and so on. So, for example, they used the money they earned on the Sabbath to create a common cash pool, and they spent Tisha b'Av dancing and making merry.⁴⁴ However, some *hakhsharah* members were distressed by this problem, mainly when they were asked to do something, such as working on the Sabbath; a number of them refused to do it, while others did their duty but were privately tortured by their infraction of religious law.⁴⁵ The memoirs of a *haverah* who was asked to cook on the Sabbath tell us: "The decision was very hard, because I tried for as long as I could to not transgress the Sabbath, and here they were forcing me. A decision that it was very hard for me to make my peace with."⁴⁶

The secular, permissive kibbutz lifestyle drew criticism and opposition from the parents of some of the *hakhsharah* girls. These parents, who had immigrated to Eretz Israel in that period, suggested or demanded that the young women join them in the city — anything so they should not continue to live in a framework that shook the foundations of traditional life. Other relatives, too, joined the circle of those applying pressure. The greater the pressure from family members and the more the difficulties and reservations about kibbutz life grew, the greater the dimensions of leaving the kibbutz became. This problem was not directly referred to in the *hakhsharot* newsletters despite its decisive importance for the fate of all the *hakhsharot*. Instead, we find statements by the young women who withstood the temptation and pressure and stayed on kibbutz. So, for example, Tzivyah Nahum went to visit her parents in the city and refused to remain with them: "With heavy heart I got up in the morning and said good-bye to my mother, but not to my father, because I was afraid he would not let me go back to the kibbutz."⁴⁷ Shoshana S. headed for Tel Aviv to visit her sister and her cousin who had preferred to live with relatives in the city. Their meeting was full of confrontations, and Shoshana showed great determination: "With my cousin, who did not hold her tongue when trying to influence me to stay with her in the city, I talked harshly. I reviled her as being a hypocrite and a traitor to the cause and to the way we had chosen in common before we immigrated to Eretz Israel and all my speeches to bring her back to the pioneering path and to a life of equality and labor were in vain." Shoshana, too, concluded her visit by secretly leaving the house, without saying good-bye.⁴⁸

From the foregoing, one forms the image of a group of youths who already in Iraq had wanted to cast off many of the traditional customs that they

had grown up with. Upon their arrival in Eretz Israel, they were open to assimilating to the cultural, social, and ideological values prevailing in the collective society they wished to join. The first stage of the integration process was characterized by the annulment and cancellation of many of the old values, values of culture and tradition. This is particularly prominent in the status of women, because of the extreme shift from a conservative way of thinking to a socialistic, revolutionary concept.

Most of the written material describing kibbutz life upon which this article is based was produced during the first few months of the young women in the training program, or at the most at the end of a year or a year and a half. Moreover, they written at the request of *madrikhim* who belonged to the kibbutz and under their guidance; they generally reflected the positions expected from the group members. Yet the vast majority of *hakhsharah* members, young men and young women, left within this period or shortly afterwards. After they had gone, few of them continued to write. In the city, they were absorbed as individuals, each one for himself, each one in his own family. Some of them left embittered, others took quitting the kibbutz as a personal failure. None of them explained their motives for leaving, and if they were critical of their life on the kibbutz, they did not express their feelings on paper. They also were not asked to continue to write for the *hakhsharot* newsletters, and apparently did not write elsewhere. If they did, we have not come across the material.⁴⁹

How can one explain the contradiction between their great enthusiasm for kibbutz life and the phenomenon of leaving? Many of the young people left owing to the friction that developed between the *hakhsharot* and the absorbing kibbutz against the backdrop of the nonegalitarian approach the kibbutz applied toward *hakhsharot* members regarding work, studies, and social life.⁵⁰ Of note is the fact that this friction was not unique with the Iraqi immigrants and the same complaint was also heard from the *hakhsharot* of European immigrants, who had arrived in Eretz Israel in the same period.⁵¹

Internal difficulties compounded the causes for leaving. The relatively short period of time the immigrants belonged to the movement in Iraq, and their *aliyah* without training and with insufficient ideological crystallization, together with imbalance between the sexes because of the small number of girls, made it difficult for a pioneering *gar'in* to coalesce in the kibbutz. In addition, the frequent leaving of members and the intaking of new ones did not make social consolidation easy.⁵² The *haverim* found it difficult to adjust to the physical labor, communal life, initiative, and responsibility demanded of them, and even to the secular, permissive way of life.

Compounded on top of all that was the influence of cultural differences. Some of the Bavli immigrants felt that the kibbutz members did not understand their mentality and were not relating with a warm and friendly attitude; the kibbutz did not serve as a home for them. Some were insulted by the demand that they speak Hebrew while the kibbutz members spoke Yiddish among themselves in front of the immigrants. Casting a pall over the network of relations were the Ashkenazi veterans' feelings of superiority and the Eastern immigrants' feelings of inferiority, as noted by one of the immigrants: "In the large settlements intimate or social relations are not forged between our members and the kibbutz members, and for the most part they [our members] feel themselves to be strangers, and lower class."⁵³

The girls were especially distressed by a feeling of loneliness and alienation, a yearning for the large, protective family they had left in Iraq together with a feeling of strangeness and being cut off in the kibbutz. Their despair was particularly deep, as described in the diary of one of the young women: "I was sad because of the distance from my parents and family. I find myself among strangers, no matter what, and I have not yet been accepted well by the group or by the kibbutz. . . . I was, after all, just an inexperienced girl who had left home for the first time, and with such suddenness I changed my country, way of life, society, and behavior. . . . We were hopeless and did not know what tomorrow would bring. Despite it all, I sometimes took myself in hand and I decided gradually to feel like I belonged to my surroundings. . . . Many were the sighs and the heartache, and I had no one to whom to pour out my anxieties."⁵⁴ When this young woman's parents reached Israel, she went to live with them in a *ma'barah* (temporary settlement transit camp for the mass immigration after 1948) — preferring the familial framework; many years later she continues to wonder if this was the correct choice.

It seems that the willingness to change and accommodate that characterized the initial stage of absorption of the Bavli *hakhsharot* members in the kibbutz did not persist for the great majority of group members beyond that period. The gap between the cultural, social, and ideological world of the kibbutz and the world of the Zionist immigrants from Iraq could not be bridged.

Conclusion

The story of the Bavli *gar'inei hakhsharot* in the kibbutzim in the 1940s constitutes a chapter in the attempt of Iraqi immigrants to integrate into *Yishuv*

and Israeli society and in the attempt of that society to assimilate the immigrants and to fashion them in the image of the “new Jews.” The model of absorption into the kibbutz was the most absolute, the most demanding of all absorption models in the country, and at times it did not leave the individual any breathing space. Since this model encompassed not only social and national content but also cultural content, its application to immigrants from Muslim countries, despite their fierce desire to accommodate to it, ultimately roused internal opposition to it. What repercussions did the experience of the young women in *hakhsharot* in the kibbutzim have on their national, ethnic, and gender consciousness and identity?

Shortly after their immigration, the Bavli young people discovered that there were other settlement models that coincided with their national approach and still did not oblige them to a revolutionary change in way of life. The city, in which most of the Jewish population in Eretz Israel lived, enabled them to maintain their Zionist-national identity and at the same time to return to an urban way of life, similar to the one they were familiar with from their country of origin.

Moreover, the kibbutz was found to be a closed ethnic unit whose members reacted intolerantly to cultural difference, and the immigrants were required, in both explicit and implicit ways, to integrate into kibbutz society and to be assimilated within it. Of course, the immigrants, too, wanted to integrate with all their heart, but after the first wave of enthusiasm, it became clear to most of them that they were not ready to relinquish their values and customs, and they were not capable of adopting the values of the kibbutz. In the end, they refused to give up their identity. The kibbutz-leaving immigrants went to live in concentrations of oriental population in the cities, the majority in the big city Tel Aviv, especially in and around Shekunat ha-Tikvah. Here they went back to working in fields of commerce and craftsmanship as they had in their country of origin, they kept in touch with their extended families, they observed their religious tradition at one level or another of strictness, they prepared their traditional foods, they spoke in Arabic among themselves, and they listened to the Arab music they liked. All of this diminished the scope and depth of the personal-social revolution demanded of them by socialist Zionism, and they still maintained their national and cultural identity.

As for the gender aspect, we must note that many innovations in kibbutz life attracted the young women: the recognition of their right to equality and their right to decide their own fate, their liberation from the burden of the dowry and forced marriage, the breaking out from the frameworks of the

extended family and the reduction of its power to set limits for the family's girls, too. A portion of these young women did develop a deep sense of belonging and obligation to the kibbutz way. And from among them came the founding women of the kibbutzim Be'eri and Neveh-Ur. A few years later, they had to leave the kibbutz, the same as their male colleagues, to help in the absorption of their family members who had arrived in the mass immigration.⁵⁵

But the greater majority of the young women found it difficult to adjust to kibbutz ways and had reservations of one kind or another about abandoning traditional customs, about the free relations between the men and women, about the antireligious attitude, and so on. They felt alienated and estranged from the kibbutz members and the kibbutz way of life; they could not accommodate to it, they did not ask for or want the type of equality accepted in the kibbutz, they did not feel any obligation toward the feminist struggle and they were not prepared to pay the price. They withdrew from the *hakhsharot* within a period of a few days or few weeks to one of a few months. Those who remained in the kibbutz made do with "feminine" jobs and were characterized by passivity in the public-social arena. Sooner or later, they left too.

At the same time, *hakhsharah* membership was a formative period in the fashioning of the gender identity of the young Iraqi female immigrants, those who hastened to leave as well as those who persisted and stayed on the kibbutz. Their experience in a way of life aspiring for equality guided them as they built the next chapter of their lives when they married, for the most part to men from the same ethnic group; and even if they chose to be homemakers and to raise children, as did most Israeli women in the 1950s, many of them did go out to work at that stage or at a later one in their lives, some of them fostered public activity of varying scope, and one of them served as a minister in the Israeli government.