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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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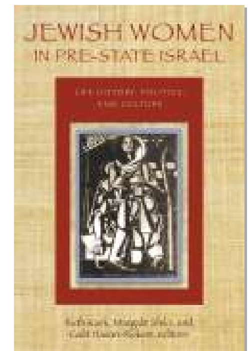

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❦ *Henry Near*

What Troubled Them?

Women in Kibbutz and Moshav *in the Mandatory Period*

This study is based primarily on articles written by women members of kibbutzim and *moshevei ovedim* in their movements' periodicals from 1919 onwards. Though not an exhaustive study of the status and feelings of these women, it sheds much light on the concerns and attitudes of the active, literate elite and gives a detailed picture of developments in this, the formative period of the kibbutz movement.

The Kibbutz

The Period of Silence

The periodicals of the kibbutz movements appeared continuously from 1921 onwards. Of almost fifteen hundred articles published between 1921 and 1929, there were only eight on "the question of the woman" [*ba'ayat ha-havera*], three of them by men; and, indeed very few written by women at all—mainly on such matters such as "children and parents" and "the pregnant woman's diet." Only beginning in 1930 was the matter discussed relatively intensely.

In 1936, thirteen years after the foundation of Beit Alpha, the first settlement of the Kibbutz Artzi movement, Meir Ya'ari, the unchallenged leader of the movement, said: "At long last our women are beginning to speak. They have begun to express their bitterness, their aspirations and their efforts. . . . 50% of the members of the Kibbutz Artzi are women, and they have been thrust into a corner."[1] The causes of this silence can be seen best from a broader perspective.

Utopia, Post-Utopia and Gender Equality

Like every intentional society, the kibbutz was a utopian community: It claimed to be the embodiment of a vision shared by a group of people, crystallized well before they reached Palestine, under the influence of the ideology of the pioneering youth movements, fragments of information about the Zionist settlements, and the thoughts and emotions of idealistic youngsters at a formative stage in their lives. This society would be free of discrimination of any sort, including gender discrimination.

Feminist attitudes were part of the mindset of male and female leaders of the labor movement. The work of the liberal and socialist feminists, Russian feminist literature, and other works found their way to the youth movements through many channels. In this literature, the concept of "sexual equality" had four distinct aspects: political equality — women's right to vote and be elected; economic and personal equality — liberation from economic dependence on the husband; equality of occupation — women's right to choose their professions and advance in them according to their talents; and sexual liberation — freedom of speech and action in sexual relationships. The concept of a society in which all these aims would be realized was translated into practical terms in the ideal of the *halutza* (pioneer woman).

> The ideal was the woman who took part shoulder to shoulder with the man in the hardest tasks, created new branches of work, rode a horse, danced, took life by storm. . . . For them, work was a sacred obligation. However bad they felt, unless they had a fever they would go on working to the limits of their strength.[2]

In other words, they strove to be like the male pioneers. Such women fitted well into the early kibbutz, which claimed to be based on equality between men and women. And, indeed, in many respects this claim was not far from the truth. Women's right to participate in general meetings, to speak and to vote, was self-evident from the very beginnings of the kibbutz; from 1920 onwards, women were full members of the kibbutz and did not depend on the men for their living; from the time when Miriam Baratz "conquered the cowshed" by milking the cows without help from a man, women's right to participate in the "conquest of labor" was recognized as legitimate and was often a major factor in the economic planning of the settlement.

With the creation of the communal educational system, the kibbutz

came close to the ideal of the family in a socialist society as conceived by Bebel, Engels, and others: couples were united by love alone, while the traditional functions of the woman — child care, laundry, and cooking — were executed by the communal system.

This was exceptional not only in the *Yishuv*, but in the world. The struggle for women's suffrage was not successful in Europe or the *Yishuv* until the mid-twenties, and the woman in town, *moshava*, and *moshav* was entirely dependent on her husband for her livelihood.

Thus, the kibbutz was an egalitarian society par excellence, particularly in comparison with others with which its members were familiar. This is one explanation for the women's silence. The post-utopian syndrome — the belief that current reality matches the original ideal — combined with real and comparative achievements to blunt the critical faculty and stifle protest.

This phenomenon was repeated in every generation. In the early 1940s, Lilia Bassevitz, one of the leading fighters for gender equality in the kibbutz movement, wrote of a meeting with a young woman who expressed feelings similar to her own. "I was so glad that you, the younger generation of kibbutz women, had arrived at the same conclusions as we, the veterans. But I was sorry that you did so only after a long struggle, and much inner turmoil."[3] Apparently Bassevitz did not understand, or did not sufficiently appreciate, a fact that every youth movement graduate knows: In every generation there came to Palestine, and in particular to the kibbutz, young women steeped in a utopian outlook, which they shook off with difficulty, as the result of a process of long, frequently painful, personal experience.

Disillusion and Progress

However, many women were dissatisfied with their lot, and from 1930 onwards their problems were often discussed in the kibbutz periodicals. Their grievances included the small proportion of women in agricultural work, technical underdevelopment of the "services" (kitchen, clothing store), the "insulting" distinction between productive and nonproductive work, and the low level of women's participation in general meetings and administrative positions. Sometimes criticism was voiced in virtually identical terms in articles that appeared fifteen years apart; things changed very slowly, if at all.[4]

Nonetheless, in certain respects the criticism did have some effect. For seven years, from 1935 to 1942, the proportion of women in agriculture increased, reaching almost 40 percent in the early 1940s. "The rule of the

third," which laid down that at least a third of each committee be women, was adopted by the kibbutz movements early in the 1930s, and thereafter by the Histadrut. And during the Arab Revolt (1936–1939), women did guard duty side by side with the men.[5] But progress was often followed by a relapse: For instance, after more than a decade of progress in the sphere of occupational equality, Hayuta Bussel said in 1947: "Poultry, dairy, and market-gardening have been taken out of [the women's] hands."[6] At the end of the Mandatory period, the small proportion of women in agriculture was an established fact, and many concluded that it was unavoidable.

It appears that the question of formal political equality did not trouble many women, and it was not mentioned in the literature of the period. The original ideal, that the woman should be as like the man as possible — particularly in the work sphere — still held good. During the 1920s and 1930s, it was reinforced by the influence of educational activities and publications in the youth movements, which tended to emphasize the pioneering ideal rather than the realities of the kibbutz. An outstanding example is the book *Haverot ba-Kibbutz*, first published in 1945 and reprinted twice in the following five years.[7] The first section is a hymn of praise to the women of the Second Aliyah, who pioneered the way to the conquest of labor by women. The rest of the book is devoted to short sections describing life in the kibbutz. Of these forty-five short chapters, thirty-five describe work in agriculture, handicrafts, and the like, and only ten are devoted to the types of work in which most women were engaged. It is small wonder that young women whose education in the youth movement was based on so slanted a viewpoint found it difficult to adapt to the very different reality.

The Second Wave

Whether because of the gap between ideal and reality, or whether because of innate social and psychological processes, other voices were also beginning to be heard. Foremost was opposition to any approach that required women to ignore their special characteristics and imitate men.

To an extent, this approach had always been part of the praxis of the kibbutzim: The "machaism" sometimes to be seen in feminist literature — the contention that women's physical strength is no less than men's — is very seldom to be found in the kibbutz.[8] But the belief that women have, and should have, special characteristics and needs only began to be expressed explicitly toward the end of the thirties.

At the end of 1946, after twenty years of feminist activity, Lilia Bassevitz published a comprehensive article entitled "The Woman in the Kibbutz."[9] The first section, based on a lecture to a non-kibbutz audience, was a song of praise to kibbutz women on their achievements in creating "a reality *different* from that of our mothers and grandmothers." There were, she said, many contradictions in the kibbutz woman's life—for instance, between family life and public activity—but "we know well that through these contradictions we can become whole."[10] Bassevitz enumerated with pride the achievements of the kibbutz woman not only in the conquest of [physical] work but, even more, in "feminine" activities: culture and hygiene, education and child care, "the creation of the national cuisine," and more.

Bassevitz presented these achievements as accomplishments of the woman and kibbutz society in concert. But in the second half of the article, originally presented to a kibbutz audience, she emphasized the price that the woman was forced to pay for these achievements. The woman in the kibbutz

> Is not simply *tired* at the end of her day's work: she is *exhausted*. . . . She is left with little strength, energy and wakefulness to devote to her children, to reading, to voluntary activities. . . . [Moreover], cleaning the room, individual laundry, knitting . . . turn her day of rest into a working day, and add several hours to her working day, especially when her children are young.[11]

This is a significant change from the ideological attitude that Bassevitz herself had formerly accepted wholeheartedly. "Feminine" occupations are no longer incidental or unavoidable additions to the main business of the kibbutz: They are a legitimate and praiseworthy part of kibbutz life, and they should be recognized as part of the labor system. Bassevitz suggested ways of lightening women's burden, but did not go as far as others, who already at this date suggested shortening the women's working day; it was only in the mid-1960s that this idea was adopted by all the kibbutz movements, though not without a struggle.

In Bassevitz's words, women in the kibbutz "create, dream, and struggle." But she now believed that they struggle, not by the side of the men, but against them; and their dreams differed radically in the mid-1940s from those almost universally accepted fifteen years earlier. Others added an ideological note:

> [In many cases] the personality of a women aged between 30 and 40 loses its focus: she does not dare to be a woman, to make the most of her mature femininity. . . . To ignore the fundamental laws of nature leads to the obstruc-

> tion of the development of the most vital natural forces, and brings about exhaustion, stagnation, and depression.[12]

"The laws of nature," not always clearly defined, were often invoked in this context. They included the maternal and familial instincts, and the desire for cleanliness, orderliness, and beauty. Recognition of their existence was one of the characteristics of what may be called the second, post-utopian, wave of kibbutz feminism.

The reasons for this development were many and varied. It sprang primarily from the personal experience of veteran kibbutz women. But later waves of immigration, particularly from the German youth movements, brought with them different cultural concepts. They were also influenced by the state of the world feminist movement, now in decline after achieving its primary political aim, and by the eclipse of feminism in the Soviet Union, widely considered to be an exemplary socialist state.

All of these factors combined to bring about a significant change in the way in which the kibbutz woman defined her social outlook and her personal aspirations.

The Moshav Ovedim

The Ideal

In the *moshav ovedim,* the woman worked in agriculture together with her husband, and thereby played her part in the conquest of labor no less than in the kibbutz, according to the ideologists of the *moshav.* In the mid-1930s, a woman in *moshav* Kefar Yehoshu'a explained to a friend abroad why she could not take a vacation. She described her day's work: ten tasks in agriculture (five in the chicken-house, three in the cowshed, two in the orchard), and no fewer household chores—cooking, laundry, child-care. She rose at 5 A.M. and went to bed at 10 P.M. She added: "My work is enjoyable, since I tend the animals, the fields and the orchards. Nobody can take my place, and if I go away for even one month everything will be ruined. . . . I am so happy in my work that I wouldn't give it up for all the money in the world."[13] Despite its clear ideological coloring, this letter expresses basic attitudes and emotions that were current among *moshav* women. The feeling of creative partnership and of freedom to decide on a varied and interesting program

each day (within the limits of economic necessity) afforded them a sort of satisfaction different from, but no less than, that of the kibbutz woman.

Reality

In the *moshav,* unlike the kibbutz, the problem of the single woman—unmarried, divorced, or widowed—remained without a fundamental solution for many years. In fact, there was no place on the *moshav* for a single woman who owned an agricultural holding: for instance, Tehiya Lieberson of Nahalal suffered a series of pressures, from ridicule to economic discrimination and the destruction of her farm, as a result of illness during which she received insufficient help. Eventually she was forced to leave the *moshav.*[14] Solutions to specific problems were usually found: neighbors assisted in rotation, laborers were hired, alternative occupations were found. But it was hard to find a permanent solution to the problems of a women who had to look after farm and children without a helpmeet: Most of the women who reached such a state left the *moshav.*

The allocation of functions within the nuclear family in the *moshav* was no different from that in the Diaspora or in the Jewish towns of Palestine. Moreover, until 1936, only the husband was entitled to sign the standard agreement with the settlement authorities; the woman had no rights in the event of divorce or her husband's death.[15] But there were few divorces, and few couples left the *moshav* after the first critical years of its existence.

In the sporadic discussions on the woman in the *moshav* that appeared in the movement periodicals, one problem recurred again and again: women's fatigue, and the consequent danger to their health. Mutual aid provided a partial solution: In periods of illness, and after childbirth, other women did the necessary work in the house and on the farm. But, even so, there could be no institutional solution to this problem, as there was in the kibbutz (release from extra duties, longer vacations, shorter working hours, etc.). Some families eased the woman's lot by abandoning the principle of self-labor. But the woman's life was hard and subject to much strain, particularly in times of economic difficulty.[16]

The Accepted Ethos

Two matters were not discussed in the movement periodicals. First, there was virtually no opposition to the existence of the nuclear family within the

kibbutz framework, although its influence was minimized in various ways, such as (voluntary) separation of married couples at public events, and allocation of resources to individuals rather than families. There is no reference at all to sexual freedom ("free love"). The accepted ethos was summed up years later as follows: "In relations between the sexes we had very many inhibitions. In fact, we still had the mentality of the shtetl: subconsciously, we wanted to be like people the world over. Every girl looked for a boy to marry, even if there was no official wedding."[17]

The second issue never raised in contemporary periodicals was the fact that, in neither the kibbutz nor the *moshav*, was there any protest against the traditional division of functions within the family. The feminine activities listed by Bassevitz seemed perfectly natural, and it was not thought necessary to transfer any of them to the men, or to the public sphere — for instance, by a rota system. And the demand to employ males in the system of communal child-care was voiced very rarely, and then most tentatively. It was generally ignored.

Conclusion

What, then, troubled the pioneer women? At an early stage, kibbutz women were troubled by the contrast between the ideal of an egalitarian society and the reality: for, as well as the undoubted achievements of the kibbutz in this sphere, there were striking inequalities in matters of work and of political activity and power. These utopian aspirations were not abandoned, and remained an integral part of kibbutz ideology; but toward the end of the 1930s, other voices began to be heard, voices that emphasized the special characteristics of the woman and demanded social and physical conditions for their expression.

Just as the kibbutz preceded the rest of the world in realizing the first stage of gender equality, the women in the leadership of the kibbutz movement preceded the "second wave" of feminism, with its aspiration to express the "other voice." But kibbutz women had to wait fifteen years for this approach to receive partial legitimization, backed by awareness of the revitalized feminist movement in Europe and the United States.

In the *moshav*, there were no parallel utopian aspirations, and the *moshav* woman did not demand gender equality. But in both forms of settlement, the physical difficulty of village life in Jewish Palestine cast a shadow over their

lives, and the need for constant physical effort emphasized their dependence on men.

The changes in the concept of the role of women in the kibbutz can be interpreted either as a failure to realize accepted and desirable aims, or as a successful adaptation of those aims to the nature and desires of the women themselves. But there can be no doubt that women in kibbutz and *moshav* alike paid a heavy price for being women, and, in particular, for being pioneers.