Girls of Liberty
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The Women’s Struggle Begins

Local Organization

We can live no longer without fully equal rights.

—Nehamah Puhachevsky, in minutes of the General Assembly, Rishon LeTzion, December 2, 1917

As calamitous as the war years were for the Yishuv, hopes ran high when the Turks fled Palestine. The country’s Jews enthusiastically welcomed the British military conquest, both because of the British Empire’s image as an enlightened power and because the British had committed themselves to the Zionist project. On November 2, 1917, two days after the British army captured Beersheba, the government in London issued the Balfour Declaration, committing itself to the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The Yishuv was euphoric at the news. Mordechai Ben-Hillel HaCohen, who chronicled the events of World War I in Palestine, recounted the public mood in his diary. He used language reserved in the Jewish tradition for speaking of the end of days: “People were ecstatic . . . we feel the footsteps of the English. It is the beginning of the redemption.”¹ Rachel Yana’it, a committed socialist, did the same, describing the surging emotions in Petah Tikvah: “Cheering and rejoicing in the streets—the English are coming, the liberating English! . . . Everyone has gone out, flooding the streets . . . cheering and rejoicing in the moshavah.”²

The combination of the pain and suffering caused by the war and the fervor brought on by the British victory and Balfour Declaration together impelled the Jewish community to reorganize. It was a crisis, but a constructive one.³ The Yishuv as a whole lacked a representative body, an obstacle to concerted and unified action.⁴ Furthermore, local community committees had been paralyzed during the war and had not conducted elections. The members of these bodies were chosen by only part of the public. Among
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others, men without property and women (whose property, if they had any, was registered in the name of their husband or some other man) were excluded from political participation. The feeling that a new era was dawning awakened a profound yearning for change throughout the Yishuv. It was time for the democratic election, by both men and women, of a new leadership.

This yearning was put into words by a woman from Haifa who viewed the rebirth of the Jewish nation and its women as one and the same: “We see our national revival as a very real ‘raising of the dead,’ and among the dead the Hebrew woman is also revived; she stands before us like her nation . . . proud, brave, and spirited; she too is the wonder of the world.” The British conquest injected new blood into some of the Yishuv’s women. Women’s charitable and cultural associations founded during the war entered the political fray. Throughout the world, women’s struggles generally began on the local level and only thereafter appeared on the more significant national stage. In Palestine, however, the potent desire of Jewish women to take part in the renewed effort to build the land led to simultaneous action on both levels, as the Yishuv prepared for local elections and for the establishment of a nationwide Assembly of Representatives.

I will first examine the local struggles for women’s right to vote. This will serve as a prologue to my presentation of the national struggle and will offer an opportunity to take a close look at the population that constituted the New Yishuv. These Jews lived under difficult, even primitive, conditions, but most of them were educated and aware of events in the rest of the world. Following the suffragist campaigns in these individual communities can show how the discourse of international feminism penetrated different subpopulations in the Yishuv. Such examples of struggles on local levels will also cast light on the dawn of Hebrew feminism.

Rishon LeTzion: Women First Speak Up

The first place women demanded the right to participate in their community’s leadership was Rishon LeTzion. In the twenty-first century, Rishon—as it is called for short—is Israel’s fourth-largest city, but in 1917 it was a moshavah with about 1,300 inhabitants. It had been founded in 1882 by seventeen families, and its name, which means “the first in Zion,” was literally true—it was the first settlement founded by the wave of settlers that
came to constitute the New Yishuv. As the first such settlement, it was home to several other firsts—the first Hebrew-language school in Palestine was established there, in 1885, as was the first Hebrew orchestra, in 1895, and the first Hebrew kindergarten, in 1898; and now its women’s organization was the first in Palestine to demand equal political rights for women. What prompted the moshavah’s women to fight for the vote? It seems that the impressive civic-mindedness of the village’s founders was shared by its women. In addition, Rishon LeTzion was home to the foremost Hebrew woman writer of the First Aliyah, Nehamah Puhachevsky, whose political consciousness and leadership abilities played a decisive role.

Born Nehamah Feinstein in 1869 in Lithuania (she died in Rishon LeTzion in 1934), Puhachevsky had been a star student. She made a name for herself in her girlhood in Brisk (Brest), both in the Russian Gymnasium she attended and in her Hebrew studies at home. Prior to her move to Palestine she corresponded in Hebrew with the famous Hebrew poet Judah Leib Gordon, some of whose works protested the low status of Jewish women. She also published, in the Hebrew newspaper Hamelitz, a bold article stating that the progress of the Jewish nation depended in part on education for women. In his memoirs, her husband Yehiel Mikhal Puhachevsky told the amazing story of how they conducted their courtship by means of letters in Hebrew he sent from Rishon LeTzion to the city where she lived, Tsaritsyn. The young woman happily accepted his marriage proposal: “And I am grateful with all my heart and soul for the opportunity that I have had in such a wonderful way to be one of the builders [of Zion] in tears and sweat.” It was a historic wedding.

Nehamah arrived in Rishon LeTzion at the end of the summer of 1889 as a twenty-year-old newlywed. Her stories, which she began to publish during the years of the Second Aliyah, portray the hardships that the New Yishuv’s first women faced. Scholars have read her melancholy voice as a plaint against the harsh life Palestine then offered, a life that was especially difficult for women. Her disillusionment with the fate of the Yishuv’s women propelled her into public activity. She founded a volunteer legal clinic in the moshavah that provided assistance to women in need, especially Yemenite women. Puhachevsky’s feminist stance was especially forceful in her fight to win women the vote on both the local and national level. The rise of a national liberation movement aroused among the moshavah’s women,
as it did among women of other nations, a desire for personal liberation as well. These women claimed throughout their campaign that the Jewish people’s right to national self-determination was inextricably wound up with women’s right to full citizenship.

The debate over the women’s question in Rishon LeTzion began at a general assembly of the village’s inhabitants, held on November 24, 1917, just nine days after the British took control of the moshavah. Democratization was on the agenda—specifically, the issue of whether the community’s charter could be revised to grant the vote to residents who were not landowners. In addition, the moshavah’s women petitioned for the vote. It is worth noting that the two groups did not submit a joint demand but instead preferred to conduct their campaigns independently.

The women reiterated their demand at a second assembly held a week later, on December 2. Puhachevsky gave an impassioned speech: “We can live no longer without fully equal rights. We, who built the settlement together with the men, deserve the right to vote for the [local] Committee, although during the first year we do not want to be elected as members. Give us what is ours—as in England and Germany, we demand full rights.” Puhachevsky took a classically feminist position—without full civil rights, a woman’s life was worthless. She explained that women should be given the vote not only as a natural human right, but also by virtue of their labors to build the Yishuv. She also stressed that in the rest of the world, such as England and Germany, women had already been considered worthy of the vote. Her liberal feminist stance was evident when she declared: “Let us be like you [men].” Puhachevsky was sharp-witted enough to recognize that the men would have difficulty acceding to her demands. Therefore, in face of opposition, she softened her position by promising that if women were given the right to vote, implementation of the change could be delayed for a full year.

The decision was to grant all males the right to vote, even if they did not own property. Regarding women, a note was made in the record: “The question of the right of women in our moshavah has been postponed until a general nationwide resolution is reached.” In other words, the men preferred that the decision be made outside the community. And in fact the question had already been taken up by the preparatory committee that had convened in Jaffa to plan for elections to an Assembly of Representatives for
The entire Yishuv. At this point, the moshavah that took pride in its innovations declined to be the first in Zion to grant women the vote and left the matter to a higher authority.

Although the decision had been made, the assembly continued to debate the issue. Hannah Drubin, a long-time resident, asked that the men explain their opposition to women’s suffrage, but no one was willing to reply. The men’s silence seems to indicate that they had no serious arguments to make and that their opposition derived from traditional patriarchal views and a fear of the unfamiliar and unknown. In the end, the chairman of the local committee endorsed Puhachevsky’s cleverly low-key proposal that the right be recognized but take effect only in the following year’s elections. The proposal was brought up for a vote once again, and to the surprise of everyone present, it passed.24 Despite the doubts of its men, Rishon LeTzion once again showed itself to be a pioneer, becoming the first local council to grant—formally, at least—women the right to vote.25

The same pattern emerged in other communities. Clearly, at this juncture, the end of 1917, reactions to the demand for women’s suffrage were mixed. Many members of the New Yishuv supported equal rights in principle, while preferring to put off implementation until general agreement could be reached. Emotions were high on both sides. Clearly, partisans on both sides were very conscious of the larger implications on the local and national level.

The Women of Rishon LeTzion Organize: The First Road to Victory

It was at Puhachevsky’s home that a group of women gathered to found “the moshavah’s first women’s association with the sole purpose of attaining equal rights for women in this place.”26 Puhachevsky went from house to house to urge her neighbors to join and take part in the struggle.27 This was, as far as is known, the first time that Yishuv women organized for a political rather than a benevolent purpose. Furthermore, the women of Rishon LeTzion were determined to expand their campaign to include the rest of the Yishuv’s women.28

With discussions in progress about whether women should be allowed to vote for the Assembly of Representatives, sixty-seven women from Rishon LeTzion, constituting about 15 percent of the moshavah’s adult women, sent a petition to the Preparatory Committee of the forthcoming elections
to the Assembly of Representatives. They protested the fact that the question was even under discussion. As citizens whose equality had just been recognized by their local community, they objected to any attempt to restrict the right of the Yishuv’s women to take part in the new Yishuvwide organizational effort. Their petition stressed that the Zionist movement had allowed women to vote for members of its institutions from the start and asked: “Why should our rights be constrained here in our own land?”

A petition was a democratic tool amenable to the nature of the suffragist campaign. It proved itself popular worldwide and was the most important instrument for spreading the feminist gospel. The same tactic was used in Norway to great effect, when in 1905 an especially popular suffragist petition was signed by 200,000 women.

Since the next election was rescheduled for a year later, women actually voted for the first time in Rishon LeTzion two years after the decision to give them the vote had been made in principle. The agenda of a general assembly of the moshavah’s inhabitants held on December 6, 1919, included a single item—electing the local committee. According to the minutes of the meeting, 228 men and women were in attendance. To everyone’s surprise, the women won an exceptional victory. It turned out that all previous hesitations and objections had dissolved. Puhachevsky and her colleague Adina Kahansky won an absolute majority of the votes. The surviving documentation does not indicate whether she turned down the chairmanship out of modesty or because she feared it the duties were too heavy, or whether it was even offered to her. It should be noted that it was not just the case that men refrained from putting women in key positions. In general, in Palestine and elsewhere, women, too, were reluctant to take on too much responsibility. A woman would serve as mayor of a city only after the establishment of the Israeli state, when Hannah Levin was elected mayor of Rishon LeTzion. The moshavah then achieved another first.

The complicated events in Rishon LeTzion offer a number of insights. The groundbreaking culture of the moshavah from its inception made it possible for women to take part in a public debate. This provided a foundation for instilling in women the belief that they had a right to take part in local elections. Notably, Rishon LeTzion’s women were accustomed to speak in public, so entering the political arena seemed to them to be the obvious next step. For the same reason, men found it easier to accept the women’s demands.
The campaign in Rishon LeTzion blazed the trail for women elsewhere in the Yishuv. It inspired similar battles in other moshavot, each case reflecting the unique nature of the community and the capacities of the women who lived there. It is instructive to compare the energy and alacrity so evident in the women of Rishon LeTzion with the women of, for example, the neighboring moshavah of Rehovot. Though Rehovot had a similar liberal character, its Women’s Association was less effective. As a result, women there received the vote only in the spring of 1921. Such a comparison indicates that the personality and presence of a female leader in Rishon LeTzion seems to have been a key factor.

Theory and Practice: The Women’s Struggle in Jaffa and Tel Aviv

In 1909 a modern garden city, Tel Aviv, was founded on the northern outskirts of Palestine’s premier port city, Jaffa. The first sixty Jews to build houses there, mostly Zionists who had just immigrated, hoped that their initiative was the first step toward the building of “the first Hebrew city, a city inhabited 100 percent by Hebrews, in which they would speak Hebrew . . . and it would eventually become the Land of Israel’s New York.” The dream began to take on flesh and blood, and by 1914 Tel Aviv had 2,000 inhabitants. Jaffa also grew impressively in these years. On the eve of World War I it had 45,000 inhabitants, most of them Arab and about a third (10,000–15,000) traditional Jews. Toward the end of the war, in the spring of 1917, the Turks expelled all the Jews of Jaffa and Tel Aviv from their homes, which were left abandoned.

The Jews began to return to Tel Aviv as soon as the Turks retreated from the city, on November 15, 1917. The homecoming was an emotional one: “It is so amazing: our days are being restored as of old, once again we are in Tel Aviv, and again the public work of the Palestine Office [of the World Zionist Organization] has returned to work . . . and schools have reopened . . . and our Hebrew rings through the streets of Jaffa again! Hooray!” When its members returned, the Tel Aviv community council met frequently, almost every day, to see that the roads and parks were cleaned, to reinstall Hebrew signs, to help the needy, and to put neighborhood institutions and returning residents back on track. The Tel Aviv public was filled with the spirit of action, and the city’s women voiced their desire “to appear on the platform of public life.”
The bylaws of Tel Aviv excluded from the neighborhood council those who did not own property, both men and women. These bylaws instituted before the war, allowed women to vote and to be elected to the neighborhood council. However, most property was registered in the name of the men in each family. As a result, the bylaws discriminated against women in practice, and until 1919 no women had held public office. In Jaffa’s Jewish community, in contrast, only men had the right to vote for the community board. As soon as the war ended, the members of both communities called for new elections to their governing councils. Furthermore, some Tel Aviv residents called for an end to discrimination and the institution of fully democratic elections. This set off a raging controversy in the city.

The force behind the women’s campaign in Tel Aviv was Ada Fishman, born in 1893 in Bessarabia. After immigrating at the beginning of 1913 with her brother, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Fishman (both sister and brother later Hebraized their name to Maimon), a very prominent leader of the Mizrahi religious Zionist movement, she became a leading figure in the Yishuv’s labor movement. Fishman belonged to HaPo‘el HaTza‘ir, a moderate socialist party, but unlike most other members of this group, she remained an observant Jew. She never married. A committed feminist, she frequently came to the aid of women, workers and others as well, who suffered from discrimination. She fought her first battle in the spring of 1914, on Lag B’Omer, a holiday marked by a pilgrimage and festival to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yohai on Mt. Meron in the Galilee. Despite a rabbinic ban against women taking part in the celebration, Fishman and a friend insisted on attending. Looking back on the incident years later, Fishman maintained that it had been the first step taken by the women of the Yishuv in their effort to gain the vote. Thanks to her proficiency in the halakhic literature, she was able to mount an argument against the rabbis based on their own tradition. “Who knows better than you do,” she said to them, “that our Torah is a Torah of life, a Torah of human and social freedom, that places no boundaries or differences between one person and another.”

By her own account, she took up the equality of women as her personal cause while still a girl: “I vowed in my heart, I really vowed, that when the time came I would know to fight forcefully against this injustice to women no matter what.” She continued to fight for women’s rights as a member of the Israeli Knesset and afterward, until her death in 1973. She was critical of the way women were treated both in Jewish religious tradition and in the
labor movement. From 1921 onward she headed the Council of Women Workers of the Histadrut labor union and fought boldly to ensure the rights of its members. “I want a revolution,” she told her friends in the summer of 1918.51

The first step Fishman took to win Tel Aviv’s women the right to vote is documented in a pamphlet she authored, titled “To the Hebrew Woman!,” published by the Women’s Association of Tel Aviv and Jaffa in December 1918. It seems to have been the first Hebrew publication by a woman about women’s right to vote issued in the Yishuv, and it was praised by the daily newspaper Ha’aretz.52 Fishman’s pamphlet was not the only one to appear on the subject. Others, both for and against giving women the vote, were published at that time. Fishman promoted political organization by women53 and censured feminine passivity: “For once [woman] needs to be an actor and not acted upon.”54

Tel Aviv’s women quickly organized. On March 13, 1918, 125 of them signed a petition55 protesting the city committee’s intention not to amend the bylaws that excluded most of the garden suburb’s inhabitants—both women and men who did not own property—from voting.56 The petition was notable not only for the long list of signatories, headed by Fishman, but also because it was a joint initiative by working-class and middle-class women.57

The petitioners first stressed that the Yishuv, at this important juncture, was a society in which men and women participated jointly in building the country.58 They noted that women had been given the right to vote in the Zionist movement, beginning with the Second Zionist Congress of 1898, and stressed that women’s equality was an integral part of the Zionist vision. Some two weeks after the petition was sent to the local committee, the residents of Tel Aviv were summoned to a public assembly that would decide the matter.59 The women won, and every adult man and woman was given the right to vote and to be elected to office.60 The Zionist public of Tel Aviv, like that of Rishon LeTzion, was open to progress.

At this point there was not yet a national umbrella organization of women’s associations. The Women’s Association of Tel Aviv and Jaffa disseminated its political positions, organized public meetings, and helped women in Rehovot, Petah Tikvah, and Jerusalem found associations of their own. A correspondent for Do’ar Hayom wrote that “the mania for equal rights is attacking
all the moshavot. The ladies are envious of their friends and demand [to be elected] . . . and their demands are coming to be accepted.\textsuperscript{61}

The women of Tel Aviv were granted the vote, but the debate continued and even intensified in Jaffa, where the Jewish population included Haredim, Sephardim, and Mizrahim (Jews with roots in the Islamic world), all of whom had trouble accepting nationalism and universalism. They categorically and openly opposed allowing women to play a role in running the community on the ground that investing a woman with power in the community was opposed to Jewish religious law, the halakhah, as they interpreted it.\textsuperscript{62} Disappointingly for the advocates of women’s rights, some Zionist men preferred “to set aside the demand and to give women their right to vote at some quieter and more placid time.”\textsuperscript{63} In fact, many of the founders of the Assembly of Representatives capitulated to the Haredim, justifying that action on the ground that unifying all members under a single political framework was their top priority. Conflicts between what was good for the nation and what was good for women were generally decided in favor of the former.

The women’s campaign in Tel Aviv offers fascinating insights into the Hebrew suffragist crusade. Here, as in Rishon LeTzion and other moshavot, the debate over whether to grant women the vote was part of a larger process of democratization of the elections to local governing councils. Yet the expansion of the franchise to all males regardless of their ownership of property aroused little controversy, whereas granting the vote to women—many of whom belonged to propertied families, even if the property was not registered in their names—raised a storm. The controversy resurfaced in 1926, when the British Mandate authorities, who had opposed granting the vote to women as part of the pro-Islam tilt in their policy,\textsuperscript{64} issued a law to govern elections for city councils in cities with mixed Jewish-Arab populations. It granted the vote only to men on the grounds that only men were registered as property owners and taxpayers. Members of the Tel Aviv Women’s Association thus launched a new campaign for their right to vote.\textsuperscript{65} The wrinkles were soon ironed out—the chief secretary of the Mandate administration announced that tax-paying women would also be able to vote.\textsuperscript{66} The Women’s Association had once again demonstrated its power.
Haifa: The Municipal Battle as an Ethnic Battle

Haifa had been viewed, since the end of the Ottoman era, as Palestine’s city of the future. The Technion, the country’s first institution of higher education, opened its doors there in 1925, and in 1933 a new and modern port facility went into operation. However, the British took control of the city only in the autumn of 1918, when their forces moved into northern Palestine.67 In 1914 the city’s population had been 22,000; the great majority were Arabs, and only 3,000 were Jews.68 A large portion of these Jews were of Sephardi and North African origin, members of communities with strong patriarchal traditions, while others were Ashkenazim. When the city’s Jewish community reorganized after the British conquest, its members debated the extension of the franchise. The controversy brought to the fore another female leader, a teacher named Sarah Azaryahu, who had immigrated to Palestine with her family in 1906. She organized a small group of courageous women into a women’s association that led the local suffragist campaign. In her memoirs, Azaryahu relates that Ashkenazi Zionists supported giving women the vote, while the traditional Eastern communities, which had absorbed Muslim culture, opposed it.69

A public assembly of the Jewish community held early in 1919 took up the question of elections for the community leadership. Eighty women were present. Azaryahu made an impressive speech at the gathering, laying out her credo. Like Puhachevsky and Fishman, Azaryahu argued that feminism was an inseparable part of the Jewish national movement, and that the national project could not succeed if women were not granted equal rights. She explained that Hebrew suffragists had adopted the idea of women’s liberation from their gentile peers prior to their arrival in Palestine: “We absorbed it into our blood. [Progressive ideas] became an inseparable part of our spiritual and moral lives; we cannot and will not give them up.”70 Suffragism was as integral to the characters of the leaders of the women’s associations as their commitment to Hebrew education and their professional training. A few weeks later, on March 11, another assembly granted Haifa’s women the vote.

The Sephardim who opposed equality for women assumed that they commanded a majority and that the women would fail in the forthcoming elections. But they were proved wrong. On the polling days, March 19–20, a woman was elected to the community council.71 That was not the end of
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the matter, however—the opponents of granting the vote to women did not give up and kept on fighting. Yet in the next elections, in the fall of 1920, two women, both from the Women’s Association slate, won seats.72 The campaign for women’s suffrage in Haifa suggests that opposition among the traditional Sephardi population was not as intense as that among the traditional Ashkenazi population.

In a rare emotional passage in her autobiography, Azaryahu acknowledged that her suffragist campaign in Haifa “opened a new, full, and profoundly interesting chapter in my life. This chapter enriched the second half of my life . . . with experiences that remain in a person’s soul until the last day of his life and as a precious gift of fate.”73 But Azaryahu remained active in Haifa for only a short time. At the end of the summer of 1919 she moved to Jerusalem, where she carried on her campaign with redoubled intensity.74

Orthodoxy Elicits Female Resolve: Petah Tikvah

The local struggles chronicled thus far show that the success of suffragist campaigns depended on the nature of the community in which they were waged. It was this that determined the vigor of the campaign and its duration. Petah Tikvah, a moshavah founded in 1878 by families from Jerusalem’s Old Yishuv, was abandoned by its original settlers two years later. With European immigrants belonging to the proto-Zionist Hovevei Zion movement, its founders reestablished it at the end of 1882; together, the two groups constituted a very conservative community. During World War I Petah Tikvah had a population of about 3,000.

Here, too, the changes brought about by the British conquest prompted the moshavah’s women to seek to participate in public life. Hannah Zlatopovsky (later Hebraized to Zahavi), who emerged as a moshavah activist, explained, “Now that we are about to receive self-government . . . we also demand the right to speak our minds.”75 The Hebrew suffragists of Petah Tikvah, like their colleagues in other settlements, directly linked the right to vote to the Jewish national enterprise.

The moshavah assembly was held just two days after the last of the exiles returned from the north of the country, on October 13, 1918.76 It was an especially tempestuous meeting.77 Petah Tikvah’s workers, who owned no property and had thus been excluded from the political arena, now spoke up and demanded to be allowed to vote and be elected to the local govern-
ing committee. At the same time, a group of women living in the village demanded their rights. As far as is known, however, the two disenfranchised groups made no attempt to cooperate. Did the workers of Petah Tikvah, as elsewhere, fear that a joint campaign would ruin their chances to get the vote? Whatever the case, their demand was quickly met, but the women’s demand was rejected.

That was not the end of it. The moshavah’s women continued to push for the vote, stressing not only their contribution to the settlement’s establishment and success but also, in particular, the anguish that they had endured: “Did we not suffer as much as you from every affliction?” they asked. They were also aware that their campaign was part of a larger international effort, because it was “an issue all over the world.” Voting was a fundamental human right, they claimed. Baruch Raab, a founder of the moshavah who backed the women, declared: “We need to move forward, not backward.” Advancing the status of women was perceived as a way to improve society as a whole.

The suffragists in Petah Tikvah did not despair. Although elections were held without their participation, they carried on their campaign. In the midst of the election (December 24–26, 1918), seven of them appeared in the auditorium where voting took place and took the ballot box hostage. They announced that if they were not given the right to vote they would not allow the poll to proceed. In Petah Tikvah, as elsewhere in the world, when men took a determined stand against them, women were radicalized to the point of taking the law into their own hands. The women of Petah Tikvah presented a petition to the local council bearing the signatures of a large number of the village’s women. But none of these actions led to the desired result. They did, however, lead to the establishment of the first local women’s association with a political agenda.

The opposition to women’s suffrage of most of Petah Tikvah’s inhabitants, men and women alike, was especially intractable. The controversy continued for another two decades. During this period the Yishuvwide Assembly of Representatives and most local councils allowed women to participate. In Petah Tikvah women were not given the vote until 1940, more than sixty years after the moshavah was founded. By that time the founding Haredi generation had passed on and new inhabitants had arrived, changing the character of the moshavah to a certain extent.
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The Jerusalem Women’s Association:
From Local Struggle to National Organization

Jerusalem, the largest city in Palestine and home to the country’s largest Jewish community, suffered even worse during the war than did other places. When the British entered the city in December 1917 it was, as one writer has put it, like “a sick person who has begun to recover from a lengthy and fatal disease.” Some 46,000 Jews lived in the city in 1914 and constituted the majority of its total population of 70,000. By the time the war ended, the Jewish community had shrunk to only 26,000. That included a large Haredi Ashkenazi population of Torah scholars who did not sympathize with Zionism and its goals. The Sephardi community was more diverse, consisting of Ottoman subjects, North Africans, Persians, and others. Many of the Sephardim worked for their living, but many others depended on charity. There was also a third group: maskilim—Jews with secular educations and progressive ideas—of different levels of religious observance and commitment to Zionism. The size of this third group is difficult to estimate. With the arrival of the new regime, the members of the Holy City’s Jews sought to rehabilitate their communities and remedy the damage the war had wrought.

The mania for organization that overcame the Yishuv as a whole did not pass over Jerusalem’s women. One of the city’s leading suffragists, a pre-school teacher named Hasyah Feinsud-Sukenik, later remembered: “I recall how the late Sarah Thon came to us, a group of women in Jerusalem, with the appeal: ‘Will we Hebrew women sit with our hands in our pockets at a time when our forces are weak and small, will we sit idly?’” Thon, who moved with her family to Jerusalem in the spring of 1917 after their expulsion from Tel Aviv, worked on charitable projects. Simultaneously, some Jerusalem women formed an association that restricted itself to charitable activities. Efforts had to be focused on easing the hardships of the war. But the Jerusalem Women’s Association’s avoidance of politics also derived from the Haredi nature of the city. As Ada Fishman wrote, “each city and its own war, each moshavah and its discontents. The women of Jerusalem have not to this day dared bring up this issue about the participation of women in the Jerusalem City Committee.”

At this time the city’s men began to reorganize Jerusalem’s Jewish community. In 1918, two governing committees were established—the Jeru-
salem Jewish Committee (Va‘ad HaKehilah) and the Ashkenazi City Committee (HaVa‘ad HaAshkenazi). The latter did not accept the authority of the former and was led by extreme Haredim. The Zionist leaders who lived in the city sought to unify the two committees and, by democratizing and unifying community institutions, to buttress the standing of Jerusalem’s Jewish community. To do so, it was necessary to hold elections, and this raised the question of whether women could participate. In May 1918 representatives of the two committees decided that only men would be permitted to vote. Furthermore, the elections would be “free, secret, direct, general, and equal for all Jerusalem’s male Jews.” The decree angered many Jews, especially those from the labor movement, and led to an evasive action—a postponement of the elections.

Even women who opposed women’s suffrage in principle took part in the debate, as recounted by a reporter for Ha’aretz: “Many of the educated women also say that in their opinion women have a more important role in life than to attend to the political intrigues and crafty alliances that are part of political life. The usefulness of women to society is greater than entry into the parliamentary game.” The question of what women’s roles were and whether women could take part in both home life and politics greatly troubled Western society during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Both men and women feared that, if women crossed the boundary from the private to the public realm, the home and family would suffer. Moreover, some believed that the very nature of political activity, with its deceptions and machinations, was contrary and even injurious to feminine nature.

The reluctance of the Jerusalem Women’s Association’s members to engage in political activity apparently irked the suffragists of Tel Aviv. On January 30, 1919, three delegates came to Jerusalem and held a public meeting. These three—Sarah Thon (who had temporarily moved back to Tel Aviv), Esther Yeivin, and Ada Fishman convened about fifty of Jerusalem’s women in the local assembly hall and called on Jerusalem’s women to take part in political activity.

The Tel Aviv initiative brought results only a short time later. A group of Jerusalem women founded a local political women’s association. On February 1, 1919, they reported that they had begun preparations for the next elections and that they had elected a steering committee for their new association. Jerusalem’s women seem to have entered the political fray at a relatively late date in part because they lacked a charismatic and determined
leader. Although Sarah Thon had moved to the city and lent her hand to charitable projects, she was ambivalent when it came to political aspirations. Her husband, Ya’akov Thon, was deeply involved at the time in the effort to found a unified committee representing Jerusalem’s Jews, and he maintained that this goal required the postponement, for a time, of the grant of suffrage to women. This stratagem of postponement enabled him and others like him to declare their commitment in principle to the idea of equality while at the same time refraining from taking any action to promote it.

Did Ya’akov Thon’s position influence his wife? Sarah Thon found herself torn between conflicting duties—between motherhood and public affairs, between suffragism and family loyalty, between the interests of women and the interests of the public as a whole. Her letters clearly show that she supported women’s right to vote without reservation. But, like Nehamah Puhachevsky, she thought patience preferable to passion. Thon’s life story—which Rafi Thon, her son, wrote (and whose title can be translated into English as “A Struggle for Equal Rights for Women”)—is an example of the way many supporters of equal rights for women found themselves torn between what they saw at that moment as the good of the Jewish nation and their feminist principles.

The right of Jerusalem’s Jewish women to vote for the Jerusalem Jewish Committee was postponed again and again. But their spirits remained high, and they continued to promote their ideas and to volunteer to provide women in need with legal services. The women’s campaign for the vote continued in full force until 1932. By that time, in Jerusalem, as elsewhere, the demographic growth of the New Yishuv population had made an impact. Women finally won the right to vote in local elections, and two were elected to seats on the Jerusalem Jewish Committee. However, the separate Ashkenazi City Committee, which represented only the city’s extreme Haredim, refused to give rights to women and remained an independent and separate body.

Presumably it was this ongoing deep struggle that impelled Jerusalem’s suffragists to found, in the summer of 1919, an umbrella organization that united all the Yishuv’s local women’s associations—the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights. Its founders stated explicitly that it was the opposition of the Haredim and their supporters that convinced them that this national body was necessary. Feinsud-Sukenik, who headed the Jerusalem organization (in addition to being chairwoman of the Council of Preschool
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Teachers, wrote in her autobiography that it was one of the most challenging jobs she had ever undertaken. The slogan that she and her associates kept in mind, she said, was the saying attributed to Hillel the Elder: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

Between Principle and Implementation

The local struggles recounted here clearly show that when women battled for their rights in communities belonging to the New Yishuv, the battle was generally a brief one, even in comparison to those that took place in other Western countries. In Zionist circles it was generally accepted that the national enterprise required equality for women. The innovative atmosphere and character of the New Yishuv was evident in many other areas as well, such as the adoption of modern styles in architecture, painting, and sculpture and the assimilation of current medical and psychological practices. The New Yishuv was quick to internalize not only the national idea but also an entire range of other modern universal concepts that prevailed in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century, among them the need to improve the status of women. Yet at the same time, the extreme part of the Old Ashkenazi Yishuv remained obdurate, rejecting new ideas. It organized itself separately so as to have no part in the program of equality.

These local struggles also show that the nature and character of a given society are the most fundamental factors in whether the society granted or denied women the vote. Furthermore, they demonstrate categorically that women gained rights only where they spearheaded the campaign. In fact, it is much easier for women to make their way into local politics than onto the national stage. Local politics is, after all, an arena of community action, and it is thus seen as appropriate for women. As the battle intensified, the determination and power of Hebrew suffragists grew. In a pamphlet published on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights, one member wrote that when the men asked the women to set aside their goals, “they achieved the opposite. It provided ammunition for our crusade. Women who had hitherto hesitated about whether to lend a hand to the fight for equal rights now saw that the battle was their battle.”