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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Social Networks of Immigrant Women in the Early 1950s in Israel

Uprooting, immigration, and absorption have been studied and continue to be investigated intensively by sociologists. They have been treated with various types of theoretical emphases. In the 1950s, when sociological research was institutionalized in Israel, the main focus was on integration processes and social uniformity. Little attention was paid to the different, even contrasting roles of those carrying out the absorption and those being absorbed.

The position of women in the absorption processes received scant attention, even though numerically women constituted about 50 percent of all immigrants.¹ Rereading the raw research material and interpreting its results affords some insight into the absorption processes of women.

One of the studies examined during that rereading is the first one dealing with the topic of immigrant absorption, carried out by students of a research seminar in the Sociology Department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (in 1950).² The students interviewed the first immigrants who settled in the Baqa quarter that had been abandoned by its Arab inhabitants in the wake of the War of Independence.³ Baqa previously had been an upper-class neighborhood of large homes. However, due to prevailing exigencies, immigrants were packed densely into the neighborhood, at times with several families housed in a single dwelling. The cooking facilities, toilets and bathrooms, halls, living, and dining rooms usually were shared.

Another study was carried out in the Talpilot *ma'abara* (pl. *ma'abarot*; temporary immigrant camps) set up near Baqa in 1957. People in the *ma'abara* were housed in abutting tin huts. Thin dividers inside the hut separated two

small rooms, and the edge of the structure served as a cooking corner. The toilets were shared by a number of inhabitants from several huts. A group of cabins in the middle of the *ma'abara* housed public institutions: a clinic, a mother-and-child-health station, a grocery store, an employment office, a social welfare office, branches of political parties, a center for cultural activities, and synagogues. Between the tin huts, *ma'abara* residents set up sheds in which they offered tailoring, shoemaking, diverse utilities, and some grocery products. Between the rows of huts were narrow dirt paths that turned into streams of mud whenever it rained.

The personal journal of a teacher, who documented the experience of working in a neighborhood school at that time, is an additional source of information.

In immigration studies, it has commonly been assumed that women are less exposed to the demands of the absorbing society. Underlying this assumption is the idea that finding a livelihood and providing means for sustenance was entirely — or mostly — the responsibility of the men. Women did continue to function mainly within the family system. Yet, a fresh look at their daily routine shows that remaining bound to the domestic scene left women with flexibility in arranging the schedule of their working day, and often free time which they used to nurture neighborly relations, visit the various absorption institutions, and build new social connections.

Women's accepted pattern of activity is affiliation through "networks." Network activity is expressed through interactive contacts in which the individual can choose with whom, when, under what circumstances, and for what purposes a person will maintain social connection. A network has no defined borders and can be expanded or contracted according to a change in its goals or needs, and according to the individual's choice. Some networks link members located within a given framework, such as a bureaucratic organization, an extended family, or the like, while others include members from various social frameworks. Networks are distinguished from one another by the nature of the contact, the degree of mutual accessibility among network members, the number of those included, and the frequency of the actual cooperation. Other data such as gender, age, education, profession, and status influence the types of networks' activities.⁴

A fresh look at these studies reveals various numbers of social networks, which assisted in the absorption process of women in Israel in the 1950s: These networks connected neighbors and friends, providers and recipients of services in bureaucratic organizations, and disparate members within the family group.

Neighborhood Networks

The crowded residential patterns contributed greatly to social contacts among inhabitants who shared a hut, a neighborhood, and a *ma'abara*. Privacy was almost nil, and women shared — willingly or not — knowledge, hardships, and suffering and took part in each other's joy and sorrow.

The activity pattern in the female neighbors' network revolved around mutual visits, in pairs or in groups. Neighbors gathered for routine conversations and shared leisure time. These meetings were an important source for passing on information about the absorption authority's services, assistance, and cultural activities.

Through these networks, immigrant women were exposed to the varied ethnic-cultural heritages that they had brought with them from their countries of origin. Newcomers thus encountered a rich, complex socio-cultural mosaic, which did not always lead them on one-way route toward integration into the absorbing society — as shown by one of the interviews:

I didn't use to go to the *mikveh taharah* (ritualarium), I went there before my wedding, and I went there after I gave birth to my son Abraham. But here some of the neighbors often go to the bathhouse Johanan Ezra near the Market. So I go, too, even if it is not my week [to do so]. . . . My husband is happy and gives me money for the bathhouse. . . . The lady there says that when children come out of the bathhouse, it's like they have the Divine Spirit.

This woman, who did not previously visit the *mikveh*, began to do so because of the influence of her fellow immigrant neighbors. Another example of neighborhood networks was women who took initiative and looked to supplement their housework, mainly as cleaning women in the homes of veteran residents in various Jerusalem neighborhoods. Some worked as seamstresses or hairdressers. They were given these jobs mainly through the help of their female neighbors in the quarter and in the *ma'abara*. To make it possible for them to go out to work, the women were helped by female neighbors — in babysitting, helping with shopping, and in contact with the absorption organizations that operated in the neighborhood and the *ma'abara*. Some women told their husbands little about how much they worked, even to the point of keeping the fact completely secret. As one interviewee put it:

Mazal brought me to a neighbor of the woman she worked for. I thought I would work there once. I was very frightened. I had never cleaned for some-

one else. I left the baby with Rachel and went with Mazal. I worked hard and the lady was happy. So I went another time. Now I work for her every week. I give Rachel a bit of money. She can't work, she has small children. So now she's the one who watches other children when we go. We go together and we come back together, and we laugh along the way. With some of the money I bought things for the house, and some I leave with the lady to keep for me.

These women who took on part-time work gained economically. To be sure, their income was small, but it gave them a certain degree of independence. Financial help for running the household was likely to influence their standing within the family. Their acknowledged as well as hidden savings gave them a feeling of economic security. As one interviewee said, "Maybe one day I'll buy myself some gold."

In addition, going out to work opened a small window for them through which they could observe the domestic-family way of life of veteran residents—a lifestyle that was usually unknown to other family members, especially to their husbands, fathers, and children.

The information they gained did not necessarily lessen the gap between veterans and immigrants. Even if women were at times exposed to the intimate life of the veterans when they crossed their threshold, they were still serving as maids in the homes of their mistresses. The veteran families dictated the range of social distance and the degree of influence to a great extent. Yet, whatever the women learned by observing and scrutinizing their surroundings, contributed toward their integration.

Women's Networks as Consumers in Bureaucratic Organizations

The "Tipat Halav" health services were intended for treating mothers and children. The examinations and medical care were in the hands of physicians, while nurses were in charge of providing guidance and explanations as well as giving vaccinations and weighing and measuring the infants.

Observations of the meetings between nurses and immigrant mothers reveals a pattern of hierarchic relations, in which many times the superior knowledge and authority of the nurses was demonstrated in relation to the inferiority and neediness of the mothers. Nurses berated the mothers or even punished them by withholding certain rewards if their instructions were not followed, and gave compliments—and sometimes benefits—to obedient women.

The immigrants did not dare to disagree openly with the nurses, but in practice they did not always follow their instructions. To satisfy the nurses, they often demonstrated obedience, since doing what they were told at times earned them certain rewards in kind, such as cans of powdered milk, baby clothes, and other products that were distributed at the health station.

Often, the content of these meetings between mothers and nurses went beyond treatment and guidance. The nurses gave the women advice on educating children and even on spousal relations. It happened that they would tell a woman things like “don’t listen to him,” or even “divorce him.”

The Tipat Halav waiting room served as a meeting place, a kind of club, which the women frequently visited, whether or not they needed advice or medical treatment. This room was heated during the winter, and tea and cookies were served. Occasionally, nurses joined in and sat with the women for a few minutes. These gatherings, accompanied by jokes and laughter, worked to attenuate the authoritative status of the nurses. The formal framework became even more relaxed when a nurse visited in the *ma’abara*. Then the immigrant women would play hostess, offering some delicacies and giving little gifts, usually of their own handiwork. Some women were so bold as to propose traditional medical remedies to the nurses and charms for health and long life.

School Networks

An elementary school was established soon after the immigrants arrived in their neighborhood. The teaching staff exhibited a high degree of volunteerism, and the hours of study were usually longer than allotted for a regular teaching day.

The school left its mark on the neighborhood by mobilizing the pupils for various local activities, such as taking out the garbage, planting a garden, and putting up signs in Hebrew. The school administration and the teachers were in regular contact with the parents and tried to involve them and make them part of different social activities. Festive ceremonies for holidays were opportunities for gatherings of the pupils and their parents. Occasionally, neighborhood residents also joined in.

Primarily the mothers were present in the school: They volunteered to help with various activities, such as maintaining cleanliness and decorating classrooms as well as preparing refreshments for holidays and ceremonies. The mothers gave the teachers small handmade gifts, such as baked goods,

scarves, and vests, and sometimes also amulets containing inscriptions and blessings. The teachers visited their pupils' homes in times of joy or sorrow. In some instances, social relations developed between the mothers and the teachers across the defined boundaries between teacher and parent. One teacher wrote in her diary: "The fact that I am single bothers some of the mothers here. But it turns out that even blessings and amulets don't help at this stage. So today Avraham's mother came with a suggestion for a match: a rich merchant from Turkey, who is not so old." The presence of the mothers in the school exposed them to various cultural content and the social substance of the absorbing society. A fringe benefit paid to the mothers for their involvement was the increased attention given to their particular children by the teachers and staff. In practical terms, these mothers also filled the role of auxiliary staff ready to assist the school.

Networks of Mothers and Children

Joining together in the shared spaces of school, neighborhood, and home, mothers and children created exclusive networks of cultural exchange. The mothers absorbed from their children linguistic skills and cultural insights. Owing to their functions outside the home, fathers lacked this same exposure. The children who attended kindergarten and school acquired the Hebrew language within a short time. Hebrew became the common language of discourse between the children, within the family, in the neighborhood, and in the *ma'abara*. Within this context, the language, which served as a cultural mirror of the broader society, penetrated into their parents' culture and way of life. Because of their domestic roles, mothers had more exposure to the worlds their children brought home.

Since mothers were more involved in school life than fathers, a complementary link was forged for them pertaining to activity between these two networks. One example of this is the songs that were learned in school and heard repeatedly at home: A number of mothers became very familiar with these tunes and lyrics.

Still, things did not always go smoothly within these networks. Differences in tradition and culture, varying concepts of discipline and parental honor, preference for the teacher's opinion over that of the parents, and embarrassment over the customs and behavior patterns brought from the countries of origin created difficulties and friction between children and parents. One of the pupils from the *ma'abara* tells that:

There was tension between what we saw at home and what went on at school. Firstly, the language. Our parents did not know Hebrew. . . . Secondly, the values: What we saw at home was not like what we saw at school, and what we heard at home was not what we heard at school. It wasn't just a generation gap but, in the main, a culture gap. These were two totally different worlds.⁵

Yet, despite the differences in culture and ways of life between themselves and their children and the price paid for the resulting arguments, the mothers still gained from joining the networks that linked them and their children. The fathers were somewhat marginalized, while the mothers were empowered.

Summary

The patterns and routes of immigrant absorption in Israel are not uniform. The difference between land of origin, the variance between types of immigrants, and the period of immigration influence the absorption process and social integration. Differences in the absorption stages are discernible within the same society and even among the same type of immigrant groups. As noted, studies conducted in Israel during the 1950s did not pay sufficient attention to gender differences in the absorption process. A partial explanation of that deficiency may be the reliance upon quantitative and institutional measures as the main characteristics of absorption, with less attention paid to the personal and human factors.

The absorption process of women who are housewives is ostensibly limited, in contrast to husbands, who are integrated into the employment system, and the children, who are integrated into the education system. A housewife draws to a great extent on experiences brought into the home through the mediation of the husband and children. A fresh review of absorption conditions and policy in Israel of the 1950s, however, tells us that the female networks, together with formal absorption institutions, helped women learn about the social and cultural characteristics of their new society. A number of conditions facilitated this absorption.

- For example, the overcrowding in houses, particularly in *ma'abarot* huts, caused physical difficulties, but also contributed to close social contact between inhabitants of the houses and *ma'abarot* dwellers. This connection had two opposing facets: It caused friction on one hand but provided company on the other. The closely packed dwellings served as a pool of re-

sources for women to find female friends and mutual aid as well as for the transmission and receipt of information.

- Additionally, the absorption process in the 1950s was accompanied by the establishment of a comprehensive organizational system that operated in the spheres of welfare, culture, and education. The organizations provided services to the immigrants while at the same time functioning as a means for linking them to the absorbing society. Because of their availability, it often happened that the women were the main consumers of some of these organizations, mainly in the areas of welfare and culture.
- Furthermore, at the beginning of the 1950s, the absorption authorities set up a wide-ranging instructional and educational system aimed in particular at children and youth. The mothers, who were housewives staying close to their children, inadvertently also gained from its fruits.
- Finally, openings in the labor market enabled the women to find part-time work that did not demand professional skills and that matched their housework well.

Homemakers were not usually given the opportunity to become part of formal organizations, which were reserved mainly for men. Yet, it seems that the lack of formal frameworks, and activity in the form of networks, was compatible with the ways that women functioned and contributed toward their absorption. These networks gave women opportunities for choosing and joining social frameworks that were more flexible both with regard to the amounts of time available to them and to their lifestyle.

Place, time, range of activity, and points of emphasis distinguished the networks within the absorption system from one another. Yet, more than once, activity in one framework actually complemented activity in another. Contents stressed in one network were emphasized in another. Retroactive analysis of the networks prohibits a detailed scrutiny of all its structural components. Still, it is clear that the authoritative structure is one of the differentiating marks between the networks and influences of its framework of activity. Networks of women neighbors were built on equality and based on friendship and mutual aid. In the bureaucratic networks, authority and decision-making were in the hands of the service providers, while in the network that linked mothers and children, the ultimate authority was that of the mothers.

The different authoritative structure in each of the networks allowed for different ways of learning and integration. An egalitarian system provides more possibilities for expanding contacts and content. In the bureaucratic networks, authority resides in those responsible for providing the service.

Those who act in accordance with the norms of the organization, and those in need of the organization's services must adjust to these norms and rules of behavior. Despite the flexibility that characterizes activity within the frame of networks, the style of activity in the bureaucratic networks leaves little room to maneuver. The main reward in that type of network is in the benefits the service provides. At times, when the activity pattern exceeds the formal definition of its role, the network members gain additional benefit. In authoritative networks such as that of mother and children, the authority holder can determine the activity pattern of the network. Since it is not bound to organizational authority, she can set the time for activity and its content.

A re-reading of these studies uncovers three types of networks that enriched the women's ability to learn and act in the course of absorption — each network according to its method of operation and the position of the woman-mother within it. Equality, acceptance of discipline, and the status of authority influenced the limits of operation of each network, its scope, and the spheres of its activity. Even with the lack of detailed knowledge about each of the networks, the information elicited from the research material on the manner of their activity helps fill in the picture of the absorption of women immigrants in Israel in the 1950s.

The pattern of absorption is difficult to gauge, because the accepted methods of measurement used as social quantitative measures (place of employment, wages, class mobility, etc.) apply to men but not to women. Those measures are also used to determine family status and the social evaluation of a family's successful absorption.

Analysis of the material cited here highlights a special method of the absorption of housewives, who continue to fill the traditional roles to which they were accustomed in their country of origin. Despite what seemed to be limiting conditions, a small window was opened for women's social and cultural absorption into the Israeli society, namely, by means of the networks described. Further investigation of the integration of these women into society requires an examination of quantitative statistical data, which consistently reveal a striking difference in employment and income between men and women. Beyond the quantitative measures, one may add other measures discussed here, even though they are not necessarily quantitative. One may conclude that the ways that women were integrated in the 1950s possibly alleviated somewhat the absorption difficulties, both for them and their families. Yet, it is difficult to discern just where these absorption paths led. Still, it may well be that the children of the immigrant women of the 1950s reaped the fruits and social benefits of these networks.