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## Being a Feminist Peace Activist--And Ashkenazi

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## Symposium

relationship with our adversaries to be transformed when we invite them to sit with us in the *sukkah*.

A *sukkah* takes a certain amount of work and effort. It must be built and decorated, and food must be carried out to it. The *sukkah* does not simply appear. So, too, does *sukkat shalom* require work and effort. It must be created; it does not simply appear.<sup>3</sup> Feminist Jews could take a step toward realizing the joyous potential of the *sukkah* by truly making it a *sukkat shalom* and doing the work necessary to create peaceful relations with others—both personal intimates and political adversaries. The aroma and beauty of the *sukkah*, and its fragility, might help create new experiences and new relationships.

## Notes

1. See Sonia Zylberberg, “Oranges and Seders: Symbols of Jewish Women’s Wrestling,” in the last issue of *Nashim* (no. 5, 2002: *Gender, Food, and Survival*), pp. 148–171.

2. The first *sukkah* I built on my own went up the night before I gave birth to my second daughter. I used strings and twigs, like a bird, and built a nest.

3. The principal of a local Jewish day school told the following story: Her school has a *sukkat shalom*, and when students have problems with each other and want to try to resolve them, they go into the *sukkat shalom*. One young boy tried it the other day, and then reported to her: I went in and nothing happened! He had been under the impression that simply “being there” made peace.

## BEING A FEMINIST PEACE ACTIVIST—AND ASHKENAZI

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It was a nice, warm winter evening in Tel Aviv, but I was cold. I felt lonely, misunderstood. I had just left a strategy-planning meeting of radical peace activists, mainly women, many of them my friends in a lifelong peace struggle. An academic, an expert on Israeli extra-parliamentary and peace movements, had argued on the basis of a report she had just concluded that the combined struggle for peace and social justice was not working (it was never really tried, I said to myself). She suggested that the peace camp, by attempting so vigorously to enlist major parts of the public (meaning, I think, Mizrahi and working class-people), was losing its natural supporters (meaning, I think,

Ashkenazi, middle-class, highly educated people). The audience seemed to agree, though no decision was made. I felt painfully alone. I felt defeated. As an Ashkenazi feminist peace activist who has allied herself with Mizrahi feminists' attempts to transform Ashkenazi politics, I left the meeting in agony and frustration.

I began my rebellion against the nationalistic and militaristic spirit of my society in my teens, by joining the small group of Israelis struggling for peace in the Middle East. Later, frustrated with the male domination of the peace movement, I joined the women-only Women in Black, and, more recently, the Coalition of Women for Just Peace. This involvement developed my understanding of justice, nationalism, and women's oppression, and it facilitated my practice of resistance. Already educated by feminism, I felt assured that my feminist peace practice simultaneously undermined existing gender relations—and, consequently, power relations—in Israel and impacted on public attitudes toward peace with the Palestinians. I felt confident that our way of struggling for peace—our political principles, the protest tactics we used, our perseverance in maintaining dialogue with Palestinians, the global support we pursued—would eventually lead Israel to sign the peace treaty we envisioned. Despite the hostility and violence we had to endure, I enjoyed the sisterhood, friendship, and solidarity that developed within our ranks.

And then came the blow: The cry of the Mizrahi feminists exploded into our faces. They rebelled furiously and bitterly against the domination by Ashkenazi women of both the feminist and the women's peace movements. They unveiled the connection, so well hidden in Israeli society, between ethnicity and power. For the first time in my life I was forced to face my Ashkenazi identity and to recognize the privileges that come with it and the system of oppression with which I was collaborating.

I was shocked. Wow, what a shock! After we gathered ourselves together, a small group of Ashkenazi feminists began a long and painful journey into our Ashkenazi identity. We met regularly to unlearn our racial practices and to examine the mechanisms oppressing Mizrahi people and privileging ourselves. We found out how we, feminists fighting against oppression, turned into oppressors of other women and men.

I began to question my peace activism. I became aware of Ashkenazi domination, and especially of the way we—in Women in Black and other women's peace movements—excluded Mizrahi women and preserved their inferiority and our superiority. I remember my Mizrahi friend, a veteran of the radical

left, saying: “Look at yourselves: Listen to the way you talk about Mizrahim, or about your Ashkenazi experience in the all-Ashkenazi youth movements and kibbutzim. I was never a part of them. I grew up in the slums. Listen to the way you enjoy playing with concepts and theories. Look at the daily paper you all read. You refuse to see how Ashkenazi your ways of talking and behaving are.” I began to realize that at the same time that we were struggling to undermine gender relations in society, we were preserving ethnic and class relations. I wondered how it was that we were so eager to fight for Palestinian national liberation, but we had failed to fight for social justice for Mizrahim. We were not as transformative as I had thought.

I carefully examined our feminist and peace practices and began to understand the ways our movements exclude Mizrahi women—by our rhetoric, agendas, and practices. In particular, my Mizrahi friends made me recognize our refusal to acknowledge the connections between war and peace, class and ethnicity, and the problematics of being an Arab Jew in a state that is fighting the Arab world and denigrates Arab culture.

Of course, I still admired the way the women in our movement fearlessly voiced a position opposed to the social consensus. In their anti-war activity in the midst of a hostile, militaristic society that is uncritically supportive of the government’s tough measures, they exhibited a high level of courage, commitment, and morality. Nevertheless, understanding the pitfalls of our peace activism, I became critical of it. Many of my sister-activists resisted my criticism and rejected my suggestion that we look into our ethnic identity.

I felt that I was beginning to drift away from my friends. I spoke and wrote extensively on the “Ashkenaziness” of the women’s peace movement. Like other social change activists of our time, I stressed the need to connect the struggle for peace, theoretically and politically, with those for social and environmental justice. I believed that we needed to adopt an alternative agenda if we wished to be relevant to the majority of Israelis and have a real impact on society. Since capitalistic globalization causes unprecedented conflicts and polarization between and within states, social justice, economic, and environmental issues inside and outside Israel must be taken into account if we wish to arrive at a sustainable peace treaty. I talked about new alliances with oppressed groups, including Mizrahi, working class, religious, and Palestinian women and men, and newcomers from the former Soviet Union. I argued that a necessary step toward such an alternative would be

a process of reflexivity on the part of Ashkenazi women and men—to probe into the meaning and implications of being privileged, to unlearn practices of oppression, to take responsibility for the harm caused in our name, to learn to truly listen and absorb the perspectives of the disadvantaged.

For a while, feminist peace activists did begin turning in this direction. At this crucial moment, the strategy-planning meeting took place in Tel Aviv. It is wiser, said the scholar, to focus solely on peace and its “natural” (Ashkenazi) supporters. The predominantly Ashkenazi peace camp once more seemed and continues to seem to willingly be secluded within itself.

After the meeting, in a nearby coffee shop, I angrily expressed my frustration: “Why are Ashkenazi feminists, many of whom are well aware of oppression and discrimination, so easily willing to abandon the dialogue with Mizrahim for the sake of peace?” A friend, a veteran of Women in Black, responded: “I expect Mizrahi feminists to tell me what their claims are.” Astonished, I asked: “Don’t you think you put too much responsibility on Mizrahim? Perhaps the issue is the meaning and practices of Ashkenaziness. Perhaps you need to reflect on your identity.” “No,” she replied assertively. “How would I know what the problem is if they don’t tell me?” I left the coffee shop in dismay: For about fifteen years, in speeches, academic articles, on television and in newspapers, in feminist gatherings—on any possible occasion, you name it—Mizrahi feminists have expressed their positions. How come these Ashkenazi peace activists don’t get it?

Peace activists still ask: Why are we such a small group? Why do we encounter so much hostility? They comfort themselves with the results of polls showing that most of the Israeli population supports the establishment of a Palestinian state. For me it is small comfort: I listen to the newly developing public discussion regarding the post-peace period and foresee a conflict-torn, violent, militaristic, racist, and chauvinistic society. I foresee a peace treaty that preserves the economic and military domination of Ashkenazi Israel. I fear we might win the battle but lose the war.

It is indeed chilly outside, isn’t it?