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The Israeli term "political mother" is a unique oxymoron that combines the mythical private realm with the ultimate public realm. In Israel, "Mother's Voice" is not best known as the title of theoretical articles on gender issues, but as a moving—and by now almost mythical—radio program, in which mothers can send messages to their soldier-sons, somewhere far away, on various "Mount Moriahs."

This essay focuses on women's poetry and the binding of Isaac (aqedah). It is a part of a study that seeks to examine the history of Hebrew poetry, and of Hebrew literariness, in the twentieth century by following the trail of a single theme—the rereading of the narrative of the binding of Isaac.\(^1\) The research sprung out of my growing awareness that understanding the dynamics of this metaphor is important not only for a historical study of Israeli culture but also for an assessment of the deep ideological and poetical structures and traumas that influence and shape Jewish and Israeli sociocultural behaviors to this day.

One surprising fact leaps to the eye even of the casual historian, namely, that the use of this charged myth is rare in the poetry of women, whilst almost ubiquitous in the work of their male contemporaries. Up until the 1970s it seems the aqedah remained an almost exclusively male topos. Even Sarah’s conspicuous absence from the original biblical story—an absence felt keenly by the sages and Rashi, who spun alternative midrashim around it, shifting the textual viewpoint to the roaringly silent mother—has not triggered any interesting subversive readings in women’s poetry until recent decades.²

From the 1970s onward the poetic rewriting of the aqedah grows more dominant in various sections of women’s poetry, both secular and religious, and affords rich pickings, in kinds of approach as well as in poetic achievement. Some women poets use the story to engage in gender issues; for others it is a historical mine of fear, anxiety, and repression: “The fetus Isaac commits suicide in his mother’s womb / Better to be unborn than born bound to the altar of fear” (Esther Ettinger). As an existential paradigm the story is sometimes taken as a symbol of the child’s inevitable break from and final farewell to the parent. In such cases it is inverted, so that it is the parent who is bound, awaiting death. At other times the new version is a mirror image of the fundamental Western paradigm of a father-son relationship in the image of a mother-daughter relationship. Lastly, one finds bold psychoanalytic interpretations that are not necessarily bound to any feminist stance and are devoid of any sociohistorical context (as, for example, in the poetry of Rivka Miriam). In recent years two plays have been staged in Jerusalem based on the various midrashim on Sarah’s life.³

Women’s poetry on the binding of Isaac proves how the most apolitical activity of all, that of birth and motherhood, is destined, in Israeli

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² Surprisingly, it was Binyamin Gallai, a poet of the generation of the War of Independence, who wrote a subversive modern feminine version of the story:

All these years her coffin was made
of a remembrance of chopped wood
on a different mountain, in the land of Moriah.

In a sophisticated play among linguistic registers—biblical, midrashic, modern military slang—Gallai plucks Sarah out of her historical narrative and re-creates her as an everywoman who, at the mere knowledge of her son’s ordeal, has turned into the “living dead.” Every mother is thus a Sarah.

³ I intend to stick to poetry even though the deconstruction of the topos is central to several contemporary novels written by women (Dolly City, by Orly Kastel-Blum; I Danced, I Stood, by Tzruya Shalev). Prose, especially postmodern, presents different issues, which open up altogether different questions.
circumstances, to become politicized, in the spirit of the 1960s slogan “the personal is political”—a revolutionary stance, if one stops to consider the links between motherhood and martyrlogy in Jewish tradition. Familiar visions come to mind. First among them is the memorable story of Hannah and her seven sons or, in other versions, Miriam Bat-Tanhum, one of the better-known stories of martyrdom in rabbinic literature: “It was told of Miriam Bat-Tanhum, who was captured with her seven sons. What did the authorities do to her? Imprisoned each of them on his own.” Each son is pulled out to bow to an idol, boldly refuses, and is taken to die. At last they come to the youngest, a child of six, who conducts an amazingly precocious theological debate with the emperor in which the child quotes from the scriptures.

Said his mother to the Emperor: “Upon your life, Emperor, give me my son, to kiss him and hold him.” And they gave him to her, and she took out her breasts and gave him milk.... And she said to the Emperor “Upon your head, Emperor, let the sword fall on both our necks together.”

The Emperor refuses her wish, sarcastically saying that it is her Book of Laws that forbids killing the parent and the child together. Her reaction, in which she compares her situation with that of Abraham on Mount Moriah, has accorded her a pride of place in Jewish tradition through the centuries:

And the mother said to her youngest son: “My son, do not be soft of heart and do not fear. You are going to your brothers, and to the bosom of Abraham. And say to him from me ‘you have built one altar and did not sacrifice your son, and I have built seven altars and sacrificed my sons on them.’” (Eikhah Rabbah, 1, Buber ed., pp. 84-95)

Galit Hazan-Rokem, in her book on Eikhah Rabbah,\(^4\) comments on the “direct physical orality” of breast-feeding, which replaces the “orality inherited from culture in the form of speech-making and verse quoting” and which is “a pre-condition for a living dialogue to take place, as opposed to the static quoting of verses.” I would stress, furthermore, that even within this midrashic scene of ultimate closeness

between mother and son on the brink of death, male and female expression is distinct rather than unified—however unified in purpose. Even when Miriam (or Hannah) speaks of Abraham, she doesn’t quote the scriptures, as her son does, but speaks to them, or with them; she domesticates religion. She is conscious, as it were, that in killing her sons she enters the story. In fact, her consciousness of the story and of her future place in it is what enables her—and presses her—to kill them. The voice of the mother is legitimate only when her son is placed upon the altar.

The story of Hannah and her seven sons was quickly adopted by the Zionist ethos and education system and incorporated in the cultural repertoire in the shape of a popular school play. In some later midrashic versions, Hannah jumps off the roof to become “the happy mother of sons.” The salient point is what remained uppermost in the Zionist consciousness as representing the normative voice. That is to say, these narratives represent the infiltration of women into the myth and the canon by the radicalization of the hegemonic discourse.

Even in Jewish medieval chronicles female martyrrology transcends male martyrrology. Yisrael Yuval quotes a few blood-curdling examples of martyrlogical feminine stories within chronicles of the First Crusade of 1096. Writing about Jewish life in Germany, Shlomo Ben-Shimshon tells how one mother urges her kindly neighbors, “I have four children. Don’t spare them either.” Another has two fair virgin daughters who “took the knife and sharpened it lest it be blunt, and stretched out their necks, and their mother slaughtered them in the name of God the Lord of Hosts.”

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6 I remember what fun it was to play Hannah in school and be brave and reckless with my “sons,” as was the order of the day. Then, I began to experience a few sneaking heretical doubts, which I was loath to voice aloud to my teacher—perhaps a moment that should be titled “How I Became a Literary Critic.”

7 Though not, significantly, in the Zionist version I played in school.


9 Quoted in Abraham Habermann, ed., Gezerot ashkenaz vetsorfat: divrei zikhronot mibenei hadorot shebitequfot masei hatselav umivhar piyyutehem (Jerusalem: Tarshish, 1945), 34.
Some historians, notably the convert Victor von Karben, explain the radical feminine martyrlogy as an answer to women's inferiority in everyday religious life that made them all the more eager to prove their zealotry. However, the reliability of such stories seems forever clouded in doubt. Jewish women on the whole did not express themselves in writing even on religious issues. How much truth is there, then, in the stories of these enthusiastic women? Were they, in fact, kinds of Antigones, Medeas, or Lady Macbets—male fictions perpetuating icons of radicalism for their authors' own political or artistic ends? The voice of Lady Macbeth is too tempting a comparison to avoid:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucke'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this. (act 1, scene 7, lines 54–59)

The harassed husband gives in. The point here is not the purpose of the deed (which in this case has nothing to do with the Lord of Hosts), but that it takes an "unsexed" woman to help a man rid himself of pity and tender feelings and act. If such women are not available, they must be invented (and in that sense, Lady Macbeth is even fictional to Macbeth). While the question of fact or fiction regarding the Jewish chronicles remains tantalizing, and perhaps unanswerable, one thing is certain: it is no mere chance that Sarah is absent from the biblical story in which her son is brought to sacrifice.

While the 1920s and 1930s saw a great flowering of feminine poetry in Hebrew, women still made little use of a motif that seemed to hypnotize their male contemporaries. Even during the War of

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10 In Yuden Buchlein, 1550; quoted by Yisrael Yuval in ibid., 89. Ada Rapoport-Albert, in her forthcoming book Women and Jewish Mysticism: Female Bodies—Male Souls claims that the prominent place accorded to women in Jewish martyrlogy in contrast to the marginality of women in the religious and spiritual arena of Judaism stems from the inherent liminality of the martyrlogical movement—the transition from life to death. In life after death or indeed in the messianic future, women are credited with the power to achieve spiritual and even religious equality with men.

11 See especially Yitzhak Lamdan, David Shimoni, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Abraham Shlonsky.
Independence, while some women poets did relate to the experience of war, they seemed to join in the preponderant discourse that tended to regard the destiny of sacrificing sons as a kind of DNA of the Jewish people ("They are born with a knife in their hearts," to quote Hayyim Gouri), without turning the paradigm to any subversive ends as mothers or daughters. A striking exception, however, is Yoheved Bat-Miriam, one of the founding mothers of Hebrew women’s poetry. When Bat-Miriam lost her son, Zuzik Hazaz, in the battle for Jerusalem in 1948, she quit writing and scarcely ever wrote a line of verse again. But in one short piece of writing (as well as in things she told me in our many conversations) she admitted the great extent to which she identified her poetic life with her maternal life:

Mothers, mothers of the world. Stand like a wall to protect your children, for without them there is nothing—without them death walks in your cold, dumb bodies.... From far, far away, from beyond, from behind my son’s body, your face floats—the bread, the water in the mouth, are like the taste of dust from his grave. A grave? A grave of Zuzik’s? And if I am the grave, my son is inside me—inside me, and therefore I walk slowly and sedately, as bringing my own body to burial.12

In her overwhelming grief Bat-Miriam appeared to her generation as both eccentric and Orphic.13

The sudden eruption of the binding of Isaac as a major topos in women’s poetry during the 1970s after such prolonged absence is therefore startling enough to capture one’s attention. Only after the Six Day War and the War of Attrition did women’s poetry become saturated with expressions of this narrative. The common denominator


13 "You are as fond of grief as of your child," says a callous cardinal to a grieving mother in Shakespeare’s King John. "He talks to me that never had a son," she answers.

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts,
Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form. (act 3, scene 4, lines 93-97)
Constance makes love to a grisly figure of death till she herself becomes that figure—a body bearing a body, as in a postmortum pregnancy.
of the various readings, and the most striking one, is a challenge to the masculine character of the narrative: after all, the biblical interpretation of the name “Abraham” is that he is the father of numerous nations (av hamon goyim). I offer here a few short readings of such writers’ poetry that form different paradigms and wish to draw special attention to publication dates, which are, in themselves an important clue.

**Categories of Feminine Discourse with the Aqedah**

The first paradigm is that of rebellion—an outright negation of the myth and an attempt to replace it with a feminine alternative fit for life. Ra’aya Harnick wrote the cycle “Poems of Attrition” (“Shirei hatashah”) in 1970, at the height of the War of Attrition (three years after the Six Day War), but published them only in 1983, after her son Guni was killed in Lebanon. (It is indeed chilling to think of them as prophetic and also of the kind of price “paid” for legitimacy.)

**шейир הזרעה 1970**

א
אני לא אקריב
כבריל ליגולה
לא א最基本
כ렐ת אלים ואני
ערכיס נשונים
מוה טרגס למלי
אני ידיעת מכלדים
תורדה
אכלה לא אתبني
לא
ליגולה.

ב
לא טרד ישוב א%p תכניות
לא טרד.general
לא בכזא לךבקה
עכשוי בקואונ
עכשוי במעדה
עכשוי בכזא ליגולה.
Poems of Attrition 1970

A.
I will not bring
my first-born to sacrifice.
Not I.

At night God and I
recon
who deserves what.

I know and am
beholden.
But not my son
and not
to sacrifice.

B.
No longer 1942
No longer Treblinka.
No longer sheep for slaughter.
Now proudly
Now like Masada
Now sheep for sacrifice.

C.
God
in His mercy builds
Jerusalem.
(Every day after the meal)
And every stone He built
in His mercy
in Jerusalem
is sodden
with blood and tears.
I'll give to God
In His mercy
Jerusalem
And take
my son
in return.\textsuperscript{14}

Harnick's attrition comes in a double sense: the contemporary, political meaning, but also the attrition of myths and the values they generate. Actually, they come in a triple sense: attrition of myth, of writer, and of reader. This new stance lets the woman into the hegemonic discourse with no apologetic note in her voice. The mother wages open war on the myth, and to do that she performs what Alicia Ostriker calls "stealing the language." She uses the original texts to deconstruct the myth from its insides. She applies the very repetitive triple rhythm, which characterized the original obedience of the binder, for her own purposes of defiance. Abraham's story marches to these repetitions: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love," or "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him." The poet now keeps the music, but replaces the contents: "I will not bring my firstborn to sacrifice, not I, and not to sacrifice." Harnick "corrects" the hypogram "your son, your only son" with "my firstborn" and so wedges herself in between the two parents, Abraham and Sarah, and shows them to have a clearly unequal emotional relation toward their son: for Sarah, Isaac is her firstborn, unlike Abraham, whose firstborn is actually Ishmael.

Linguistic mechanisms are similarly taken up and dismantled. For example, the well-worn coin "as sheep to slaughter" (\textit{katson latievah}) is concretized by placing it within the context of the \textit{aqedah}, in which there was a sacrificial animal. In this way the new text deconstructs the master narrative of Zionism: Zionism is supposed to give shelter, to be the opposite of "as sheep for slaughter," but actually it amounts to the same kind of martyrrology.

\textsuperscript{14}Ra'aya Harnick, \textit{Shirim leGuni} (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1983), 9–11. Translated by Ruth Kartun-Blum and Sonya Grubber.
The poet wishes the biblical pattern of exchange to go her way ("I shall give God in His mercy / Jerusalem / and take my son in return"). Abraham is a great barterer, the first great Jewish merchant, and his story is full of deals—with his brother, with God, with Ephron the Hittite. But Abraham’s deals are gracious and righteous and, when dealing with God, even whimsical. Nothing of that survives in Harnick’s version. She exposes God as a dishonest dealer. In the wake of Yehudah Amichai’s poetry she deconstructs the traditional Jewish Grace after Meals: "God / in His mercy builds / Jerusalem. / (Every day after the meal) / And every stone He built / ... is sodden / with blood and tears."

In another poem Harnick says "And we know all too well / That we go to the mountain with no ram in the thicket / And no ram in the world / And we are very lonely." Moshe Shamir makes a fine distinction between the stories of Oedipus and Abraham. Unlike the Oedipus story, which happens unwittingly—at least from the son’s point of view—the binding of Isaac is, throughout, a conscious act. The problems that occur on a conscious level are far more complicated than problems presented as the product of the unconscious. The verb “to know,” which relates originally to Abraham, “the "knight of faith," relates in Harnick’s poem to an individual, private foreknowledge of the tragic outcome of the plot. Unlike the biblical Sarah, who is “not knowing,” the modern mother not only knows but also expresses her knowledge in writing.

A poem describes what something is not in order to distance itself from another form of poetic discourse. What Jonathan Culler terms “negative presupposition” is a technique much used in Israeli political poetry and should not be seen merely as a rhetorical, ornamental device but as a psychological perspective charged with anger and emotion. Moreover, it is a yardstick for defining cultural space. When the poet mother says “I will not sacrifice my firstborn,” she places herself in opposition not only to the war in Lebanon but to historical continuity as a fatalistic decree.

Harnick is consistent in her antimartyrological stance. Three years ago she published a polemic article in the literary journal Dimui following the

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15 According to the talmudic sages (Pesikta Rabbati 40), even the name of the sacrificial mountain—Moriah—was thought to emanate from the Hebrew noun temurah (payment, exchange). See Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac As a Sacrifice, trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Pantheon, 1967), 69.


kidnapping of the soldier Nahshon Vacksman, which she titled "The Sanctification of the Victim or a Return to the Diaspora." In this article she challenges the popular media’s tendency to focus on the kidnapped, "the victim," and so to overlook the heroic soldier who was killed in trying to save Vacksman. This year she stood in solitary protest against the placing of a monument for victims of terrorism on Mount Herzl, the site of a military cemetery.

**The Dialogical Reciprocity**

In contrast to the aggressive antisacrificial mood taken up by Harnick, the other feminine stance in relation to the myth is less transparent and more dialogical. Nevertheless, it also challenges the male perspective of the narrative. Here a dialogue is formed between the female voice and the myth. The very existence of a dialogue reduces the normative prowess of myth; when it ceases to be normative, it becomes discursive. The works of several women poets, both secular and religious, belong to this category. Here there is no attempt to reconcile conflicting elements; instead, there is an attempt to continue living with a profound awareness of them. Compared with the aggressive antisacrificial poetry of the 1980s and 1990s by poets such as Meir Weiseltier and Yitzhak Laor, this seems a more complex perspective. Hava Pinhas-Cohen, a religious woman, editor of the journal Dimui, does not isolate the *aqedah* as a point of reference but treats it as part of an entire historical sequence. She breaks down the barrier of a woman’s inability to read herself in a male narrative; it is as if she says that because she is Jewish, she has an equal share in this myth. She does not stand where tradition has put her, that is, alongside Abraham, in the slot of Sarah and Hagar, but actually in his place, which also puts her in a special position from which to question issues of gender.19

Pinhas-Cohen takes up an attitude long neglected by Hebrew poetry, which has concentrated on the sorry self. She creates a special intimacy with history by domesticating great moments or combining monumental time (to use Kristeva’s definition) with intimate personal time, as illustrated in the poem “Entreaty” (“Baqashah”).

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18 *Dimui* (September 10, 1996).

19 As for the relations between women and nation in Israel, see N. Yuval Davis, “Gender and Nation,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16 (4) (1993).
Entreaty

With my babe in arms
And human milk lacing his life,
At night come beats and measured noises
Trains—

At some station on this earth,
Barefoot and powerless
I stretched out my arms
A ram’s horns caught in the thicket
The whisper of earth to heaven
Hear, and weave your mercy overhead
Like the shade of vine and fig
Pray, do not try me.

There is wood and a thicket, a smell of fire
and the sight of smoke. You don’t play hide
and seek
with mothers—
With my hand out I cover my eyes
My voice lost in a voiceless
scream

Where art thou?  

“Entreaty” draws on traditional prayers of supplication offered by women (tehinot) and on the prayer for forgiveness recited by men (tahanan). The woman speaking here, however, quarrels with God and calls Him to account, thereby revising the image of the suppliant woman that is prevalent in the tehinot. 

During the most intimate and physical experience of motherhood—that “physical orality,” or breast-feeding—associations of the most traumatic historical kind surface in the mother’s mind. The mother suckling her child recalls hellish images of the Holocaust. She claims for herself the kind of biblical rhetoric originally used by God to Adam or Abraham. “Don’t play hide and seek with mothers,” she says. For her, “hide and seek” is a man’s game; a man has time on his hands, since he isn’t concerned with the daily occupation of nurturing life. Game rhetoric—defining the rules of the game—is male-oriented. One can look through a sociological prism and claim that this is a male practice. Out of the calm domestic scene a daring interpretation of monumental historic experience is suggested as a kind of game God played with Abraham: God as a male figure hides the victim only to reveal it in the last minute. Now God is hiding from mothers holding their children. The mother and child are the substitute for the ram; they are the real victims; no games now. “Where are you?” (ayyekka), God’s cry to Adam who has sinned and has shamefully hidden himself, is therefore turned towards God and remains hanging in the air as an accusation. The cry becomes the prerogative of a mother who could not save her child.  

Pinhas-Cohen’s Abraham, here and elsewhere in her poetry, is a one-time hero. He has done a single act of heroism, if it could be called that. The mother’s heroism, on the other hand, is a daily one, rising from her ethics of care. Julia Kristeva defines male time as “linear

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21 A latent paronomasia is evoked in Hebrew in the association between ayyekka (where are you?) and Eikhah (Lamentations), thereby linking admonition and lamentation.
equals historical."\textsuperscript{22} A woman’s time, on the other hand, is cyclical and repetitive. Abraham rises \textit{one} morning, while she gropes her children’s bodies \textit{every} morning to check for unusual signs.

The woman poet places herself in a complicated position from which to sort out a medley of feeling—in the very thicket of the \textit{aqedah}. But by doing so she daringly claims a place for herself at the very heart of the myth, rather than as a traditional spectator. It is as if she says: “I am the one who wakes up to my children each morning, connecting with my body and my deeds past, present, and future, and therefore it is my right to read this myth with feminine eyes, while with no intention to profane it.” In this way she suggests a kind of feminine hubris that poses the woman’s role as possibly the more valuable of the two.

The most impressive link between moral discourse and the voice of motherhood was created by Daliah Rabikovich in two of her latest volumes, \textit{Genuine Love} and \textit{Mother with Child}, in which the voice of motherhood is also identified with the voice of the Palestinian mother. \textit{Mother with Child} is not a tautological title, because there is also such a thing as a mother with no child. Furthermore, there is also a pregnancy with a dead child (a poem about a Palestinian mother written during the Intifada). The practice, or practicality, of motherhood has radically changed Rabikovich’s poetic voice. From her passive stance as a mere spectator in the window, she now moves on to assume a new responsibility, expressing itself mainly in her political poetry:

\begin{verbatim}
אבל דיה לוח בּך
לэрחל ממלמדיאית
הברוח כאשרהיהל כדיעש עתה
הبشילה כשם עלב
اجتماع חיקפיות, פסנוניות.
נהלה לוח בּך
שכפלה.
יהא אופנה ובשילה.
\end{verbatim}

But She Had a Son

For Rachel Melamed Eitan

An acquaintance begun in mid-winter
Ripened by the end of spring.
A smiling, peaceful woman.
She had a son
Who was killed.
She bakes and cooks,
Part-time in the municipality.
Lunch always ready on the table.
And all in utter refusal
To adjust.

In her own way, as if peacefully,
She will arrest the world all of a sudden.
Difficult to know what she can.
Without really saying things,
She is demanding.
After all they took her son.
She will in no way justify
This taking.
Who dares tell her:
Now it is time for you to wash your face
And get better.
What's passed has passed.

She sets on a backbreaking journey.
A journey circuitous back and forth.
With her own hands, she heaps coals beneath her
Pouring cinder over her body.
She is Rachel. Which Rachel?
Who had a son,
And she says to him night and day
Summer and winter, holidays and feasts,
I am Rachel your mother,
Out of informed consent and free will
I have no comforter.\(^{23}\)

Intertextuality, rather than figurative language, produces the literariness of Rabikovitch’s political text. “But She Had a Son” is one of the most powerful lamentations in Hebrew poetry. Here the intertext of the aqedah creates a link between the guilt feelings of a bereaved mother and self-punishment. The link is conjured up in the image of inward-turning feminine aggression, intended to perpetuate the pain and suffering of a mother who does not want to separate from her grief. Here, too, the aqedah is not isolated but interwoven with other canonical literary texts of theodicy, which the poet uses subversively. The two biblical texts that are deconstructed pertain to two bereaved fathers: David and Job. Unlike Job, David accepts the bereavement more lightly: he gets up, washes his face, and eats. By way of contrast, Rachel becomes the archetypal mother, who forever refuses to

\(^{23}\) Dalia Rabikovitch, Kol hashirim ad koh (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 281–82. Translated by Ruth Kartun-Blum.
console herself. As always, Rabikovich's great achievement is in her fusion of biblical and colloquial language and in her syntax, which is extremely suggestive.

**Concluding Remarks**

Carol Gilligan, in her book *In a Different Voice,* links feminine consciousness with a moral code. Feminine consciousness, she argues, has to do with the ability to think in terms of the needs of others rather than in abstract terms of "rights." That is, what separates the male from the female code is the ethics of care and the consciousness of a need of greater and more active responsibility toward others that may mend the potential indifference of "noninterference" morality.

Through the revisionary reading of the myth, Israeli women poets present new definitions of social, political, and moral values. They revise the myth to represent a world of feminine values. For the first time in Jewish history, the mother represents herself in a strong stance of opposition: she is the protester, while appropriating the public political voice. The ethics of care generates for her a different moral code. The women poets remove the numinous element from the story, debating with the Bible, with God, with the "knight of faith," and with themselves as to their place in the story.

The appropriation of this central myth was made possible by historical circumstances. After the Yom Kippur War, political rhetoric changed. While the Six Day War was followed by great bereavement and mourning for the dead, these were wrapped in the overall sense of achievement. But once social consciousness was turned to the issue of price, it was the mother who took up the banner of protest: the legitimization of feminine representation was brought about by the growing awareness of the fact that the victims were too high a price to pay in war.

The extent to which the Yom Kippur War and the war in Lebanon have changed the national narrative may be seen in Netivah Ben-Yehuda's influential book *Miba'ad la'avotot* (*Through the Binding Ropes*, 1985), which is a critical reading of the mythical War of Independence, in which Ben-Yehuda herself took part. Significantly, Ben-Yehuda only published her book after the Lebanon War, the only nonconsensus war in the history of Israel. (Similarly, it was only after this war that Harnick could publish her poetry.) Ben-Yehuda writes:

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If one uses the binding of Isaac as a parable of Zionism, one can’t overlook the fact that the whole story since this day is told by the Abrahams—and rightly so. After all, they were the mighty fathers, the founders, the thinkers, the prophets, who had a direct line to God. After all, they were the ones who put themselves to the test for the readiness to pay the heaviest price in the world. But even though according to the Abrahams’ story Isaac was only an extra, only the “son of,” it’s clear that he, too, paid a heavy price. Though he climbed the altar willingly, agreed in everything with Daddy Abraham, it was he who was left alone face to face with death. Not Abraham. Furthermore, in the binding of Isaac of Zionism there wasn’t always a ram in the thicket. Not for every Isaac. So this is a story of one of the Isaacs, a detailed on-the-level report on what it was like, there on the altar, what it all looked like from there, through the binding ropes of the aqedah in 1948.25

Were such feelings never present before in the history of Zionism, or were they present but silenced? And if so, how were they silenced? A political movement called “Four Mothers,” which aimed “not to let our sons be killed in Lebanon,” adopted the poem “In the Beginnings” by Yehudit Kafri, which challenges the silence of Sarah:

And where was Sarah? …  
Why didn’t she block  
the road  
And whispered pursed lips:  
You will not pass this way  
As long as I live!

In many ways, “Four Mothers” resembles the movement “Parents Against Silence,” which emerged during the Lebanon War and also demanded a unilateral withdrawal of all the Israeli forces from Lebanon. The media called that movement “Mothers Against Silence” because most of its activists were women. The new movement, “Four Mothers,” draws its strength and authority from its identity as “the mother’s voice.” This voice, say the members, accords them the right not to give up what they hold most dear, which belongs to them rather than to the nation. It seems that their choice to be named “Four Mothers” evoked a deep Jewish resonance and endowed the movement with a symbolic meaning that contributed to its legitimacy. The mother’s

voice was translated into political and media discourses and thereby made its impact.

The legitimization of the effort of the members of "Four Mothers" to make their voices heard in protest stemmed from the fact that they were inhabitants of the northern part of the country and mothers of combat soldiers. In the same way, Harnick's publication of her poems resulted from the fact that her son was killed in Lebanon. As I have noted in the context of Hannah, a mother's voice is heard only when her son is placed on the altar. In contrast to the conquest of the West Bank, the Lebanon War produced an extremist critical discourse that transgressed the boundaries of myth. Residing near the northern border enabled one to challenge the assumptions of this political mode—to sit, so to speak, in a binary liminal position on the borderline of this discourse.

Another woman's peace organization was established after the opening of the tunnel under the Western Wall in September 1997 with the purpose of focusing on a different angle of the public agenda. A movement by religious women was formed, calling itself the "Movement for the Sanctity of Life." The issues it addresses intertwine with the debate over the features of contemporary Judaism and the hierarchy of values in the religious sector. Their argument draws its strength not from a political stance but from a moral one: the sanctification of life is superior to the sanctification of blood or soil. This stand brings them to negate the Israeli occupation of the territories. Thus, fifteen years after Harnick's and Kafri's poems were first published, political organizations of women have sought to replace the all-pervading topos of male camaraderie, so central to the heroic myth of war. It appears, therefore, that poetry is not just "the inversion of saying" as Weiseltier calls it, but in many cases, pre-dates the saying and the events that follow. In many ways poetry is "the writing on the wall."

In a passage of a recent book, The Gift of Death, in which he compares Melville's story "Bartleby the Scrivener" and the binding of Isaac, Jacques Derrida observes:

"It is difficult not to be struck by the absence of woman in these two monstrous yet banal stories. It is a story of father and son, of masculine figures, of hierarchies among men (God the Father, Abraham, Isaac; the woman Sarah is she to whom nothing is said...). Would the logic of sacrificial responsibility within the implacable universality of the law, of its law, be altered, inflected, attenuated or displaced, if a woman..."

were to intervene in some consequential manner? Does the system of this sacrificial responsibility ... imply at its very basis an exclusion or sacrifice of woman?²⁷

According to contemporary Israeli poetry, motherhood as a concept aims to deconstruct the binary categories of gender, suggesting a more sublime entity—an alternative component of mythology. If only mothers were able, to quote Rabikovitch, "peacefully as it were, to stop the world at once."

EPILOGUE

A few months ago the I.D.F. withdrew from Lebanon. There is no doubt that the voice raised by the Four Mothers Movement and others like it was a catalyst for this decision. Perhaps it also made it possible for men to raise their voices against the occupation of the security zone where it was not possible to do so before.

The aqedah—the binding of Isaac—was the mythological locus in which such a movement could develop, without stopping the world, only diverting its course a little.