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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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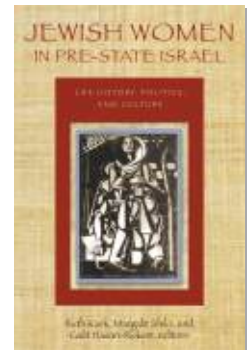
Published by Brandeis University Press

Kark, Ruth & Shilo, Margalit & Hasan-Rokem, Galit & Reinharz, Shulamit.

Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture.

Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2009.

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Aftermath

A decade after an international conference that took place on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem and culminated in the publication in Hebrew of this volume, the new English version is now available. Our original aim was for the book to serve as a stimulus for more research in the field. Substantial interest has been generated. Demand for the first edition was high, and it went out of print almost immediately. Research in gender and women in the fields of history, literature, anthropology, sociology, art, and more has entered the mainstream of the Israeli academic sphere. All the major research universities in Israel have special Gender Studies programs, and the number of papers and books appearing on this topic grows steadily. Our hope is that the English edition is similarly catalytic abroad.

The concept inspiring our book, namely, the idea that the Jewish community in the Land of Israel since the emergence of the Zionist immigration gave rise to new gender identities, is now commonly accepted. The vibrant heterogeneous society that constituted the new State of Israel produced, and is still producing, diverse newly shaped identities.

Studies following our original volume, and inspired in part by it, have engaged in many new topics. These arenas include women of the religious sector, both national religious women and ultra-orthodox women; Mizrahi women; Arab Palestinian women; women in different professions, such as the military, medicine, high technology, and the arts; and women in various phases of their lives, including girls, mature women, widows, and bereaved mothers. At the same time, the historical research of Jewish women's life and creativity in ancient and medieval times has proliferated and deepened, enriching the understanding of early modern, modern, and contemporary conceptions.

Interest in gender research and especially research on women has unearthed forgotten materials, including old diaries, abandoned letters, and neglected autobiographies. Women's writings, a field that a few years ago seemed deserted, have suddenly surfaced. For example, an English author, Hannah Trager, who was brought to Ottoman Palestine as a baby and later moved back to London, wrote about women's experiences while building Petah Tikvah in 1878.¹ Yehudit Harari, who also came as a baby to one of the first colonies nearly a decade after Trager, wrote her life story, depicting her love affair with her future husband and casting new light on intimate relationships between the sexes.² In a republished book, a young Zionist girl, Henya Pekelman, who immigrated to Mandatory Palestine, where she worked as a builder and suffered hunger and rape, told her life story including sexual abuse before she committed suicide.³ Such forgotten yet evocative voices have now received the attention of new audiences.

Study of the history of women and gender also has opened new spheres of interest: the history of motherhood, the history of childhood, and especially the history of young girls. Gaining an understanding of the past of the Jewish people and particularly of the new Jewish society in the State of Israel is impossible without an acquaintance with the various histories of the Jewish people and Jewish culture. Such work enriches worldwide research on these topics and opens doors to new understandings of our society, its origins, and its connections with other societies.

The uniqueness of gender studies lies in their twofold nature: theoretical as well as empirical. Academics who have taught gender studies sometimes sense a hidden vibration in the class whenever students feel that the theories they encounter enable them to view their own lives in a new way. We hope this volume similarly touches the lives of its readers.

It is difficult to assess the influence of a single book. We do not pretend that the new understandings prevailing in Israeli society in the last decade concerning women's roles in society were influenced by this book or any other book. Yet, the Hebrew volume and the burst of research activity following in its wake are a clear and resonant voice documenting the transformation of Israeli society as it experiences its gender revolution. The roots of this revolution are here depicted and brought to life for the English-speaking audience.

