In spring 2015, a new political party emerged in Israel. Ubezchutan (In her merit) was an all-female party of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) women. Their leader, Ruth Colian, argued that the interests of these women, whose situation was “akin to slavery,” were not represented by any existing political party. The ultra-Orthodox parties that purported to represent their communities in the Knesset were led by men, and excluded women from their electoral lists. Mainstream parties were ignorant of their needs or failed to make them a priority. While Ubezchutan failed to garner any seats in the twentieth Knesset, some commentators noted that there had been attempts to run all-female party slates several times since the creation of the State of Israel. Unmentioned in this modern retelling was the legacy of Israel’s first all-female political party, the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights, whose diligent efforts obtained the right to vote for women, first in the representative assembly of the Yishuv under the British Mandate and then for seats in the first Knesset.

Margalit Shilo’s masterful account of the work of the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights fills this unfortunate gap in popular and scholarly accounts of women’s history in Israel. Translated from the original Hebrew with the support of a Helen Hammer Translation Prize, this work epitomizes the sort of careful scholarship on the history of Jewish women and their struggle for gender equality that the Brandeis Series on Gender, Culture, Religion and Law and HBI Series on Jewish Women are committed to publishing.

Between 1917 and 1936, the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights succeeded in securing women’s suffrage, the establishment of commitment to women’s equality, and passage of Mandate legislation that banned child marriage. Weaving together memoir, analysis of public documents, and press reports, Shilo provides a gripping account of the personalities and political forces that achieved these milestones and shaped the identity of the New Yishuv.
Debate over the role of women in this new dispensation was the crucible in which this new identity was forged. Understanding the struggle between mainstream and ultra-Orthodox groups during this formative period provides important insight into continuing struggles in Israel over the inclusion of women in all aspects of public life. Both arguments and political strategies continue to reappear. During the debate over suffrage, some Haredi groups insisted that the franchise could not be extended to women because they were too frivolous to participate in political discussion. Most, however, made the less provocative argument that involvement in political debate was immodest, inconsistent with women’s empathic nature and a potential threat to the family because it would distract women from their primary duties to children and home. All these claims purported to be supported by halakhah. They reemerged in 2015, when Haredi political and religious leaders rejected the idea of women serving on Haredi party lists or running on their own all-female list.

The deployment of segregation as a solution to problems of immodest mingling of the sexes in public institutions is also not a novel approach. Israelis in the twenty-first century grapple with sex segregation on public buses, on which women are pressured, harassed, and sometimes assaulted, in order to persuade them to sit in the back of the bus, away from view of and contact with men. Haredi politicians in the 1920s who worried that it was immodest for men and women to sit together in the assembly proposed ingenious solutions, such as a separate women’s section. Thanks to lobbying by the Union of Hebrew Women, this proposal was not adopted.

Many Israelis today resent the stranglehold of rabbinical courts in Israel over matters relating to marriage and divorce and call for the creation of civil marriage. Shilo shows how the women of the Union of Hebrew Women resisted rabbinical attempts to assume exclusive jurisdiction over inheritance law and argued for the creation of Hebrew law courts, which would institute civil law in accordance with modern Jewish norms.

Shilo’s account demonstrates that discrimination against women in public life has been a component of Israeli identity from the start. It was the one thing that all sectors of the old Yishuv could agree on, that bound them into a unified political force. The need to keep ultra-orthodox parties on board with the project of the creation of the Jewish state has presented a temptation to mainstream Israeli governments to compromise on their commit-
ment to women’s rights—and continues to do so. Shilo describes the vigilance with which the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights fought this tendency in the 1920s. That history provides a lesson for those who might let down their guard in the defense of women’s rights today.

Lisa Fishbayn Joffe