Victory and Defeat

The question of women’s rights is a question of Zionism’s right to exist.

—Yoseph Klausner, “Zekhuyot Ha’Ishah”

The battle for women’s right to vote ended with the passage by the Second Assembly of Representatives of a declaration of equal rights for women. Once the issue was decided, everyone involved began to argue about who should get credit for the victory. The members of the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights insisted that the triumph was theirs, as it had been their relentless and uncompromising campaign that had brought success. As Sarah Azaryahu later wrote, “Women fought boldly and energetically against this attack on their rights, and they won.”¹ To the women’s party, victory seemed complete. Azaryahu rejoiced that “a turbulent and suspenseful era of the Hebrew women’s movement in our country has come to an end—the era of women’s fight for the right to vote for the Yishuv’s highest institution.”² She and her colleagues seem to have believed that their political battle had reached its conclusion with the Assembly’s declaration of equal rights for women.

It was certainly true that the Union, despite its limited electoral power, had played a very important watchdog role, sounding the alarm each time men tried to fashion new compromises that infringed on women’s rights. It had also proved categorically that politics was not solely a male preserve.³ Indeed, political activity by women is unambiguous proof of their entitlement.⁴ Azaryahu said as much: “At such decisive moments, the Yishuv’s women, of all leanings, unite[d] around the Union and, at public meetings it held all over the country, they vigorously voiced their bold concept of being equal and free citizens.”⁵ The Union’s members maintained that their participation in the first elections to the Assembly of Representatives in 1920 enabled them to fight for their cause and wield influence.⁶
Offering a glimpse into her own experience, Azaryahu admitted that she had wavered. “At times it seemed that, under pressure from Haredi circles, women would need to abandon their political positions; at times it seemed as if the ground was being pulled out from under them and that they were about to lose all the gains they had obtained,” she wrote. After women’s suffrage had gained the force of law, she admitted, “there were many difficult and shocking moments of inner warfare . . . [but we] could not, from a moral point of view, give in . . . [we] would not commit moral suicide.” Members of the Union had maintained from the start that they could trust no one but themselves. Nevertheless, Azaryahu acknowledged that she had often received the help and encouragement of men in the Assembly, who were “allies committed to the idea of equality and freedom for women.”

The elation of the Union’s women was not shared by the leaders of the New Yishuv. They, too, saw the decision on women’s rights as a victory in principle—but it was also a calamity in practice. For most of them, women’s suffrage had been a long-range goal. Their more immediate aim had been to unite the entire Yishuv under their leadership. Unlike the Haredim, who had declared that votes for women was a red line they would not cross, most members of the New Yishuv favored the cause in principle, but they did not think it worth the price of a rupture. Over the course of the Union’s campaign for suffrage, these leaders sought to fashion a broad consensus among the Yishuv’s myriad components for two reasons: first so that the Yishuv’s self-governing bodies would be recognized as legitimate by the British, and second with the purpose of fashioning a common sense of unity within the Yishuv and between it and the Jewish people as a whole. On this count, they failed. In retrospect, it seems clear that, despite the New Yishuv’s declarations of support for the principle of women’s equality, it did not in fact internalize the principle. In this regard the Hebrew suffragists found themselves facing a situation similar to that faced by their sisters elsewhere in the world.

The Haredi community’s crushing failure to convince the Yishuv to reject women’s suffrage resulted more than anything else from the huge demographic transformation that the Jewish community in Palestine underwent during these years, which greatly enlarged the New Yishuv. In the years 1920–26, Jewish immigration surged. By the end of 1925 the Old Yishuv had lost its primacy. Most of the immigrants who arrived following the British conquest supported the Zionist movement and thus associated
themselves with the New Yishuv. The Haredim were faced with the fact that their confidence that most of the Jewish public would side with them on the women’s issue had been misplaced. Furthermore, they realized that they would be able to maintain their unique lifestyle only within an independent community separate from the organized New Yishuv. They had broached the possibility of a split at the beginning of the women’s suffrage campaign, and their repeated declarations that they could not compromise on the women’s issue were evidence of their inclination to maintain themselves as a separate community independent of the secular Zionist leadership. In the summer of 1925, the Haredi newspaper Kol Yisra’el stated explicitly that by splitting away from the rest of the Yishuv “divine providence had kept us from being swept away by the [Zionists].” The Old Yishuv had lost the demographic contest, but that only made it more zealous in upholding its principles and refusing to surrender to the New Yishuv. Mizrahi, for its part, lost face when it failed to bridge the gap between the Haredim and the New Yishuv. With the Haredim gone, Mizrahi found itself a marginal, isolated, and weak faction in the Assembly of Representatives, unable to further its mission of promoting traditional Judaism within the framework of the new institutions.

The considerable international research on voting rights addresses the question of the contribution made by women’s organizations to gaining suffrage. It is an issue that preoccupied suffragist leaders in any number of countries, as can be seen at the end of a book coauthored by Carrie Chapman Catt: “On the outside of politics women fought one of the strongest, bravest battles recorded in history, but to these men inside politics, some Republicans, some Democrats, and some members of minority parties, the women of the United States owe their enfranchisement.” The same was true in the Yishuv. While the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights was represented in the First Assembly of Representatives, their numbers were few and their votes alone were not enough to achieve their goals. As was the case with suffragists elsewhere in the world, they succeeded only thanks to massive support from men and growing public awareness that democracy required equality for women.

Historians have reached widely different conclusions about how important the Union was in gaining Yishuv women the right to vote. Some say the Union’s campaign was decisive, while others claim its effect was modest. In reality, the facts as we know them support both positions, as there is no measure that can precisely determine how much influence the Union had.
Whatever the case, the Union’s work was celebrated worldwide thanks to its membership in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance.

It should also be kept in mind that the Union’s eight-year struggle enabled New Yishuv society to become accustomed to, and internalize the principle of equality for women. The suffrage campaign was an educational process both for the women involved and for the Yishuv as a whole. In such a complex and tortuous campaign, victory cannot be attributed to a single cause or participant. Rather, it belonged, as Azaryahu wrote, “to the dreamers of the New Yishuv, who remained faithful to fundamental principles, on which they labored to construct a nation.”

By melding Jewish nationalism with feminism, the Union was able to present the suffragist cause as not just an exclusively women’s issue but rather as something in the interest of the entire Jewish community.

The Uniqueness of the Struggle

The Yishuv was not the only polity in which women’s emancipation, nation building, and democratization were closely linked. In many emerging nations, women demanded the vote as part of the struggle for national self-determination. One example is Ireland, another country connected, if in a different way, to England. The feminist organizations in both countries were not particularly large, and in both cases these movements opposed violence of any kind. Both in Ireland and in the Yishuv, many women refrained from taking part in the campaign for suffrage because they believed that independence (or socialism) would automatically grant them equality. Irish suffragists, like their Hebrew sisters, did not restrict themselves to voting rights. They supported other policies and legislation to promote women’s interests, in particular giving them more legal power and correcting injustices that affected women especially, such as rape and prostitution. In both countries the women’s campaign had in a way an antireligious character. The liberation of women in both cases symbolized, in part, the national society’s separation from traditional religious society. In Palestine, Haredi Jews were the most vociferous opponents of women’s suffrage; in Ireland, that part was played by the Catholic hierarchy. Finally, in both cases, victory was followed by oblivion. Histories of the national movements ignored the role played by women’s rights activists, and the public too soon forgot the role women played.
But the Hebrew suffragist movement nevertheless displays several unique features that reflect the special nature of the Yishuv. First, the movement’s members viewed women’s suffrage as a central principle without which the Zionist project could not be achieved. This contrasted with Irish feminists, who were unsure whether they should make national independence or votes for women their first priority.\(^{25}\) Second, the Hebrew suffragists proclaimed that equality was the foremost means of protecting the traditional nuclear family. It was the family that builds the nation, they claimed; without families the nation could not stand. Indeed, from the Mandate period to the present day, the Yishuv and state of Israel have encouraged Jews to raise large families.

And third, the principle of equality for women impelled the Union to look beyond the local arena and to see their struggle as part of a universal, international movement. The members of the Union understood that the restoration of the Jewish people to the stage of history and politics meant acting internationally. The fight for the vote changed the nature of Yishuv society, transforming it from a tiny entity drawing its strength from its historical past into one seeing itself as an integral part of the family of nations. The debate over women’s rights, which inflamed Yishuv society for only about eight years, demonstrates that gender is not just a seasoning kneaded into the dough of society, but rather the yeast that makes it rise and gives it its character.

Additional unique features of the Hebrew suffragist movement were noted by Azaryahu in her book on the movement:\(^{26}\)

1. *The local and national campaigns were pursued simultaneously.* This contrasts with the situation in the West, where women gradually made their way into the governing councils and committees of local institutions, such as school boards and town councils. Only after that did they take their campaign to the national level.\(^{27}\)

2. *The campaign for women’s suffrage was conducted in the process of establishing national institutions.* In fact, women were involved in the work of fashioning the Assembly of Representatives even before they had been officially granted the right to participate in it. This was quite different from what happened in the United States and Western Europe, where women sought to join existing legislative bodies.\(^{28}\)

3. *The women of the Yishuv exercised the right to vote and to be elected in 1920 and 1925, before their right was ratified.* As Rosa Welt Straus, the Union’s presi-
dent, put it, the Yishuv’s women fought not to gain a right but to prevent one from being revoked.

4. The Yishuv’s feminists founded a political party. The Union’s strategy of running a “women’s slate independent of parties and factions” was, according to Azaryahu, “a unique tactic that up to this time [1949] has had no equal in women’s movements in other countries.”29 The Yishuv’s women did not subordinate their interests as women to national interests. Rather, they raised two banners, that of their nation and that of women’s equality in the family. The Union proclaimed, in Yoseph Klausner’s words, that “the question of women’s rights is a question of Zionism’s right to exist.”30 The common scholarly presumption that national and feminist goals were incompatible with each other does not apply to the case of the Yishuv.31

Why Has the Yishuv’s Women’s Suffrage Campaign Been Suppressed and Forgotten?

Looking back, the campaign for women’s suffrage is perceived, in Israel and in many other countries, as a story that needs no telling. In Mandatory Palestine, after women gained the right to vote, that right came to be taken for granted, and the story of how it happened seems unremarkable, even today. In this it resembles the battle to establish Hebrew as the Yishuv’s primary language. The Hebrew language’s revival is also taken for granted, to the point where the story of the campaign waged to bring that about has almost vanished from Israeli collective memory. It is well known that prior to the institution of an innovation its absence is unfelt, while after the innovation has been accepted, it is hard to imagine the world without it. But that fact does not mean that we should not seek a better understanding of why the fight for women’s suffrage receives barely any mention in mainstream histories of the Yishuv. The explanation may further illuminate the unique nature of the campaign.32

Histories of the Yishuv focus largely on immigration and settlement, as well as on relations between the Jews, Arabs, and British. The women’s story makes no appearance. Collective memory is molded by agents who foster and promote it. The natural agents of the memory of the women’s unit would have been the members of the Union, a tiny organization carrying a heavy burden. Oblivion claimed not only the Union’s suffrage campaign but
also its other activities, just as the doings of women are generally forgotten in all areas.33

This consignment to oblivion seems to be attributable to the fact that the suffragist campaign was led by women from the political right and center, whereas the labor left was the leading political force in the Yishuv throughout the Mandate and for the first three decades of Israeli history. Note also that the role of the National Council, the primary theater of the battle for women’s suffrage, has also been minimized in Zionist historiography. Most writers of Yishuv and Israeli history were aligned with the labor movement. 

Presumably the relatively moderate line taken by the Union, with its allegiance to feminism, the Jewish nation, and family life, did not fire up souls the way the socialist labor movement did, with its promise of a new world order. In the labor movement, the Council of Women Workers was seen as the flag bearer of women’s equality, and only a few of the women active in this organization were supporters of the Union. Much of the Yishuv was captivated by the message of revolutionary socialism. The measured, if consistent and persistent, stance taken by the Union did not rouse fervor and thus was not remembered. The involvement of some women in the Yishuv’s defense forces (mainly in combat support roles) gave birth to a myth of female equality that did not jibe with the suffragist narrative. This, too, caused the battle for women’s rights to be forgotten.

Writers who have chronicled the first successful suffragist campaign, in New Zealand, have pointed out that men were the heroes in the earliest version of the narrative. Only seventy years later did a historian, Patricia Grimshaw, show that women played an important role.34 This is one more example that historiography does not always reliably report the truth—instead, it portrays a society’s view of the facts. The marginal position of women in Yishuv society left an imprint, and the Hebrew suffragist story was nearly forgotten.

Society has always considered modesty a female virtue. Male historians are not the only ones to have kept women in the background—women have done the same. With the exception of Azarayhu, who composed a history of the women’s movement in the Yishuv, none of the members of the Union wrote about their work. Not only was the women’s suffrage campaign excluded from Israeli history, but so were its heroines—most importantly Welt Straus, who left Palestine at the age of eighty, after her daughter’s death.35
Abandoning the country and the Zionist enterprise is a grave transgression in the Zionist value system. When Welt Straus committed this “sin” to join her remaining family in Europe, she most likely doomed herself to be forgotten. Arnan Azaryahu, Sarah Azaryahu’s youngest son, confirmed to me that Welt Straus’s emigration was seen by her colleagues as tantamount to disloyalty; few of them would speak of her thereafter.36

Another explanation may well be that the minuscule number of women elected to the Assemblies of Representatives, and thereafter to the Knesset, demonstrated just how far Yishuv and Israeli society was from full equality. The Second Assembly of Representatives’ declaration in 1926 that women were equal “in all branches of life” has not been fully implemented to this day.37 As I write, in 2015, the number of women in the Knesset is far smaller than their proportion in the population.38 The story of the battle for women’s rights is not only a success story. In large measure, it is also a tale of disappointment and failure. And failure, as we know, does not sell books. To rescue this story from the depths of oblivion is also to write an indictment of how slowly the train to equality runs.

Just a Beginning

The Yishuv’s feminists traveled a long road before achieving the right to vote, but that battle was only the first one in the equality revolution. Farther down the road the members of the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights had disappointments and came to realize that full parity with men would be long in coming.39 In other countries as well it soon became clear that gaining the vote did not bring about the full equality that the advocates of women’s suffrage had hoped for.40 In her book on Jewish women’s organizations in England and the United States, Linda Kuzmack writes that “securing the vote did not empower immigrant women to the degree they expected. They did not win equal pay or equal working conditions.”41 In an article Azaryahu wrote at the time of the Second Assembly of Representatives, she stressed that in gaining the vote the Union had not completed its task. Rather, it faced a new era of labors.42

A memorandum that was almost certainly written in 1929, apparently by Azaryahu, celebrated the Union’s achievements but at the same time stressed that much work remained to be done: “In most of our national institutions women have no place and no influence; there are still community
and moshavah councils from which women are barred; the Hebrew magistrate’s court—that progressive bench—feels no obligation to invite women to serve as judges (the exceptions—the magistrate’s courts of Tel Aviv and Rishon LeTzion). At Zionist Congresses you encounter almost no women delegates from the Yishuv. True, formal barriers before women had been removed, but a glass ceiling still prevented women from reaching positions of influence in the prestigious institutions of the New Yishuv and the Zionist movement.

In the summer of 1944, almost two decades after the official granting of the vote to women and the declaration of equal rights, Azaryahu indicated that she had begun to comprehend that there were obstacles to true equality that she had not been aware of previously. Women face, she said, “very tough barriers . . . [and] have begun to search for new ways of ensuring that the women of the Yishuv will take part in its central institutions . . . so that the precious asset of the vote [will] not remain as a dead letter on paper, a symbol alone.” In the beginning, the members of the Union believed that its legal achievements would pave the way to equality. They later realized that laws recognizing their rights were not sufficient—they had to fight to have the laws put into practice and seek new ways to advance their cause.

The women of the Union realized that once again they had to set out on a two-pronged campaign, aimed both outward, at changing the institutional framework of the Yishuv, and inward, at educating women. In 1950, in the early stages of the State of Israel—after the appointment of Israel’s first female cabinet minister and the submission to the Knesset, by the minister of justice, of a law granting equal rights for women (which was passed in 1951)—the Union issued its final newsletter. An anonymous writer remained cautious: “These are the heralds of full equality for women in the world and in our country as well; mostly likely, for now, in theory only.”

While they were pleased with what they had achieved, the Union’s leaders were well aware of the huge disparity between the equality proclaimed by law and the actual state of women in Israeli society. Furthermore, the reasons that the government used to explain its position on gender equality were themselves patently nonegalitarian. The grant of equality to women was portrayed not as a fundamental right but as a token of gratitude for women’s contribution to society. That is how Minister of Justice Pinhas Rosen justified the equal rights law when he presented it to the Knesset. “From the beginning of the new return to Zion . . . the role of the Jewish
women has not been absent from all the Yishuv’s work,” he declared. “The first elected government has thus seen fit to bring before the Knesset the fundamentals of its program and state: full equality for women will be instituted.” In some parts of Israeli society, the debate over the social and public status of women continues to be controversial, and some still seek to deny them full equality. The battle begun by the Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights is not yet over.