Girls of Liberty
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Published by Brandeis University Press

Shilo, Margalit.
Girls of Liberty: The Struggle for Suffrage in Mandatory Palestine.
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Five Years of Struggle and a Victory

The question of women’s rights must therefore receive a final solution in this session, so that it [will] no longer be a nemesis for the National Council.

—Y. A. Navon, “BeSivkhey haVa’ad haLe’umi”

Contrary to expectations, the elections to the first Assembly of Representatives did not mark the end of the struggle for equality. The fight continued for another five years before finally ending in victory in January 1926. The suffragists ratcheted up their campaign and raised their voices even louder. During this period, the League of Nations officially granted Great Britain a Mandate over Palestine and the territory’s borders were established. In 1921, Arabs rioted in Jaffa, killing Jews and shaking Jewish-Arab coexistence. When peace was restored, it was a tense one. Sir Herbert Samuel’s tenure as high commissioner, a time of both achievements and failures, ended in the summer of 1925, when he was replaced by Lord Palmer.

Demographically, the Jewish population of Palestine more than doubled during this period, thanks to two waves of immigration, the Third Aliyah and Fourth Aliyah. The immigrant influx expanded Tel Aviv, which was transformed from a garden suburb of Jaffa into a city in its own right. It also swelled the populations of the country’s other cities and the moshavot. Some of these immigrants founded new communal agricultural settlements—kibbutzim and moshavim.

On the political level, labor organizations and parties became the dominant force in the Yishuv. At the same time, the Old Yishuv’s share of the Jewish population diminished. Yet while the Yishuv grew and developed, its national institutions—the Assembly of Representatives and the National Council—remained weak and lacked effective organization.

The Assembly of Representatives met first in October 1920 and only a handful of times afterward. The Haredim continued to refuse to participate, fearing that they would become dependent on this secular organization—
one that would control their most vital services, such as education, the distribution of charitable funds, and kosher slaughter. The lack of cooperation between the Yishuv’s two sectors led the Mandate administration to refrain from granting the power of taxation to the newly established Yishuv institutions, thus impeding their ability to function. Likewise, the Zionist Executive, protecting its own turf, held back in granting the Yishuv institutions’ request for cooperation. In the midst of all this, the women’s question, “the question that made public life miserable,” remained on the public agenda.

The National Council, chosen from among the members of the Assembly of Representatives, served as its executive body. To satisfy the Haredim, all thirty-six members of the Council were men. However, seventeen alternate members were also chosen, and among these were two women, Rachel Yana’it and Dr. Hannah Maisel Shochat, both members of the labor movement. Yana’it had recently married Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, who chaired the Council. Maisel, the founder of the country’s first women’s farm, was the wife of Eli’ezer Shochat, also a delegate to the Assembly, and the sister-in-law of Yisra’el Shochat, who served on the Council. It is not clear whether the two were chosen mostly for their family connections or because of their considerable personal achievements.

This slight to women angered and frustrated the members of the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights. Its president, Rosa Welt Straus, declared in a letter to the journal that she was profoundly disappointed by the exclusion of women from full membership in the National Council.

The Council showed itself to be a conciliatory and subdued body, reflecting the nature of its three chairmen. Ya’akov Thon, who had chaired the Provisional Committee, had been a compromiser, but his initiatives were usually rejected by its other members. Ben-Zvi was a leader of Ahdut HaAvodah, which was one of the two main parties in the labor movement at that time that advocated equality for women, but he was also known as a seeker of consensus. David Yellin, an educator born into the Old Yishuv who sought to unite it with the New Yishuv, maintained that there was no halakhic prohibition against women’s participation in elections. He thus believed that the Haredim would slowly come around to accepting the new rules. The leaders of the National Council recognized women’s right to vote in principle but viewed putting it into action as a matter of secondary importance. Their paramount objective was to obtain British recognition of the Yishuv’s governing institutions, and to do that they needed the Haredim to cooper-
“politics of expediency” was pursued by progressive forces in many countries that supported women’s rights but held off implementing them in for economic or practical political reasons. The women’s question was thus a central cause of the paralysis of the Yishuv’s elected institutions. Their inaction disappointed the Yishuv, as Ben-Zvi noted in the autumn of 1921. “There is a sense of total apathy in all our work and no project is accomplished properly,” he complained. The only way out seemed to lie in the second session of the Assembly of Representatives, scheduled for February 1922. Resolving the women’s issue was on the agenda. But the Haredim issued an ultimatum to the National Council: as long as women’s right to vote and be elected to office was not rescinded, they would not take part in the Assembly. The Haredim’s poor showing in the elections, rather than prompting them to compromise, caused them to make increasingly extreme demands.

The flames of hostility between the Old and New Yishuvs grew higher. The New Yishuv was appalled when, in February 1922, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld and his right-hand man Jacob Israël De-Haan met with the British press baron Lord Northcliffe, a strident anti-Zionist. The Haredim asked Northcliffe to recommend to the British authorities that they recognize the Haredim as a separate Jewish community, legally distinct from the New Yishuv. It was the first practical step the Haredi leadership had made toward seceding from the organized Yishuv, and its implications were clear to all. The New Yishuv viewed the meeting with Lord Northcliffe as tantamount to treason. The antagonism it caused would lead, two years later, to the Yishuv’s first political assassination. The Union organized a public meeting in Jerusalem on February 19–20, 1922, to protest Haredi intransigence. At the protest meeting and rally the Union’s members boldly raised their voices.

The Mizrahi movement nevertheless persisted in its support for the Haredim. Rabbi Moshe Ostrovski—whose wife, Hinda, was one of the founders of the Mizrahi Women organization in the Yishuv—put it this way: “We don’t say whether women are permitted or forbidden to participate in elections, but one thing is clear to us, that it is that in complete opposition to the opinions and views of most parts of the Hebrew public in Palestine.” Mizrahi also vehemently opposed recognizing the results of the first elections and adhered to its decision not to participate in the Assembly of Representatives as long as the Haredim were not present.
But the two religious groups were not the only ones to boycott the Assembly. The parties representing the farmers of the moshavot and the Sephardim saw an opportunity to flex their muscles. But after meeting with them, the leaders of the National Council were able to mollify these factions. The leaders’ many meetings with the Haredim, however, were futile and showed just how weak the elected bodies were. Yoseph Klausner described the situation in harsh terms: “You had to see the most respected figures in Palestinian Jewry running . . . harried and frantic . . . inveigling and appeasing—and all this just so that the most rotten part of the Yishuv endorse the nation’s renewal.”

The Second Session of the Assembly of Representatives

Whatever power the Assembly of Representatives had, it possessed by virtue of its very existence. It convened for its second session on March 6–9, 1922, in the Zion Theater in downtown Jerusalem, a venue perfectly suited to the body’s significance. With seating for 900, the hall was equipped with electric lighting at a time when Jerusalem homes lacked this amenity. Zionist flags, the banners of the twelve tribes of Israel, and photographs of Zionist leaders adorned the walls. On the day it convened, the Haredim sent the Assembly an open letter calling on the factions of the Left to decide against women’s suffrage, “and then all Haredi Judaism will come to join with you in the organizational work.” The demand was rejected categorically. The secretary who recorded the proceedings noted that the seats assigned to the Haredim and Mizrahi remained empty, and Assembly Speaker Yellin regretted this in his opening remarks: “These [empty] seats call and shout out to that part that has not yet come—come and join us!”

A smaller number of delegates attended this time—in fact, to keep costs down, only about 200 of the 314 delegates elected were invited to participate. This time, the Assembly operated with greater efficiency, thanks in part to the absence of the Haredim. The Communities Ordinance, which required every Jew in Palestine to belong to the Yishuv’s official bodies, was approved, and the national institutions were authorized to levy mandatory taxes on the country’s Jews. But these decisions required the Mandate government’s ratification, which was not forthcoming. The British claimed that the rights granted to the Jews needed to be appropriate for the Arab pop-
ulation as well. The National Council thus remained paralyzed and lost prestige.

In the end, the women’s issue did not come up at this session. It was put off for the next one, which was slated to convene during the following year. It seems likely that the leaders of the Assembly thought that this postponement would make it possible for the Haredim to participate in the next session. In the meantime, the women’s issue was put into the deep freeze, and the elation that had prevailed at the first session had turned into skepticism by this point. Ada Fishman wrote sarcastically in Do’ar Hayom: “The most important thing in the second session is whether the [labor] left will stick to its capitulationist-compromising tactics in the future as well.” Once again, at the end of the second session, no women were appointed full members of the National Council, only as alternates. But this tactic did have some partial success—Mizrachi consented to accept seats on the National Council. The proceedings of the National Council between the second and third Assembly sessions show that the two women serving as alternate members, Yana’it and Glicklich, both representing Ahdut HaAvodah, participated in National Council meetings.

Nevertheless, the dispute with the Haredim led to a new round of pleas to the women who sat in the Assembly of Representatives. They were asked to give up their seats, but they remained steadfast in their beliefs that women should not give up even one iota of their rights and that it was their responsibility to ensure the liberal character of the Jewish national society in the making.

Toward a Split: Initial Feelers

It gradually became clear that the Haredim intended to secede from the rest of the Yishuv and that the fight over women’s political rights was merely a proxy for a more general war against the New Yishuv’s intention of dominating the Jewish community in Palestine. Rabbi Yisra’el Porat asserted that Haredi intransigence was aimed at frustrating “the desire of the left-wing minority to rule and impose its ideals and opinions on the Haredi majority.” The Haredim announced that they were “against cooperation with secular Jews . . . and against . . . paying taxes to a Council of Sabbath violators and consumers of forbidden foods.” They justified this separatist stance by
referring to traditional Jewish sources and historical experience. They explained their position at length in letters they sent in English to the Colonial Office in London, in which they declared that they were forbidden to live under the authority of the secular National Council.\textsuperscript{38} 

In the debate over women’s suffrage the Haredim emphatically rejected modern standards, but that did not keep them from shrewdly invoking democratic values in their dialogue with the British. They reiterated their claim that they were the majority among Palestine’s Jews,\textsuperscript{39} and that they should thus not be compelled to become part of the organized Yishuv. Such coercion would be in violation of British law as well as the Mandate charter, both of which recognized individual and religious freedom.\textsuperscript{40} They also argued that they were being forced to be part of a community that granted women the right to vote, even though this was not the practice—or so they claimed—in any other Jewish community. They met with High Commissioner Samuel and asked him to recognize them as a separate community.\textsuperscript{41} In letters to the League of Nations in Geneva, they tried to block ratification of the British Mandate.\textsuperscript{42} The British—who, following Ottoman practice, categorized the Yishuv as a religious community—took the Haredi claims very seriously and for that reason held off ratifying the charter of the Yishuv’s national institutions.\textsuperscript{43} 

Articles condemning cooperation with the Assembly of Representatives appeared frequently in the Haredi press.\textsuperscript{44} In the Haredi view, establishing themselves as a separate community was the right and proper thing to do: “[we have come to] realize clearly that Torah-observant Jews are not permitted and are not able to be organized into a single common community with public desecrators of the Sabbath and heretics.”\textsuperscript{45} As the time for ratifying the Communities Ordinance approached, separatist efforts increased. On June 22, 1924, a public prayer service was held at the Western Wall to protest the imposition of the ordinance. Rabbi Sonnenfeld wrote: “It is a time of tribulation for the Jewish community, a danger of destruction, may it not be, hovers over the Torah, religion and the entire Haredi Yishuv.”\textsuperscript{46} Three thousand Haredim signed a petition to the colonial secretary asking for recognition as a separate community.\textsuperscript{47} Preparations were made for sending a delegation to London to make this request in person. 

The tension between the Haredim and the New Yishuv reached its climax on June 30, 1924. De-Haan was shot dead outside the Sha’arei Tzedek hospital on Jaffa Road. He had been meant to travel to London as part of a
Haredi delegation to meet with Colonial Office officials as part of Haredi efforts to gain recognition as a separate community. His death is considered to be the modern Yishuv’s first political assassination. The furor aroused by the murder further fanned the flames between the warring factions. British officials voiced their concern that the killing would make it harder for them to recognize the Assembly of Representatives. Women’s suffrage was temporarily pushed into the background of a pitched battle waged by the Haredim against their subordination to the Yishuv’s autonomous governing institutions.

Referendum: The Union in Opposition

In search for a solution to the deadlock over women’s suffrage, Mizrahi—aware that in other countries popular majorities had usually voted against granting the vote to women—had since the spring of 1919 waged an inconsistent campaign for a referendum on women’s suffrage in the Yishuv. Referendums can be double-edged swords. On the one hand, they are perceived to be the ultimate in democracy, but on the other hand, they can exacerbate societal rifts and cause a severe crisis of legitimacy for the regime that sponsors them. In some of the United States as well as European countries (Switzerland, in particular), referendums came to be accepted as the best way of making decisions about voting rights. The Mizrahi movement became so fervent about the subject that, as Rabbi Yehuda Leib Fishman acknowledged, “We’ve made ourselves a laughing stock among the Haredim.”

Referendums on women’s suffrage in other places had been held in different formats. In some, both men and women voted; in others, only men or only women participated. Taken as a whole, these referendums showed that broad-based support for women’s suffrage among women could not be taken for granted, and in many cases more women opposed it than supported it. For example, in the public debate leading up to a referendum in Massachusetts in 1895, members of a women’s party opposing suffrage argued that even voting no in a referendum would be a violation of their absolute opposition to women’s involvement in politics. They thus boycotted the poll. American anti-suffragists argued that referendums on the subject should be restricted to women, on the ground that democracy required that women decide the issue for themselves.
The National Council leaders agreed in principle in 1923 with the referendum proposal, thus implicitly declaring that women’s voting rights were a matter of choice rather than of principle. Advocates of a referendum thought that it could bring the controversy to an end, whereas opponents on both sides of the issue rejected it, claiming that they would not accept the results. Leaders of the labor movement supported the idea of a referendum halfheartedly, hoping that it might pave the way toward British recognition of the Yishuv’s autonomous institutions.

The National Council’s position is difficult to understand. Did its members think that the Haredim would accept the referendum results? Perhaps they thought that if a referendum denied women the right to vote, the labor camp would accept the people’s judgment, and that if it granted the right, the Haredim would break away but Mizrahi and the other conservative factions—the Sephardim and farmers—would accept the results and participate in the Assembly. Members of the Union and some women in the labor movement argued that consenting to a referendum was tantamount to giving up a right they had already exercised. The controversy over a referendum proved so fierce that the idea was tabled for the time being.

In the spring of 1924, with the approach of the Assembly of Representatives’ third session, Mizrahi broached an idea that had been bandied about several times over the previous five years—holding a referendum on women’s suffrage. The women of the Union felt that they needed to ratchet up their campaign and produce “a single enormous voice of protest,” so they declared a nationwide Women’s Rights Campaign Day for April 2, 1924. They planned it in detail: there would be rallies in settlements and cities, posters, and leaflets explaining the roles played by women in building the Yishuv and on feminist activism. Calling on Yishuv women “for whom the idea of women’s liberation is close and dear to their hearts,” Union members asked for help organizing the rallies and urged women to participate in protests against the referendum. Azaryahu wrote a pointed article for Ha’aretz, arguing that any concession on women’s suffrage would open the door to demands for still further concessions.

She was not alone in this assessment. Leading figures on the National Council were also coming to the conclusion that yielding to the Haredim was simply providing an incentive for them to issue more demands. Azaryahu pledged that she and her colleagues would not compromise “on our natural rights to participate in the building of our land. . . . For a quar-
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ter of a century we have been brought up as Zionist women in the spirit of absolute equality and we will never forfeit this right."63 She spoke from a position of strength and with a fierce belief in women’s ability to stand their ground. The two dailies, Ha’aretz and Do’ar Hayom, that assiduously reported the Union’s efforts also loyally supported its campaign.

The response was enthusiastic. Large crowds showed up for the rallies, at which both women and men spoke. The rally in Jerusalem was held at one of the city’s largest venues, outside Beit Ha’Am. The yard was packed. Most of those present were associated with the labor movement, and the mood was exultant.64 The most notable speaker was Henrietta Szold, the founder of Hadassah and the head of the Hebrew Women’s Organization. She stressed that it was vital for the national enterprise to be founded on the principles of equality and justice, including full participation for women.65 Turning a term of Haredi vituperation against them, she said that they, not the supporters of women’s suffrage, were “fence breakers”—that is, they breached a social norm.66 Azaryahu and Hasyah Feinsud-Sukenik of the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights also spoke, as did Rachel Yana’it of Ahдут HaAvodah, the well-known pediatrician Dr. Helena Kagan, and Yoseph Klausner.67

Klausner pointed to the great advances in women’s suffrage in Europe and North America and condemned the Yishuv’s stagnation on the issue.68 He extolled the traditional Jewish prohibition against causing harm to another person and argued that considering women as inferior to men conflicted with enlightened Judaism and Zionism. A referendum on women’s right to vote was, he said, tantamount to asking voters to decide whether or not women were human beings. “This is our unchanging, adamant position and we will not move from it. We will not budge!” he concluded.69 The crowd applauded and cheered the speakers’ categorical rejection of a referendum.70

The Third Session Approaches: The Union Intensifies Its Campaign

The Yishuv grew considerably between the Assembly of Representatives’ first and third sessions, and most of the newcomers were affiliated with the New Yishuv. As a result, the Assembly elected in 1920 no longer represented the population, causing unease among Yishuv leaders. The National Council Executive issued a statement saying that “the time has come for the New He-
brew Yishuv in Palestine, which has almost doubled its numbers during this period, to make its wishes heard.”

The time that had passed and the changing demographic characteristics of the Yishuv raised hopes that the women’s question had become anachronistic. Yana’it’s reaction was: “I had hoped not to hear the same old argument in the National Council today.”

But new elections meant crafting the rules by which they would be held, and that meant a decision regarding women’s right to vote had to be made. The Union thus redoubled its campaign. It sent letters chronicling previous parts of the campaign, signed by Welt Straus and the seven members of its executive committee, to Zionist offices around the globe. No halakhic prohibition was involved, they maintained, stressing women’s contributions to building the land. They would not compromise on their legal rights, they declared, and they asked the Yishuv’s women’s “sisters, wherever they are... to stand at our side in this war and to help [us], with all the power of influence they wield, achieve total victory.” They sent a special letter to Szold, asking her to convene Hadassah’s governing council and send the National Council a telegram in support of the struggle. Such a message was “of extreme importance,” they wrote.

These appeals to Zionist organizations brought the results the women had hoped. On the eve of the third session of the Assembly, the Yishuv press was full of stories of cables that Zionist women’s organizations from various countries had sent to the National Council and the Union. The messages adamantly opposed the suggestion that Yishuv women might be deprived of their right to vote. They demanded that the election regulations conform to the rules of justice and equality. Szold once again stood by the Union, calling in a telegram to Welt Straus for the Assembly of Representatives to ratify women’s right to vote. Anything else, she asserted, would be unbefitting the new Jewish society that had been established in the people’s national home. In a single move, the Union’s campaign had the effect of making women’s rights, once and for all, an inseparable part of Zionist ideology and of creating an international sisterhood of Jewish women.

But that was not all. The women of the Union made their voices heard throughout the Yishuv. They organized women’s rallies supporting women’s suffrage in Haifa and Jerusalem, in Jaffa and Tel Aviv, and in the moshavot. They once again packed Jerusalem’s Beit Ha‘Am auditorium, and Do’ar Hayom reported that there were more men in attendance than women. The speakers included members of the Union; representatives of the labor
movement; and Klausner, the Union’s veteran supporter. They stressed that the question facing the Assembly of Representatives at this juncture was not that of whether to grant women the right to vote but that of whether to revoke a right that women had already exercised in the first Yishuvwide elections. These rallies ended by adopting resolutions adamantly calling on the Assembly to “not take away the right!” As Welt Straus put it, “we are not now discussing here the question of whether to grant women the right to vote but rather whether to rescind it, the first and only such spectacle in the history of the women’s liberation movement, which can bring no honor to our revitalizing land.”

The Assembly Decides and Splits

The Assembly of Representatives convened for its third session on June 15–17, 1925, at the Zion Theater. The regulations that would govern the next election were on its agenda. The Haredim, who declared that they refused to give in to the dictates of the New Yishuv, did not attend. In their absence, the presence of women in the Assembly and audience was all the more evident, and the general feeling was that the time had come to make a decision. Ya’akov Thon, who still hoped that he could bring the body to accede to the Haredi demand for a referendum and thus entice them to take part in the proceedings, made a secret deal with them with the help of Yellin. It contained two provisions: that the Assembly would approve a referendum by secret ballot, and that the Haredim would accept the results of the referendum—but only if the proposal to grant women the vote was defeated. This patently undemocratic compact was aimed at getting the Haredim to participate in the session so that the Assembly could claim to represent all of Palestine’s Jews. When the agreement was brought before the delegates for a vote, they were shocked. Azaryahu stressed in the debate about the scheme that women had been sitting alongside rabbis at Zionist Congresses for an entire generation, and no one had ever objected to their presence or suggested that the halakhah forbade women to vote. She spoke of the prevailing winds in Western society, where women were now accepted as equal members of the world’s parliaments. “They now come with a demand that the decision be given over to the minority, something unheard of everywhere,” she concluded. Years later she wrote that her speech was met “with a huge thunder of cheers and lengthy applause.”
The unexpected pact was put to a vote. The result was unequivocal—53 for and 130 against. In response, the delegates of the Mizrahi, Sephardi, and Yemenite factions immediately walked out of the hall, to boos from their fellow delegates. Yet the walkout was a clear sign that the Assembly of Representatives had come to an end. The remaining delegates were anxious. Had the Assembly, Azaryahu wondered, “fallen, God forbid, never to rise again?” The next morning, after expressing regret at the exit of the Haredim and their supporters, the Assembly passed the bylaws that would govern the elections to a new Assembly. The rules included the following section: “Every Jew, without regard to sex or class, has a right to vote and to be elected.” It was also decided that the elections would be held within three weeks. Both these decisions were of great importance. According to the newspaper HaPo’el HaTza’ir, “the third session adjourned in elation and confidence that the Yishuv will be able to overcome the obstacles that various irresponsible parties have placed in the way of our organization.”

But the opponents of women’s suffrage did not sit on their hands. Fifty of the delegates who had walked out assembled the next day and declared that they were the legal Assembly. “The people are with us . . . we are the Assembly of Representatives,” they announced. They chose a provisional, mostly Haredi, National Council and an Election Commission and planned to demand that the Zionist Executive support their organization. It looked as if the split in the Yishuv was final.

Referendum Redux

The Assembly’s decision to hold new elections inspired the women of the Union. They began to organize rallies and home meetings “in all sectors of the people to persuade them to go to the polls and vote for those who defend their rights.” They also took part in joint rallies with other parties. But it seemed as if the subject, and the Union’s reiteration of its message, now bored the public. Davar reported that a rally in Petah Tikvah where Azaryahu had spoken had been sparsely attended. Yet the blow that knocked the wind out of the sails of the Union came from an unexpected direction: the elections were postponed once again.

The immediate cause was Mizrahi. The members of the religious Zionist movement asked for time to rethink their strategy. Admitting that they had been too hasty in walking out, they maintained, “The women’s question is
not even an issue for us.” They once again raised the worn banner of a referendum, promising that they and the Haredim would accept the results unconditionally. They sent their proposal to the press. Some of the Sephardi and Yemenite delegates who had walked out with Mizrahi expressed similar regrets. At first, the National Council categorically rejected any delay, and the referendum idea as well, on the ground that “the women’s question has become a sticking point. Because of it the National Council cannot progress with any work.” It sounds as if its members had accepted the split in the Yishuv and that the subject of a referendum had been exhausted. The Haredim also opposed the Mizrahi proposal, announcing in their newspaper Kol Yisra’el that “none of Haredi Jewry will take part in the referendum.” Despite all this, after debating the issue for two days, the National Council decided to delay the elections by three months.

This postponement, like previous ones, demonstrates the New Yishuv leadership’s profound desire to bring all of Palestine’s Jews under one roof. It also once again put the Union in the position of being seen as an impediment to Jewish unity. However, the members of the National Council did not want to be seen as infringing women’s rights or as setting aside the decisions of the Assembly of Representatives. They thus reasserted that the decision made in the third session regarding women’s participation in the elections was not open to appeal. Their desire to please all sides was evident at a meeting of the Provisional Committee Executive held in September 1925, which set the election day for November 8, 1925. But, it resolved, on the same ballot there would also be a referendum on women’s suffrage. According to one writer, this referendum, which he termed “the final concession,” was the last hope for saving Yishuv unity.

The decision angered the women of the Union, who refused to agree to a referendum. Although Welt Straus was not a member of the National Council, she had been present at the meeting where the referendum was decided on. She wrote in Ha’aretz that the decision violated the decisions of the Assembly of Representatives, as well as the Zionist movement’s democratic principles. “Who does not understand that by such means we shake the very foundations of our Yishuv?” she asked. Szold stood by the Union and sent a letter to the National Council demanding that women be given full rights to vote and to be elected to office.

Ada Fishman castigated the labor parties for agreeing to compromise. “Would they have consented to a referendum if the subject were men?” she
asked. A writer in the brand-new labor newspaper, Davar, supported her: “It is unheard of in a place where women have already participated in elections and have already been elected to the national legislature that this natural and inherent right be stolen from them and they [be] ejected from their people’s and their land’s legislature. In doing this, are we not making ourselves a laughingstock before the entire world?”

The Union’s members were unanimous in rejecting the referendum but divided on tactics. Should they participate in it and lend their support to those who supported women’s rights, or boycott it and thus strengthen their opponents? Most of them chose the first course. They worked to rouse public opinion in the cities and moshavot and to persuade women to vote against those who would rob them of their rights. But the members of the Tel Aviv chapter took the opposite tack, voting at two rallies to boycott the referendum. “We are washing our hands of it and will remain passive,” they declared. Esther Yeivin, the chapter’s chairwoman, argued that the National Council’s decision on the referendum was illegal and constituted a stinging affront to the Yishuv’s women. “We must, once and for all, decide and dare to protest and not give in,” she asserted. The Tel Aviv chapter sent a statement to the press calling on the “radical Hebrew” public to join in their protest and not vote in the referendum.

The disagreement between the Union’s national leadership in Jerusalem and the Tel Aviv branch was one of tactics, not principle. The women in Jerusalem believed that they needed to take part in the referendum and vote in favor of women’s suffrage, so that the initiative would be passed. The members in Tel Aviv, in contrast, maintained that participation in the referendum legitimized it. And elsewhere? In the estimation of Do’ar Hayom, “the demand for equal rights for women not only does not come from all the women in Palestine, but a large portion of them is willing to do without it or even utterly opposes it.” The religious newspaper Hed Ha’am agreed, arguing that “the larger part of the women in Palestine does not demand this right [to vote] and is not even concerned with it.” The eloquent reticence of the Yishuv’s women seems to support the newspapers’ claims. The same phenomenon of a paucity of interest by women in suffrage could be seen also in the United States, where most women abstained from the struggle and did not vote in referendums on the issue.

The hope that the Haredim would consent to accept the results of a referendum even if it went against them turned out to be a vain one. Two weeks
before the scheduled vote, an assembly of rabbis from all over the country declared its inalterable opposition to a referendum in which women could vote. The Chief Rabbinate also issued a prohibition against participating in the referendum. Kol Yisra’el published a stern warning against voting, signed by rabbis from the Yishuv, Europe, and the United States. Mizrahi realized that its strategy had been a mistake. It issued a statement calling for the referendum to be abandoned because “it is totally unnecessary and there is no need to take part in it.” The National Council agreed and immediately canceled the referendum. Yellin acknowledged that, over the years, “we conceded [to the Haredim] everything we could just so that they would take part,” but it had all been for nothing.

Yeivin proudly declared: “A disgrace for the Hebrew nation in Palestine has been averted.” At a meeting organized by the Union in Tel Aviv and attended by representatives of chapters around the country and many guests, the organization’s leaders maintained that they had paved the way for this achievement and that the Yishuv should “congratulate the Union of [Hebrew] Women for Equal Rights for its uncompromising battle for justice and equality.”

Victory for Women: The Second Elections

A new date was set for elections, December 6. The fractiousness that had been evident in the initial elections to the Assembly of Representatives increased. In 1920 about twenty parties had participated, while this time twenty-nine submitted slates. At the same time, the number of seats in the Assembly was reduced by a third. Thanks to a surge in immigration, however, the voting public had increased to approximately 58,000. Bulletin boards were plastered with posters announcing polling places and calling on people to vote. Rallies were held to urge people to perform their civic duty.

The Union worked hard to prepare for the elections. It submitted its slate of candidates to the Election Commission and launched its campaign. Welt Straus urged its members to do their part by donating to the election fund, making posters, and encouraging women to vote for lists that included female candidates. She concluded a letter to the Union’s members: “We must mobilize all our scattered strength and in the end victory will be ours.”
But opponents of the elections did not remain impassive. Haredi groups planned actions to interfere with the voting. *Kol Yisra’el* launched attacks on Mizrahi. The offices of the Jerusalem branch of the Haredi organization Agudat Yisra’el filled with energetic volunteers. *Kol Yisra’el* reported that “broadsides and prohibitions against the elections are published daily and plastered on walls and handed out to people.” Pious Jews all over the country were called on to sign a petition to the Mandate authorities declaring that the Haredi public was united in its opposition to the Assembly of Representatives. Particularly venomous attacks were made on Yana’it and Glicklich, alternative National Council members. At the Meah She’arim Yeshiva every weapon was fired: “boycotts, invective, and shofar blasts.” *Kol Yisra’el* published a “warning” that the elections would bring “a horrible disaster on the Holy Land and destruction and devastation on Judaism and the entire Jewish people.” But the rest of the public remained largely apathetic, “paralyzed,” as the Election Commission put it. Ben-Zvi lamented in *Davar* that “apathy has become natural for us in all relating to the organization of the Yishuv and the National Council.”

The lack of public enthusiasm for the campaign was evident in a sharp reduction in turnout. In 1920 a full 77 percent of those eligible voted, whereas in 1925 only 56.7 percent did so. Yehoshua Radler Feldman of Mizrahi recalled that five years previously some Jews had recited the festive sheheheyanu blessing on casting their vote, “their eyes sparkling with tears of joy.” He remembered that Oriental Jews had decorated the polling places with greenery and that voters had arrived singing, accompanied by drums and cymbals. But that kind of euphoria was nowhere to be seen in the second round.

The newspapers devoted much space to opposition to the elections and covered the event extensively. “Almost all the inhabitants of Jerusalem took the day off . . . heads of yeshivot recognized that it was essential to cancel studies on this day so as to give the young people a chance to fight the holy war,” the Haredi newspaper *Kol Yisra’el* reported. The obligation to engage in Torah study was set aside so as to enable yeshiva students to frighten the public and deter potential voters. The Election Commission reported that members of Agudat Yisra’el armed with sticks threatened citizens arriving to vote. But *Kol Yisra’el* painted a different picture: “Pioneers [members of the New Yishuv] brutally pummeled exhausted Jews and Torah scholars with
their fists.” Recall that, in 1920, Haredi polling places were considered dangerous.

The Election Commission reported that, despite the difficulties, “the elections proceeded in an orderly fashion throughout the country. Supervision . . . was excellent.” And the results clearly reflected the new political map and the changes that had taken place since the first poll. The women’s party made respectable gains, receiving 2,000 votes, which made it the fifth-largest faction, with 13 delegates. Another 12 women were elected on the slates of other parties. The number of women who were elected nearly doubled, in spite of the fact that the size of the Assembly had been reduced. They now constituted 11.4 percent of the delegates, as opposed to 4.5 percent in the previous Assembly. The labor parties won 92 of the 221 seats, together receiving 42.6 percent of the vote, up from 35.4 percent in the elections of 1920. Their victory constituted a victory for women’s right to vote.

The center or middle-class bloc, to which the Union belonged, included a number of other parties that also had women in their slates. Together the bloc won 73 seats, a third of the total (as opposed to a fifth in the first Assembly of Representatives). The bloc included the Revisionist Party, recently founded by Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who called himself a “male suffragist.” A third of the bloc was made up of ethnic slates, who with 40 seats constituted 16.3 percent of the total membership of the Assembly—down from 20 percent in 1920. The religious bloc suffered a heavy blow. Partly because of the Haredi boycott and partly because of the Yishuv’s changing demographics, it was the smallest group in the new Assembly, and Mizrahi, which had fought tirelessly to get the Haredim to participate, lost badly. The religious bloc was fractured into five different parties, and together these received only 16 seats, just 4.5 percent of the total (as opposed to 19.7 percent in 1920).

The Union’s leaders sensed their power. Their writings stress that they had fought and won the battle for women’s suffrage. Proudly, they reported in the IWSA’s journal that they had not been surprised by the Union’s triumph, even though other parties had been.
The End of the Struggle

Five weeks after the elections, on January 11, 1926, the Yishuv’s elected representatives again filled the Zion Theater in Jerusalem. The first session of the Second Assembly of Representatives was termed a “peace meeting,” but it in fact highlighted the fracture in the Yishuv. Yellin and the other members of the presidium gave welcoming speeches. Davar expressed the feelings of the public: “We come here from all parts of the Yishuv. Men and women without the infringement of rights and without a war for rights.” Years later Azaryahu recalled her excitement: “I remember very well the elation that filled every part of me . . . with a light heart I took my place among the delegates as an equal among equals.”

Really? The way the hall looked reflected the convoluted and obstacle-ridden road women had traveled to obtain equality. Davar reported acerbically that the twenty-five female delegates sat “crowded and close to each other, almost separate, almost as if in a separate women’s section.” It is not clear whether they did so out of habit or solidarity, or as a way of needling the Haredim. A reporter for Ha’aretz also mocked the “kosher” way the women delegates sat. In addition, the silence that the women observed throughout the meeting showed that they still had a long way to go before they were equal partners in the political system.

But the fruits of the struggle were nevertheless apparent. An overwhelming number of the delegates voted, at this first session, in favor of women’s rights. The resolution read: “The Second Assembly of Representatives of the Jews of the Land of Israel hereby declares the equal rights [of women] in all areas of the Hebrew Yishuv’s civil, political, and economic life, and demands that the [Mandate] government ensure equal rights in all the country’s laws.” At the IWSA congress held in Paris in the summer of 1926, Welt Straus declared that the resolution had been proposed by the Union. On December 31, 1927, the Mandate administration formally ratified the resolution. The struggle for women’s suffrage produced a new civil order that promised equality for women in all areas.

The equality resolution was not just lip service—it was immediately put into force. Four women were appointed to the National Council: Azaryahu and Yeivin from the Union and Yana’it and Fishman of the labor caucus. Two more women served as alternate members: Feinsod-Sukenik of the Union and Rachel Katznelson of the labor movement, who would later, as wife
of Israel’s third president, Zalman Shazar, serve as Israel’s first lady.167 The participation of women in the executive body, the National Council, guaranteed their standing and enabled them to play an active role in decision making.168 It is worth noting that, at this point, women had a larger representation in the Yishuv leadership than in the Zionist Executive, even though the Zionist movement had granted women the vote from the start. A writer for Ha’ishah marveled at this: “How could this have happened . . . that during all those years not a single woman had entered the Executive of the Zionist Organization?”169

In every publication of the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights throughout its history (1919–51), its leaders cited the granting of the vote to women in local and national elections as its most dramatic and important achievement. Azaryahu maintained that the Union had blazed the trail that led women onto the national stage.170 The fact that this successful campaign had been waged over the relatively brief period of eight years was, in her words, “a huge leap.”171 The unique strategy chosen by the Union—its constitution as a political party—was viewed by its members as the key factor in its electoral success, one that went far beyond that of suffragists in other countries at that time.172

The suffrage campaign was not only one of women for women. It changed Yishuv society. “How great was the revolution in its world-view and in the Yishuv’s way of thinking about women,” said Sarah Azaryahu. She saw it as part of a profound process of inner liberation of the souls of the Yishuv’s women, much like the sense of liberation that swept up nations in their struggles for independence. As she wrote, “both these movements suckle from a single source—the aspiration for freedom and self-determination of the nation and the individual, of man and of woman.”173 The Union’s women saw their victory in 1925–1926 as a jumping-off point for further efforts, such as rectification of the legal status of women in the family.174

Epilogue

The campaign had seemingly come to an end, but in fact it was not over. From time to time women’s suffrage reemerged as an issue during debates in local councils or in the Assembly of Representatives, or with regard to legislation by the Mandate administration.175 Two years after the question of women’s suffrage had been decided, Ostrovski, the Mizrahi leader, tabled
in front of the National Council new proposals for reconciliation with the Haredim to induce them to return to the Assembly. He proposed that women voters be permitted to fill out their ballots at home and give them to their husbands to place in the ballot boxes at polling stations. Alternatively, he suggested that separate polling places be instituted for men and women. His suggestions were rejected.176

Another attempt to roll back women’s suffrage came in 1932, when the Mandate administration, faced with Muslim objections to women’s participation in local elections and seeking to maintain a uniform legal system for all of Palestine’s inhabitants, proposed a provision that would grant the high commissioner the power to cancel women’s right to vote in local council elections. The Union protested vociferously. Welt Straus brought the proposal before an IWSA congress in Marseilles, which denounced the initiative. This condemnation, along with petitions by the Union to the high commissioner and the British Ministry of Justice, forced the withdrawal of the proposal.177

The women serving in the National Council responded vigorously each time Mandate or Jewish authorities attempted what Azaryahu called “acts of public violence”—that is, a rollback of women’s rights. Jewish women, she declared, would “never agree to be a second-class citizens in their land and among their nation.”178 Given the attempts of some religious authorities in today’s Israel to enforce increasing public segregation of the sexes, Feinsud-Sukenik proved prophetic when she said that sex-segregated polling places would lead the Yishuv down a dangerous road. “We don’t have separate streets and cars for women,” she said, “so why should we make our elections into a farce when there is no reason to do so?”179

These and similar attempts made it clear to Azaryahu and her colleagues that the equality they had achieved remained shaky. In the spring of 1936 she acknowledged that “women remain the weak side of society that can, at any opportunity, be cast aside.”180 This sense did not fade with time. A short time after Israel was founded, the Union’s women sent a letter to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion expressing their concern about discrimination against women. They wrote: “A nation that demands a position of equality and freedom for itself among the family of nations is required first to establish its own life on these principles. It cannot discriminate between the two parts of the nation, men and women.”181