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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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A “Woman-Human”

A. D. Gordon’s Approach to Women’s Equality and His Influence on Second Aliyah Feminists

U ntil the appearance of contemporary Jewish-feminist thought, there was one Jewish philosopher for whom the feminine image was central in his perception of Divinity; it was from this image that his perception of ethics and religion derived. This thinker was A. D. Gordon (1856–1922), one of the first leaders of the Second Aliyah and the kibbutz movement.¹ This article focuses solely on the practical ramifications of a theological worldview: Gordon’s social and political perception of women’s status in society and in the family and the extent of Gordon’s influence on the spiritual world of Second Aliyah women and on their political perception, particularly on that of the women’s laborers’ movement leaders, such as Rachel Katznelson and Ada Maimon.

Ideological Positions

Gordon’s statements on “personality and family closeness” that appeared in the article “Foundations for the Regulations of the Moshav Ovedim,” published in 1921—a few months before his death—illustrate the degree of nebulosity and complexity of his thought on the issue of equality between men and women:

The entire structure of her soul, like the entire structure of her body and its shape, as well as her role in nature, situate the women’s personality as one of the primary components in the creation of the family and the next generation. . . . In this respect the woman’s power is much greater than the

man's, since she is the one who carries the baby, gives birth, and suffers through the process of the offspring's formation and raising the child, she is a mother. This is her most supreme freedom and right. However, she has not yet achieved it and, therefore, has not yet found herself. Until today she was, and still is, the man's disciple. She regards man's life as a symbol and a model for her own rights, and she values her rights so long as they resemble the man's, so long as they allow her participation in man's public life. In this attitude one can see to a certain degree the spirit of our time, the wish to instill the spirit of public life into family life instead of introducing the spirit of the family into public life. Nevertheless, in order for the woman to liberate herself from man's tutelage, so that she may know these things for herself from life, from her own experience and failures, one must not deprive her of her complete freedom and right to participate in all aspects of life, private and public.²

A similar argument, on the importance of stressing feminine uniqueness in the feminist message, is cited today by many feminists such as Gilligan, Noddings, Irigaray, Kristeva, and others. But Gordon, in contrast to today's feminists, does not indicate how women should be involved in public life after attaining self-awareness.

Apparently, Gordon was the first to recognize the obscurity and complexity regarding the subject in the article itself, which appeared in *Ha-Po'el ha-Tza'ir* in November 1921, while Gordon was in Vienna for treatment for cancer. His correspondence with his daughter, Yael Gordon, at that time attests to his doubts and perhaps even to second thoughts about the article's contents, from the minute the issue reached him. His article appeared, apparently inadvertently on the part of the editor, alongside the piece by Ada Fishman (Maimon), "On the Question of the Woman Laborer." Fishman complained in her article of the sweeping discrimination against women among the laborers in Eretz Israel. She cast historical blame for the discrimination between men and women on the women for not participating in earning a living. She summed up her thoughts as follows: "All of us clearly see (we believe in it) that the fulfillment of our ambition to create a working society without exploiters or exploited can only become possible if the daughters like the sons, the men like the women, will bear the yoke of labor and life to the fullest extent."³ In a letter to Yael that Gordon sent from Vienna, he wrote that "the remarks in Ada's article are essentially just and her claims are legitimate in the main, in light of today's situation, yet I allow myself to think that a woman who is her own student would express things in a different spirit, with different emphasis, and her demands, too, would

then take a different form and tone, and for the sake of unity — perhaps also a different nature.”⁴

Gordon’s criticism of Fishman’s concept of equality involved the passage in the message calling for “instilling the spirit of public life into the family.” As Gordon had said, he aspired to instill the spirit of the family into public life. This line of thought came from his overall thinking, which attacks human cognitive and behavioral processes that had resulted in such great alienation between man and his community and between man and himself. In this sense, Gordon saw in the spirit of family closeness hope for the human race, and in the woman, a facilitator and promoter of this spirit. But, he felt that only the women themselves should determine and decide their own fate; society and its institutions have no place in setting limits on them.

This approach led Gordon to support women’s suffrage and to attack — in his article “After the Quake” (1920) — the Orthodox groups in the *Yishuv* that in the name of “holiness” intend “to negate human rights from the woman.”⁵ In the same article, he mentions Deborah the prophetess who was a judge among Israel, and he calls upon the *haredim* (by this term he means all Orthodox Jews) to influence the Israeli national spirit so that it would raise women like her on whom they could also rely. This owing to the fact that they would “not become defective in any way, not in modesty and not in supreme holiness, whether they will not participate or whether they will participate in assemblies with men.” Despite Gordon’s unequivocal stance compelling the granting of human rights, including suffrage, to the woman, in this article, too, he falls into the trap of ambivalence. He does not realize that it is impossible to bridge the tremendous gap between his basically egalitarian stances and the unequal, stratified perception of mankind in Jewish Law — as perpetuated by Orthodoxy. This unsuccessful attempt to bridge the gap also completely ignores the reservation in the Talmud (Megillah 14b) regarding the overly assertive figure of Deborah the prophetess that is expressed in the Rav Nahman’s statement: “Haughtiness does not befit women. There were two haughty women, and their names are hateful, one being called a hornet [Deborah] and the other a weasel.” The Talmud grants the title prophetess to women such as Abigail, wife of King David, because of his seduction and faith in the political future of her future husband, but when it turns to discussing women such as Deborah and Huldah who functioned and led the nation as prophetesses, it expresses overt reservations and finds it difficult to accept the fact that they were public leaders. An additional problem that arises from Gordon’s plea to the Orthodox to develop women such as Deborah, in his terms, is the nuance of doubt one gleans from these

statements concerning the greatness of the leadership of his soul mates the *halutzot* — labor leaders.

The Biographical Aspect — Family Life

Regarding every aspect of Gordon's connections to the women of the Second Aliyah, the term "soul mate" is not a metaphor. At the same time, we should first say something about Gordon's connections with the women in his family. Aharon David Gordon was his parents' sole remaining son, after his four siblings died in childhood. According to the testimony of his friend Yosef Aharonowitz, Deborah Gordon, Aharon David's mother, was a wise, educated woman whom "distinguished people would consult for advice."⁶ His closeness to his mother intensified, apparently, owing to the intellectual tension with his father; his daughter, Yael Gordon, explains in a letter to Yosef Aharonowitz that her grandfather, Uri Gordon,

was not an unrelenting zealot but if, in his presence, someone should transgress one of the mildest commandments, he never held his peace. Sometimes his arguments with his son were very deep and tempestuous when the son [A. D. Gordon] would air his idea that it would be better to annul certain commandments for obvious reasons. At such moments A. D.'s mother would be on guard and trembling from tip to toe with agitation, she would beg them to stop.⁷

Even though A. D. Gordon had observed the commandments when in the Diaspora (in Eretz Israel, too, he kept the Sabbath), he gradually left the rigid Orthodox framework. Gordon was involved in arranging for "modernized" schools and "he was the first," according to Aharonowitz, "to try to place girls' education on a par with the boys'." He taught his daughter Hebrew and Jewish subjects, no differently than he taught his son. Later, Gordon helped Yael, who was a Hebrew teacher, to establish a girls' school in Haschavato, the town where they lived. The foregoing indicates his gradual taking exception to Orthodox Jewish law while he was still an observant Jew.

We know little about Gordon's wife. Surprisingly, she receives scant mention in their daughter Yael's memoirs. Feygle Tartakov-Gordon was Gordon's paternal cousin. From the age of fifteen, while a yeshiva student, he lived in her hasidic father's home, in the town of Obodovka. He became engaged to Feygle and they married about three years later. The couple had seven chil-

dren, of whom two survived, the daughter Yael and the son Yehiel Michal. In the early years of their marriage, the Gordons lived near the bride's parents, but Gordon's serious controversies over religious issues with his uncle, who was also his father-in-law, prompted the couple to move to the Mohilna farm where Gordon's parents lived.⁸

In a tragic way, Feygle Tartakov-Gordon played a decisive role in her husband's decision to immigrate to Eretz Israel. According to Yael's testimony, after the sale of the farm that was owned by Baron Ginzburg (a relative of Gordon's), the family was forced to return to Obodovka, near the family of Feygle.⁹ Gordon, who had kept the accounts for the farm, became unemployed. In the memoirs that Yael Gordon wrote in 1947 (and which have never been published in their entirety), she notes that Gordon first planned to emigrate to America, "but Mother tipped the scales by announcing that she did not agree to go to America but only to Eretz Israel."¹⁰ The fact that Feygle came down on the side of Eretz Israel is very interesting and diminishes somewhat the myth of the elderly pioneer who left everything for his *aliyah* to Eretz Israel. Yet, she was a tragic figure, as we have said, since Feygle Tartakov-Gordon paid for this decision with her life. Gordon preceded the rest of his family by immigrating to Eretz Israel in 1904. Some four years later, he was joined by Yael, and about a year after that Feygle arrived. The son Yehiel Michal stayed behind to continue studying in the Obodovka yeshivah (and eventually died in a typhoid epidemic). The united family almost settled in En Gannim, but only four months later, the mother died of a serious disease not described in anyone's memoirs. Feygle Tartakov-Gordon was buried in the old cemetery in Petah Tikva. As far as we know, Gordon had no intimate relations with any other woman following her death.

The closest person to Gordon in the last twenty years of his life was his daughter Yael; she had been a partner in his educational projects in the Diaspora, in Zionism, in his pioneering, and in his intellectual world, sometimes as the first reader of his writings. In his book *Ha-Yahid*, E. Schweid determined that Yael "sacrificed much of her private life for him. And she also loved and admired him all her life. But truth be told: she was not capable of taking part in his spiritual life, and the demands he made upon her by his very closeness to her were more than she could endure."¹¹ The indirect evidence provided by Chaya Rutenberg about her talk with Yael Gordon, around 1915, when she worked for Hannah Maisel at Kinneret, indicates that Yael apparently gave up marriage to a man who did not go on *aliyah* to Eretz Israel because of Gordon's reservations about the match.¹² Yet, in all of Yael's writings there is no evidence that Gordon's closeness to her and his

demands upon her were beyond her endurance. On the contrary, in her letters to him she complained of great loneliness and the lack of ongoing connection with him, and she asked that he write to her more often: "You well understand how much I need your letters."¹³ Her statements to the First Women Laborers' Convention reflect, on the one hand, the infusion of her father's expressions and ideas, while on the other, the unequivocal egalitarian aspect she gave to those expressions that her father had coined but had refrained from making crystal clear:

We are aspiring to the equality of the woman and to her liberation, which will give her the opportunity to fill her roles as both mother and a human beneficial to society. And for this we must aspire especially in our young society that is forming in Eretz Israel through the desire of the nation to maintain its self-concept while preserving its "ego" through labor and creativity. The young Hebrew women who come here, beside coming to play their national role as daughters of our people, want to find themselves here, the "self of the woman-human" for which there is no more fitting place in the world to find in it the root of its soul and to uncover [it] than in the workers' corner in our land.¹⁴

The expressions "mother and human," "labor and creativity," and "woman-human" are all Gordonian concepts that were given feminist meanings in the words of Yael Gordon. Yet undoubtedly here, too, as in every web of family relations, there was great pain in the father-daughter relationship. Anyone reading between the lines discerns that in the letters from Gordon to her and about her one sees a great deal of insensitivity and lack of appreciation of her. Even in the letter that he wrote in Vienna, with his response to Ada Fishman (Maimon)'s statements, he demonstrates callousness by saying that a woman is first of all the one who carries the baby and gives birth. Even if motherhood in Gordon's writings is a broad philosophical issue, his very writing these things to Yael, who never married or gave birth, shows great emotional insensitivity. She, of course, chose to ignore these nuances of meaning. In another letter from Gordon, sent from a convalescent home in Safed about a year earlier, he reveals callousness to his daughter's sensitivities: In the letter, he quotes what Yael wrote in her letter about "the beauty and blessing of labor." Instead of praising her feeling or at least ignoring what she wrote if he found it offensive, Gordon exposed his criticism of her statements in his public letter to Deganyah: "the beauty and blessing in labor and the harmony among workers are very delicate flowers to which every unnecessary touch is difficult, for which the coating of words does not always fit."¹⁵

At the same time, we cannot know why Yael Gordon never married. We may suppose that her fate was similar to that of other Second Aliyah women whose aspirations for equality and agricultural work along with their ideological commitment prevented them from linking up with a spouse, by choice or by necessity. From her letters, we see that she lacked self-confidence, and we may presume this was also expressed in her relations with men. In her letter from Migdal (12 Heshvan 5644 [1913]), she repeatedly complains that she does not have faith in her own abilities.¹⁶ Gordon’s letters echo the pain of loneliness that his daughter and some of her friends bore. Scrutiny of their loneliness leads him to ponder the need to change family structure, as part of the yearned-for utopian vision. In his article “*Mitokh Keri’ah*” (From Reading; 1915), he writes: “One of the factors detrimental to the lives of the young [male] laborers is certainly the lack of family life . . . to what extent their remaining bachelors until their hair turns white, brings a blessing to the lives of others, let others judge . . . if there is not some wisdom here — there old age here! Old age in youth . . .”¹⁷ Owing to his perception of the heterosexual family as the foundation of human and social life, Gordon could not conceive of the possibility of choosing a life of singleness, for it may have been that some of the unmarried women among whom he lived preferred it. We may assume that a part of them did want to marry and raise a family but had not found the right man. The bulk of Gordon’s anger was directed toward his male colleagues, Haskalah writers and their secular-Zionist admirers, in whose statements blaming Jewish tradition for being solely responsible for the discrimination against women, he saw more than a pinch of hypocrisy. “Without family life,” he thought, “a nation will not be built.” Yet he still admitted that family life, like various aspects of human life in modern times, requires change: “A young man can only see life with the woman he loves and with the entire world, which this life opens for him and instills in his heart. But if new life is sought, then also family life must take on new shape and new character. That is, relations between the man and the woman that are greatly natural.”¹⁸

Biographical Testimony — Gordon’s Connections with Pioneering Women

As he saw his readers, they were a public of brothers and sisters.¹⁹ Even in his article on the revival of Hebrew, Gordon stressed the fact that the women had led the language revolution by speaking more Hebrew than the men.²⁰

He supported the idea of establishing a Hebrew university (1913) as a solution to the problem of assimilation, and he wrote about its designation as an institution for education of young men and women as obvious; and when writing about the problem of unemployment among the Second Aliyah immigrants, he asks: “Are we not obliged to make sure that each young man and woman who come to Eretz Israel to work, will find work and an environment for a life of labor?”²¹

Evidence of this emotional-ethical stand appears repeatedly as a thread running through the memoirs of the *halutzot* of the Second Aliyah. Tehiya Lieberzohn remembered that Gordon supported her when she persisted in demanding that she be allowed to engage in agricultural work.²² Hannah Chizik described him reading chapters of the bible to the women while they worked late into the night in the kitchen.²³ The most colorful depiction appears in the words of Eva Tabenkin, reflecting A. D. Gordon’s view of the daily life of the *halutzim*, his unique dynamics with them in general and with the women among them in particular:

What was Gordon for us? . . . For each one who went right from school to this Kinneret, scorching in the *hamsins* (severely hot days), stinging with its mosquitoes on its enchanted evenings, to the harsh conditions next to the bread oven in the deep of the night, to the laundry boiler that blinds your eyes with its non-stop steam of stinging nettles, when Gordon would do laundry with us or bring a lantern to the oven to give us light — then everything turned into an important imperative of life, and confidence that your life is full of meaning, that your strength will be enough, that you, too, are — one arm “in the effort of a thousand arms.”²⁴

From this we learn not only of Gordon’s spiritual strength in his attitude toward the groups among whom he stayed, but also of his working together with the women in the routine maintenance jobs in the *kevutzot*: in the laundry, the kitchen, next to the oven, and so on.

In light of the foregoing, it is not surprising that at the founding assembly of the Women’s Labor Movement at Kinneret, held around the same time as the convention of Galilee Workers in 1915, Gordon was one of four men invited to it (in principle, the gathering was closed to men), with Joseph Busel of Deganyah, Eliezer Yaffe, and Benzion Israeli of Kinneret. The four male invitees were selected on the basis of their sympathy for the women’s struggle for equality, or “from among the sympathizers with the woman worker from the beginning” as Benzion Israeli put it in his memoirs (incidentally, he does

not mention that he was among those invited to take part); Joseph Busel and his wife Hayyuta were known for their egalitarian marriage.²⁵ In contrast, there certainly were some men who were disappointed at not having been invited to the assembly, such as Berl Katznelson.²⁶ Since there are no minutes of this women worker’s gathering, we are forced to make do with the testimony of two of the organizers about A. D. Gordon’s remarks at it: Rachel Katznelson-Shazar and Ada Fishman-Maimon, who later described his speech in totally different ways. In her essay, Rachel Katznelson expressed her disappointment from his remarks: “This time I saw Gordon in all in his intellectualism and his distancing himself from life. I entered the room and heard his voice. This time his voice was an old one. When Gordon speaks from the heart—his voice is young.”²⁷ Her words corroborate the vagueness and internal tension in Gordon’s position on the status of women as expressed in his writings. If, as we may assume, Gordon lectured on his philosophical and religious attitudes and the connection between them and the issue of femininity and family closeness, then it is no wonder that women, who were daily struggling for equality at work and for a reasonable attitude from contemptuous comrades, left disappointed from the lack of practicality in his speech.

Ironically, it was precisely Ada Fishman-Maimon who wrote positively, in her book *Tenu’at ha-Po’alot be-Eretz Israel* (The Women Laborers’ Movement in Eretz Israel), about Gordon’s appearance before the convention attendees. She describes the same speech to the gathering as follows: “Among those taking part in the convention was A. D. Gordon. In his remarks he asked to reinforce the faith in the heart of the woman worker. Even if now, they do not find enough understanding on the part of their [male] comrades in considering the importance of the woman laborer at work and in society, this understanding, even if it takes time, will surely come.”²⁸ These statements, too, coincide with what we know about Gordon. The essence of his support for all the spiritual, class, and national political struggles was always emotional and personal; expressing emotional support for the women who had gathered sounds natural and apt for the essence of his relations with his [female] friends.

It was Gordon’s fate, as perhaps it is for any decent thinker, to be interpreted in contrasting ways. The interesting thing in these testimonies, and particularly in Fishman-Maimon’s, is precisely in the way she incorporated Gordon into her egalitarian-Jewish world view— as the daughter of a rabbi, a person well-versed in Jewish law and lore, an upholder of Jewish tradition, and an incontrovertible feminist-socialist all her life. In response to an article besmirching her in the Orthodox daily newspaper *Hatzofe* (31 May 1953),

when she was a Knesset member—an article that attacked the fact that she herself had carried a Torah scroll at the ceremony for bringing Torah scrolls into the synagogue at the agricultural school that she had founded, Ayanot—Fishman-Maimon wrote the following:

I admit that I well understand the bitterness of the author of the article. It has finally become known in our country that Hapoel Hamizrachi and its followers do not have a monopoly on observing Jewish tradition, and that there are institutions and individuals in the Histadrut who actually know how to revere the traditions of their forefathers. And yet [why didn't the writer of the article quote] also the last rows of my article that point out that in Ayanot "prevails the spirit of the late Rabbi Kook and the late A. D. Gordon?"²⁹

She goes on to quote the sixteenth-century code of Rabbi Karo, Shulkan Arukh, Sabbath Laws, chapter 282, section 3, that "all go up to be one of the readers of the Torah Portion including a woman or a minor," and she argues: "And if it is permitted according to the Shulkhan Arukh to be one of the readers of the Torah Portion, is it not fitting that she should also have the honor to carry a Torah scroll and to be appointed a *dayyenet* or judge in the rabbinic courts to insure protection for women in issues of marriage and divorce? And are we not obligated at all to educate our children in this spirit of acknowledging equality, for all of us are created in the image [of God]." ³⁰

Fishman-Maimon's statements are fascinating in themselves for the way she integrates her interpretation of Jewish law in her confrontations with the Orthodox establishment and for addressing the general public in Israel. For our purposes, it is important to see that she saw herself as continuing the way of Rabbi Kook and A. D. Gordon in her methods of interpretation, in her political struggle, and in the egalitarian-Jewish education to which she dedicated her life. Of course, it is doubtful whether Ada Fishman-Maimon was a successor to of Rabbi Kook, whose attitude toward Jewish law was essentially uncompromisingly Orthodox in its unequal approach toward women; but her choice of A. D. Gordon was correct; and this is on the basis of a close reading of Gordon and his non-Orthodox attitude to religion and Jewish law and his anti-hierarchical thought. Yet, in contrast to Gordon, Fishman-Maimon strove in her speeches (especially in the Knesset) and in her educational and political activity to adapt Judaism and Jewish Law to a contemporary reality of equality between men and women, since she understood that the confrontation with Jewish heritage was linked to the issue of the woman in Eretz Israel no less than occupational struggles.

Gordon hoped that the Orthodox “would pour some of their national spirit” over the nation by putting women in positions of leadership and that this step would promote justice among the Jewish people. Like him, Fishman-Maimon argued (in her Knesset speech on 21 May 1952) that “I do not come to oppose the Rabbinic Office or the Rabbinic Law Courts. I am not at all certain that a secular court would be more just.”³¹ To correct the injustice of discrimination against women in Jewish law, she suggested appointing *dayyanot* — judges to the Rabbinic courts — basing herself on the precedents of Deborah the prophetess and the Talmudic stories about Beruriah the wife of Rabbi Meir, for example. Obviously, in theory these ideas are correct, just as theoretically the world of Orthodox Jewish law could take the lead in everything related to equality between women and men, as Gordon had expected. But even in their own time, the women workers had spoken for themselves and in contrast to the optimistic basic premises of both Gordon and Fishman-Maimon.