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Breaking Their Silence: Mizrahi Women and the Israeli Feminist Movement

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Political scientists tend to examine the impact of grass-roots activism in terms of visible output in the public sphere: for instance, how many laws were legislated, which desired policies came about, and whether decision-makers changed their minds as a result of grass-roots pressure. In this fashion, feminist movements are often evaluated on the basis of the impact they make, even though changes in women's status are the outcome of many factors—not all of them visible in the public sphere. Social changes most often begin with a shift in consciousness reinforced by economic and political factors, although the links between them are not always clear. Sometimes it appears as though every step forward is followed by two steps back; even irreversible processes are difficult to evaluate qualitatively, let alone quantitatively.¹ One example is an individual's acquisition of knowledge concerning the workings of political power via participation in social justice movements. Such experiences can be liberating and empowering, regardless of whether the movement's goals are actually attained.

In this essay, I examine first the relationship between Ashkenazic and Mizrahi women in the Israeli feminist movement, showing how Mizrahi feminism developed out of conflicts within the movement in a manner that reflected ethnic tensions present in the larger Israeli society. Following a discussion of the problems caused by economic policies promoting privatization and globalization, I present an account of three incidents in which Mizrahi women chose to “break their silence” in the face of economic oppression or exploitation. In conclusion, I point to an issue that has been inadequately discussed in the theoretical feminist literature—namely, the invisible link between the “social” and “psychic” aspects of women's oppression—and show its impact on both Mizrahi women and feminist movement activism.

The Feminist Movement in Israel

Early in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, immigration to Israel from prosperous western countries increased markedly. Among the young migrants were

women from Anglo-American countries who had been exposed to the feminist movement from the late 1960s onward. The ideas they brought with them, and the grass-roots activity that they initiated, marked the first significant steps in pursuit of women's rights in Israel.²

A local movement was founded, and slogans such as "liberation," "sisterhood," and "women's rights" were prominently aired. Annual conferences were attended by women from most sectors of Israeli society, including Israeli Palestinian women and American Jewish immigrants (the latter joined the movement in disproportionate numbers). Although Ashkenazic women were in the majority, there were also Mizrahim;³ similarly, there were both religious and secular women in the movement. While few in numbers, Israeli feminists were enthusiastic and committed, confident that they were at the threshold of women's liberation.

Before long, however, tensions surfaced as some women came to the realization that they were not on an equal footing with others in the movement. Feelings of deprivation were especially salient among the ranks of the Mizrahi and Palestinian Israeli women, who discovered that they were not kept apprised of all the movement's meetings and events. They were also disturbed by the fact that they were routinely assigned menial tasks such as mailing flyers or preparing placards for demonstrations, and rarely if ever served as movement spokespersons either abroad or in the local media. They felt that they were slowly being marginalized, their voices gradually being silenced. As one Mizrahi woman put it:

What do they [the Ashkenazic women] know about what it means to be a Mizrahi woman—a woman with many children, religious? They close their ears to us, they are patronizing. . . . They give you all the reasons in the world to feel like a stranger. No opportunity to open your mouth—nobody to talk to, anyway. A club . . . of feminist Neturei Karta—most of the time even the language is different. It's a club for immigrants where the domain and language is English.⁴

Whenever Mizrahi women tried to bring up the issue of being excluded for ethnic reasons, their claim was dismissed as irrelevant. Hence, many of them left the movement.⁵

By the early 1980s, it was clear that the Israeli feminist movement comprised almost exclusively Ashkenazic women activists who were mainly concerned with "upper-class" issues such as the struggle for greater representation of women on corporate boards, in political parties, and in higher education, as well as the celebration of sexual preference. At times, the class-based nature of an issue was not immediately apparent. For instance, the movement invested a good deal of its energy and almost all its resources in a highly publicized campaign to have women accepted to the pilots' training program of the Israel Defense Forces. Success, it was believed, would open doors for all women, although only those with high educational attainments (who more often than not came from the upper middle class) would be eligible. Thus, for Mizrahi women who came from the lower class, and for Palestinian Israeli women or religious women who did not even serve in the army, pilot training was not even a theoretical option. Meanwhile, socioeconomic issues that were of particular concern to poorer women—improving work conditions in factories, for instance, or encouraging more women to complete elementary school⁶—were largely ignored.

While almost everyone in this initial group of Mizrahi feminists belonged to the middle class and many had acquired higher education, most of them had grown up under deprived conditions and maintained their sensitivity to problems affecting the poorer population. Supporting the movement's agenda, they nonetheless had different priorities: for them, the equal opportunities sought (and sometimes already attained) by the Ashkenazic feminists were still in the realm of fantasy.

Although the patronizing attitude of the leadership and its elitist order of priorities caused growing resentment among the Mizrahi feminists, it was not until 1994 that these differences came out in the open. At the tenth annual feminist conference held that year in Givat Haviva, a small group of Mizrahi feminists disrupted the proceedings, claiming that the Ashkenazic women did not represent their special concerns and accusing them of betraying feminist ideals of sisterhood, solidarity, and equality. The movement's leadership rejected the charges. The debate between the two groups ended in a bitter deadlock, with many participants—both Ashkenazic and Mizrahi—walking out of the conference. Shortly thereafter, the movement split.⁷

The tumultuous conference at Givat Haviva is now regarded widely as a milestone in the development of feminist consciousness in Israel. Debate continued over the course of the following year not only within feminist circles but also among academics, in the media, and at the grass-roots level.⁸ The conference left a legacy of soured relations among Israeli feminists, and the movement as a whole never recovered fully from being labeled upper-class, sectarian, and uncommitted to ideals of female solidarity and equality. Emergent ideological differences now came into the open, in this way demonstrating that the Israeli feminist agenda was not monolithic. Indeed, ethnic, class, religious, and national interests proved to be stronger than feminist sentiments of sisterhood.

The pattern of subordination to a hegemonic group that developed within the Israeli feminist movement has parallels in U.S. feminist movements since the 1980s, as has long been noted and extensively discussed.⁹ Both the Israeli and American cases demonstrate that, although women may share common experiences of oppression because they are women, this does not preclude them from oppressing women who are not of their class or ethnic group.¹⁰ Put generally, the conclusion is that the common fate of being oppressed as women is not a sufficient condition for generating solidarity; as is the case with subordination among men, better-off women tend to subordinate those women who are worse off. In other words, class ties may well be stronger than gender ties, and material interests lead upper-class women to identify with males of their own class, rather than with women from the lower classes or from different races or ethnic groups.

Following the split with the larger feminist movement, Mizrahi feminists began to meet separately and in the following year organized a conference of their own, which took place in May 1995 in Netanya. There they spoke for the first time about their complex experiences of ethnic and gender oppression. Some reported that discussing these issues freely was itself liberating and empowering.¹¹ In speaking of their past wounds, these women discovered that their personal experiences and perspectives had a collective dimension, connected as they were to the public sphere and to their socialization into the Zionist ethos. Their common individual experiences began to

take the form of a Mizrahi women's collective narrative that fostered solidarity and helped define a Mizrahi feminist agenda.

The topics discussed at the first Mizrahi feminist conference reflected two major concerns. First was a deeply felt need to highlight the gap between official Zionist history as taught in school and Mizrahi women's own personal biographies, which included the history they had learned from their parents. Second was a need to expose and publicize the painful experiences of their parents' generation and their own experiences as children. Many of the women expressed a sense of urgency stemming from their belief that their own history was insufficiently recognized—and also misrepresented—by the rest of Israeli society.¹² At the conference, participants fulfilled the feminist ideal of translating “the personal into the political,” in accordance with one of the main tenets of feminist thinking dating back to the 1970s.¹³ Their avid desire to discuss questions relating to the politics of identity, the dominant view of Israeli history, and gender and race discrimination in Israel was incorporated into their agenda, moving it strongly in the direction of a history of marginalization, identity crisis, and economic deprivation.¹⁴

Within the broader context of the existing Israeli feminist discourse, Mizrahi feminism represented the interests of women who were at (or who identified with) the bottom layers of Israeli society, and who sought to expose the hidden mechanisms that made it more difficult for marginalized women to make their voices heard. This process of feminist social formation did not occur in a void. While the poverty and depressed circumstances of Mizrahi women were part of a social issue that had existed since Israel's establishment, the intersection between gendered and ethnized experiences of disadvantage was not simply the coming together of two separate forms of deprivation. Rather, the compounding of these different yet inseparable social dimensions strengthened the walls of the societal enclave barring Mizrahi women from equal access to civil and social rights. Experiencing a more complex pattern of deprivation than Mizrahi men, they were thus in an even weaker position—and even more inclined to remain silenced.¹⁵ Yet in order to escape that pattern, that silence needed to be broken. This was accomplished at the first Mizrahi feminist conference, where participants met with women very much like themselves.¹⁶

In spite of the emancipating experiences at their first conference, Mizrahi feminists soon discovered that speaking out did not lead to tangible gains. Years earlier, beginning in the 1980s, Israel had begun to pull back from its earlier welfare commitments. Now, worsening economic conditions worked to “re-silence” those among the Mizrahi women who only recently had begun to make their voices heard.

The Challenges Confronting Mizrahi Feminism

In the years following the conference, Mizrahi feminists such as Mira Eliezer and Netta Amar struggled on behalf of deprived women and children in the slums, especially in Israel's big cities. Most women prominent in the movement were lower middle-class, having become slightly better off economically and somewhat better educated than their sisters in the slums, and they were able to share their collective

narratives with other women who, they believed, had undergone the same experiences of marginalization. Joining them were a number of younger Mizrahi women who were university students. Gradually, the Mizrahi feminist agenda began to shift from its initial orientation of seeking to uncover the causes of past deprivation to a focus on the present—namely, the conditions of poverty and unemployment within which the third and fourth generation of Mizrahi women were trapped, and which now also affected new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia. Mizrahi women of the third and fourth generation in Israel worked hand in hand with new immigrants, thereby sharpening their own experience of deprivation. The agenda was promoted by a small group of activists mainly from the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem area, some two dozen in number, who held conferences and staged demonstrations. In 1999, they founded Ahoti (from *ahoti*, lit. “my sister”), whose name reflected the founders’ commitment to feminist sisterhood.¹⁷

At Ahoti’s inaugural conference, organized mainly at the grass-roots level, participants included Mizrahi feminists, as well as representatives of other marginalized groups of women such as Ethiopians, Palestinian Israelis, and lesbians. Most of the discussion focused on the actual rather than the theoretical or ideological: immediate problems such as economic recession and the rising unemployment in the outlying towns, exploitation of female labor, single motherhood, issues concerning elementary education, and deepening gaps between women in Israel’s central region and those in development towns on the periphery. The term “globalization” often came up in discussion.

This shift of focus from historical deprivation and identity crisis to women’s poverty in contemporary Israel was indicative of Mizrahi feminism’s openness to issues confronting women at the grass roots, regardless of their country of origin. Moreover, it helped to remove the stigma of sectarianism that hitherto had been attached to Mizrahi feminists by other Israeli feminist organizations and by the media. The 1999 conference declared 2000 to be “the year of women workers.” Shortly afterwards, Ahoti took up this project. The worsening situation of women workers as a result of Israeli leaders’ globalization policies led to a focus on socioeconomic issues among Mizrahi activists. Their agenda included five main goals: 1) expanding the circle of feminists to include working women and those who lived in peripheral settlements; 2) integrating class politics with the varied and complex identity politics of many groups in Israeli society—Jews, Arabs, Ethiopians, Russians, Mizrahim, and women in general; 3) giving immediate assistance to low-income women, particularly in the area of legal counseling as to their rights; 4) bringing the current discourse between Jewish and Arab women factory workers into Israeli feminism; and 5) disseminating information on a variety of issues of particular importance to working women—for instance, the rights of pregnant women, sexual harassment in the workplace, how to read a pay slip, and how to join a labor union.¹⁸

Significantly, Mizrahi women activists were the first to address the corrosive and elitist influence of economic globalization on Israeli social policies, an issue hitherto neglected by the Israeli feminist movement. This new Mizrahi feminist agenda appealed especially to women located at the bottom rungs of Israeli society, a number of whom sought to bring their problems to the attention of the public and to raise women’s consciousness regarding the need for action.

Four aspects of the influence of globalization in Israel were particularly relevant to the new Mizrahi feminist agenda: the privatization of industry; the opening up of the economic market (industrial and monetary systems) to the competition of the world market; the privatization of social services, and the shifting focus of economic enterprise from production to financial services. From the very first, Israeli society had been marked by gaps between poor and rich, with various economic growth policies running counter to the stated national political goal of attaining a more equal society.¹⁹ These gaps, moreover, were highly correlated with ethnic, national, and religious cleavages, and as a result, society was divided economically into Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, religious and non-religious, Arabs and Jews, and immigrants and veterans.²⁰ Notwithstanding, Israel until the 1970s was widely considered to be a welfare state that provided its citizens with many basic social services, including education, health, housing, and pension and social security payments. The state was also the country's largest employer.²¹ It was variously involved in the largest 100 companies (10 percent of which it owned), and more than 71 percent of the grants and subsidies given to Israeli industry came from the state.²² Workers were protected by a single strong trade union movement (the Histadrut) and by labor laws thought to be comparable to those in European social-democratic countries. In addition, the state controlled the financial sector, closely regulating its activities and even owning many major institutions, including banks.²³ To round out the picture, women during this period were (as they mostly still are) the second breadwinner in heterosexual families.²⁴

Israel began to move in the direction of globalization and to retreat from its welfare state commitments in 1979, when the coalition government led by Menachem Begin—the first non-Labor prime minister—adopted a policy of privatization and economic liberalization. Over the next 25 years, industry, the financial institutions, and social services slowly but steadily privatized, with the effects, however, being felt mainly (and negatively) by the lower-middle and lower classes. Whereas many lower-class women were formerly able to make ends meet by having more than one job, they now increasingly found themselves out of work, and in many cases had difficulty even feeding their children. During the 1980s and 1990s, economic reforms included the cutting of budgets for education, health, and the municipalities; reduced social service payments and decreased subsidization of basic commodities such as food; a cutback in aid to struggling industries; and increased competition and lessened protection in the employment sector, which led both to the weakening of the trade union movement and the introduction of private manpower firms and practices in hiring. The negative effects of these reforms were felt most acutely in the development towns in the Negev and in the north, where the population was (and is) largely Mizrahi.²⁵

This is where Mizrahi feminism met globalization. The question facing women activists was: Did this situation carry the seeds of protest? Were the terms of extreme subordination of the women at the bottom of society—the first to be fired when textile and food factories were closed and workers were exploited—severe enough to generate change and motivate women to break their silence? And how might this be done? In the framework of the women workers project, Ahoti activists took up the challenge by traveling to Israel's outlying towns to meet with women factory

workers, cashiers, and cleaners employed by private manpower companies, among others. They provided them with information about employee rights and encouraged them to unionize within the workplace. To their surprise, they discovered that the women were fully aware of their rights but had done nothing to realize them—and were unwilling, moreover, to attempt to unionize. At first the activists attributed this to the women's lack of experience in organizational activism. Only later did it become clear to them that the women workers, mostly new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia, feared confronting their employers. Given the scarcity of employment opportunities in the development towns and the relatively high rate of unemployment, they were reluctant to speak out for fear of being branded "troublemakers." Such a label would not only jeopardize their present jobs but would hurt their chances of getting work elsewhere.

Exacerbating the situation was the fact that the power of unions in Israel generally, and in the development towns, in particular, had been seriously eroded as a consequence of privatization and globalization. Women workers were increasingly forced to deal with employer exploitation on their own and were afraid to fight for their just and legal rights. Although many of those exploited had cases that almost certainly would have stood up in court, they dared not take action.²⁶

Ahoti activists tried in vain to encourage these women to break their silence. At a certain point, frustrated, some of the activists became disillusioned and disheartened and reverted to their previous identity politics agenda, emphasizing such issues as the distinctiveness of Mizrahi feminist art, literature, and media.²⁷ Meanwhile, the frustration and confusion regarding the realities faced by women workers, combined with internal disagreements over whether to focus on identity politics or on globalization, brought the "year of women workers" project to an end. Ironically, this occurred just as a number of women in southern development towns began to make their voices heard in protest.

Between 2000 and 2004, three significant cases of protest on the part of exploited Mizrahi women living in Negev development towns came to public attention. These protests were spontaneous and personal and were not connected to any organization, including Ahoti. For this reason, the claim may be made that social justice activism in this field did not lead to significant change. I would argue, however, that the work promoted by Ahoti, while not bearing immediate fruit, may have had an indirect influence on those women who spoke out.

Three Case Studies of Protest

Vicki Knafo's March to Jerusalem

The first, and perhaps best known, of these protests was initiated by Vicki Knafo, who in the summer of 2003 was a 43-year-old, twice-divorced mother of three children living in the town of Mitzpe Ramon. The sole breadwinner of her family, Knafo had worked over the years in various temporary jobs in which she earned less than the minimum wage. Like many others in her position, Knafo received an income supplement—in her case, equal to her monthly wages—from the National Insurance

Institute of Israel. As a result, while she lived below the poverty line, she “wasn’t starving.”²⁸ However, in June 2003, as part of the economic recovery plan, a cut in supplemental income payments went into effect. On the verge of starvation and “one step from suicide,” Knafo decided to take action. Since she had no money for a bus ticket and no patience to wait for other single mothers to get a bus organized, she decided to march to Jerusalem—some 200 kilometers away—and to camp outside the Ministry of Finance, located in the row of government buildings close to the Knesset.

Knafo began her protest on July 1, 2003 and after five days reached her destination. By then, she was no longer on her own. Her roadside walk in the heat of an Israeli summer had quickly attracted widespread media coverage, and Knafo was soon accompanied on the way by other single mothers, unemployed workers, and social activists, including five members of Ahoti.²⁹ Upon their arrival, they were met by more individuals who sought to express their solidarity and encouragement. While Knafo did not manage to meet any senior government economic officials during the days that followed, thousands of people came to visit her and provided her with food, clothing, and a tent. Some of these people were mothers who joined her protest. Two weeks after Knafo’s arrival in Jerusalem, some 300 single mothers (and a few fathers) and a large number of children were encamped in more than 40 tents opposite the Knesset.

Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, a master of media communication, was deeply committed to privatization as the solution to Israel’s economic ills. In his view, the key to economic reform and advancement lay in balancing the budget by means of cutting government outlays on social welfare programs such as old age pensions, child support, and unemployment benefits. He pursued such policies rigorously, even though this resulted in increased unemployment (which was further exacerbated by the influx of foreign workers, who were paid lower salaries than those required by law for Israelis). Eventually, Netanyahu invited Knafo for a meeting on condition that she come alone. Knafo, for her part, wished to be accompanied by social activists and economic experts who had offered her help. Negotiations for the meeting continued for weeks but generated only media hype, until eventually Knafo could no longer bear the public spotlight. This, together with the end of the summer school vacation, led her to pack up and return with her children to Mitzpe Ramon in September 2003. During her lengthy protest, Knafo had only the briefest of meetings with Netanyahu.

Ahoti activists were among those who spent time with Knafo in Jerusalem, discussing the steps she should take with regard to both the negotiations with Netanyahu and her contacts with the media and with representatives of other NGO’s. At a certain point, Ahoti’s voice was lost among all those willing to assist, since its only resources were time and solidarity (whereas other groups were in a position to provide financial support, food, tents, and professional advice and publicity). After returning to Mitzpe Ramon, Knafo ended her relations with Ahoti and most of the other groups.³⁰

Throughout her stay in Jerusalem, Knafo was open to advice from those who came to offer sympathy and support. At the same time, fully aware of her inexperience in social activism, she refrained from making major decisions. Eventually, the powerful energy fueled by her protest dissipated as Knafo found herself pulled in different directions by groups and individuals who, in many cases, had their own agenda to promote.

Did Knafo's protest fail? In the course of three months spent by Knafo (and others who had joined her) in front of the Ministry of Finance, Netanyahu was forced to hear what she had come to tell him—via the media, if not necessarily firsthand. In this sense, given Knafo's initial resolve to do no more than tell the finance minister what she thought, her protest can be judged a success. For Knafo personally, the experience was certainly sobering. She learned much about the public sphere and about social activism against injustice. She learned about other, less immediately relevant matters, such as how the media handles scoops and how it feels to be a celebrity—both admired and criticized—and was also exposed to new terms and concepts in which her economic distress might be expressed. In all these respects, Knafo's protest was both important and successful on the personal level, even though it may have attained little in the way of political achievement or social change. No laws were passed, none of the desired policies were adopted, and decision-makers did not change their minds as a result of Knafo's protest. Likewise, Ahoti activists did not have any discernible impact as a result of their participation in this act of public protest. Nevertheless, it may not be going beyond the facts to suggest that Knafo's initial protest may well have led to a shift in consciousness that was then reinforced by the economic and political experiences associated with the event. However, because it is hard to quantify, it is very difficult to evaluate the extent of this shift.

From Workers to Bosses: The Mitzpe Atzmaut Textile Factory

Three years earlier, another Mizrahi woman from Mitzpe Ramon, Havatzelet Ingbar, had launched a different kind of protest against economic policies that had brought her family to the verge of starvation.

Ingbar, a married mother of four, had worked for 14 years as a seamstress in the Mitzpe Atzmaut textile factory. In July 2000, it became known that the factory was on the verge of bankruptcy. In the past, depending on the volume of its orders, the factory had periodically laid off workers; Ingbar and others were routinely fired and rehired about twice a year. Although the workers belonged to a union—Ingbar herself was a union representative—there had previously been no organized protests. As she explained: "We could do nothing, since there were so many other unemployed women waiting at the doors of the factory, and with even a hint of our fighting for our rights, we would have found ourselves immediately thrown into the streets."³¹ Now, however, as word spread that all 57 employees at the factory were about to permanently lose their jobs, Ingbar and a few of her fellow workers walked off the floor, thus beginning a wildcat strike. Acting spontaneously, they gave little thought at first to the goals or the consequences of their action.

Their first step was to close the factory gates. Following this, their pressing priority was to attend to the needs of their children. Mothers with small children arranged with their husbands and relatives to have the children brought to the factory so that they could care for them at night. They also requested a supply of blankets and food sufficient for a protracted sit-in: "Because we are not going to let anybody in or out until we have a solution to our situation. We have nowhere to go, and we may die here. We are here until we hear what the Histadrut or the government have to offer us as a solution."³²

The women's actions brought the media to Mitzpe Ramon—a rare occurrence. Dramatic images of women shouting and burning tires were broadcast, and there was a sense that the protest was likely to spread to other Israeli towns. After the first flush of excitement, however, the media lost interest and moved on. Neither did any representatives of the government show any interest. Nevertheless, the women carried on and permitted no one, including the owner, to enter the factory. After three weeks, a number of social justice organizations from Jerusalem and Beersheba became involved and sought to draw public attention to the situation. Some six weeks after the sit-in began, when the matter was almost forgotten, the head of the Histadrut, Amir Peretz, announced that he was going to visit the factory.

Upon his arrival, Peretz asked the strikers to open up the gates and hear what he had to say. He was allowed to enter and stayed inside for several hours. During the discussion, tension was high both inside the factory and among the crowd outside. At the end of the meeting, the Histadrut leader emerged together with Ingbar and another activist, Avigayil Yifrah, and issued a startling public statement: the workers, with Histadrut assistance in the form of a loan of NIS 1,000,000 (about \$250,000), would purchase the failing factory. The women had agreed to end their strike as soon as the Histadrut made good on its promise and contracts for the purchase of the factory were signed. “We were shocked,” Ingbar later recalled, “but we had nothing to lose.”

The atmosphere was euphoric. The media celebrated a “victory for justice,” focusing their attention on the leading personalities and on the reactions of the public at large, while ignoring the seeds of failure incipient in the initiative. The reality was that the Israeli textile industry was in crisis as a result of fierce competition from the Far East, Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf states. More specifically, the factory in Mitzpe Ramon was deeply in debt. Only later did Ingbar and her fellow workers discover that its net worth was no more than about NIS 250,000. Beyond the additional NIS 750,000 in funding provided by the labor federation, all debts were to be assumed by the factory's new owners, namely, the women themselves. Moreover, the physical plant and equipment were old, and there were no capital reserves to enable the factory to survive unregulated competition emanating either from Israel or overseas. At the time of the sale, these realities—known not only to the owners but also to Histadrut leaders and to others involved in the textile sector (such as the Textile and Fashion Industries Association)—was not made clear to the women workers. They now proceeded to become factory owners by purchasing shares at NIS 5,000 each. Money for the shares came out of the NIS 1,000,000 loan provided by the Histadrut, since none of the women could afford NIS 5,000 out of their meager earnings as textile workers.

Ingbar recalls: “When the Histadrut offered to have us go for it, I was shocked. Me? How would I do both the sewing and the management? What do I know about business and commerce? But we were so excited, first, because he [Peretz] honored us with his visit, and second, who could afford to refuse such an offer when there was nothing else on the horizon? We had nothing to lose, so we decided to go for it.”

Over the next few weeks, many individuals made their way from the center of the country to Mitzpe Ramon, a distant town on Israel's southern periphery, in order to offer moral support and professional advice. Among them were financial advisers, accountants, managers, and experts in marketing and human resources. The constant

flow of visitors to the factory and their embrace of the women who had taken it over became a media festival in which anonymous female workers were transformed into national heroines, serving as a beacon of hope for others similarly disadvantaged. Two television producers came to document the process whereby women who had always been workers became businesswomen managing their own factory. Textile merchants also lent them moral and material support, placing larger orders than they required so as to give the women extra encouragement. A few weeks after the factory's purchase, it reopened in a colorful ceremony.

Ahoti activists were among those who offered help and support when the women's strike first hit the media. When asked what the women needed, Ingbar immediately requested scissors and chairs. It was at this point that the women's shockingly difficult working conditions were exposed. Under the previous owners, the women had sat for hours at a time on old and uncomfortable chairs and were not allowed to change their position; not surprisingly, many of them reported suffering from chronic backache. Yet the factory's needs went far beyond new chairs, scissors, or medical assistance. Ahoti, with no budget of its own, attempted to raise money by turning to a Jerusalem philanthropist, without success. As in the case of Knafo, the Ahoti activists found themselves unable to offer anything beyond moral support and solidarity. In addition, since most of them came from Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, it was not easy to travel to Mitzpe Ramon on a regular basis.

As noted, the seeds of failure were present from the outset, though these were either hidden from view or downplayed. The women in the factory did their best to become directors, managers, marketers, and accountants as well as factory workers, but they faced tremendous difficulties and obstacles. The worst was their lack of familiarity with Israeli political and bureaucratic institutions and processes. Moreover, most of those with whom they had to work were men, who, as Ingbar recalled, "could not bear the idea that a subordinated woman from yesterday would become their boss in the factory or an equal negotiator for resources today." In their interactions with the Histadrut, the ministries of finance, labor, and welfare, and local government authorities, the women were perceived as totally inexperienced; according to Ingbar, "they ate us alive." Management power games and manipulation were new to her and her friends. They did not know how the system worked, and more significantly, they were very minor players on the political scene, unable to pull strings, to apply pressure, or to persuade others to further the factory's interests. During the first year, Ingbar encountered both external and internal obstacles emanating from local officials, technicians, and some of her fellow workers. Men in managerial positions, she recalled, could not accept the dramatically transformed situation in which women "who knew nothing" were now speaking to them as equals. The initial expectation was that the women would quickly learn to function as managers, and in almost no time would be doing business as usual. These expectations were not fulfilled, however, and the task of overcoming the weighty external and internal obstacles and complications proved to be beyond them. The factory limped along, buyers gradually lost their patience, and after almost a year, Ingbar finally gave up and resigned; some time later, Yifrah resigned as well.

As with the case of Vicki Knafo, it is difficult to evaluate the success or failure of the Mitzpe Ramon women's act of protest. On an individual level, both Ingbar and

Yifrah found themselves unemployed once they had quit their managerial positions. Since the initial struggle was aimed at preserving jobs, they were clear losers. On a broader level, however, the revolt at Mitzpe Atzmaut was an unprecedented event in which a group of women workers, by virtue of their protest, eventually became managers of the factory in which they worked and had previously been exploited. To be sure, this turn of events led to no real change in the public arena and had no perceptible effect on other blue-collar women workers. At the same time, the women at Mitzpe Atzmaut experienced significant change. They gained a rare opportunity to look into the world of their employers, seeing from within how management and business is carried out. They had face to face contact with representatives of government ministries and business, with those who formerly determined how much they should earn or who bought the products they produced. They learned how it felt to be responsible for other people's salaries and to ensure that products were manufactured and delivered on time. The lasting effects of such experiences are difficult to evaluate and measure, but they have most likely led to shifts in consciousness or professional abilities among workers who were transformed overnight into managers.

The "Lionesses" of Beersheba

In January 2004, three women in their 40s—Yehudit Ben-David, Ahuva Mor-Yosef, and Michal Magen—entered a supermarket in Beersheba. They filled their shopping carts and then asked to speak to the manager, informing her that they intended to walk out without paying for what they had taken. Over the course of the following two months, this scenario was repeated in other supermarkets in the city. In a flyer signed by "The Three Lionesses," the women explained that they were acting out of desperation. "The economic depression and the recent removal of the subsidies on bread and basic food have brought us to starvation," they wrote. "We are left with no choice. We have to protect our children. We have decided to take direct action to fill our shopping carts with food and bring it to our children. It's time to stop being shy and silent. If you're a single mother, join us. Together we'll succeed."³³

All three women were without regular employment. Mor-Yosef had worked as a supermarket cashier but five years previously had suffered a heart attack. "While I was recovering, they fired me," she told a foreign reporter. "Now they say I'm too old to hire." In a different interview, one of the women declared: "We are the silent victims of Bibi Netanyahu. . . . I clean stairways occasionally . . . but it's not enough for the rent and food and electricity . . . we have no electricity, so we are no longer ashamed [to steal]."³⁴ All three women were divorced, and their ex-husbands were not providing alimony.

Hearing of the women's protest, the Beersheba branch of the Shatil organization contacted the Lionesses and tried to encourage them to organize self-help—for instance, a project to bake and distribute bread among the city's poor population. But the women were too angry to conform by restricting themselves to socially acceptable activities, preferring instead to continue their challenge against the social order. They refused to act like "good girls" and instead resorted to criminal acts. In March, for instance, they were arrested (not for the first time) for attempting to invade the Knesset cafeteria.³⁵ Although they gained a certain amount of media exposure, their

protest did not generate widespread public debate or support from other women. On the contrary, many people condemned the women for disturbing the public order and for providing a bad example to their children.³⁶ After April 2004, the Lionesses no longer received media coverage.

Conclusion

What can be learned from each of these three case studies? In each instance, women who had experienced years of economic deprivation and exploitation in silence suddenly broke out in protest. What motivated them? As indicated by the women themselves, what brought them to their moment of crisis was the fear that they would no longer be able to provide for their children. This was particularly so in the case of the Lionesses, who, forced to choose between being “good mothers” who would feed their children and “good citizens” who would maintain public order and obey the law, chose the former. In other words, the gender motivation, the commitment to motherhood in accordance with the values with which they had been raised, obliged them to take action. Until the moment of crisis, the point at which they could no longer “make do,” the women in Beersheba—as with the factory workers in Mitzpe Ramon and with Vicki Knafo before June 2003—refrained from taking action. In all these cases, it seems, the women’s spontaneous radical action was motivated not by social or feminist ideology but by their gendered consciousness of their traditional role and responsibility as mothers.

Does this mean that there is a gender difference in the motivation of the oppressed to rebel and to break the silence? Would fathers have done the same had they been in the same situation? Would they have used the same rhetoric in order to justify their protest? Although the question of why and when people rebel has preoccupied historians and philosophers of revolution (such as Hannah Arendt) and social scientists (such as Ted Gurr),³⁷ these scholars discuss the matter in terms of a class or civil rights struggle, without taking up aspects of gender—namely, biological, economic, psychological, and sexual differences between males and females. Similarly, while feminist literature has dealt extensively with the circumstances of inequality, it, too, has barely addressed the question of how, why, and when women, as opposed to men, choose to rebel instead of continuing to remain silent, thus carrying on in a framework of exploitation and humiliation. Moreover, in the case of the Israeli feminist movement, in which tension developed between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, there is an additional ethnic factor to consider (similar to the racial factor underlying the tension between, for instance, African American and white American feminists). When the ethnic factor is intertwined with the gender factor, the “silencing forces” are compounded.

Whereas feminist scholars, despite different approaches, agree that sexual subordination is the common denominator at the root of women’s oppression and silence,³⁸ they tend to ignore the public sphere—that is, such issues as how political practices, legislation, and economic consequences of globalization are connected to the formation of personal and gendered identity. Put somewhat differently, the feminist literature leaves a gap between the “psychic” (that is, forces operating on the individual level) and the “social” by ignoring the relations between the geopolitical

or global context and the acting person, that is, the agent. An exception in this regard is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who draws a distinction between the first world and the third world in her landmark work, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"³⁹ Yet in the era of globalization, there are situations in which *both* worlds exist: one can live in the "third world" even in a "first world" country, with the lives of women at the bottom of "first world" societies resembling those of women in the third world.

Hence, to be a Mizrahi woman and mother in an outlying town in Israel in the era of globalization raises issues of feminism different from those confronting an upper-class mother in Tel Aviv. Spivak criticizes the methods by which third world women's issues are formulated in contemporary western literature. She argues that, paradoxically, third world women are prevented from speaking when white men come to "save" them from brown men and thereby take over the representation of their interests. Similarly, when feminists take action in order to generate social change, the inner differences among them—for instance, whether they are white Americans or Indians—become transparent.⁴⁰ Ahoti and Shatil activists who tried to provide support and solidarity to the women in the cases discussed here also followed western patterns of action, which had the effect of silencing the "subaltern" women who took action.

In the case of Ahoti feminists, the dilemma was precisely this gap between the psyche and the social—between the women's need to discuss their ethnic and identity subordination, on the one hand, versus the imperative to "break the silence" with regard to economic oppression and deprivation, on the other. This was a dilemma that the activists faced both when attempting to support the struggling women and when trying to restructure their own agenda. In each of the three case studies, the protesting women had not previously heard of Ahoti, and their interactions with movement activists were no different from those with representatives of other non-governmental organizations. Thus, the gap that the activists were theoretically able to bridge between the psycho-ethnic and the socioeconomic remained unbridged.

As noted, it is very difficult to determine the success or failure of acts of spontaneous protest, and all the more so when issues of ethnicity and gender are factored in. In analyzing the three case studies through the lens of gender, it becomes apparent that the women acted first and foremost as mothers. They felt that they had the right to go public because socially structured norms expected them to function as good mothers. What they did, in effect, was to appeal to the public's sense of justice, delivering a message that went roughly as follows: "We were brought up and expected to be good mothers, but under the current economic conditions, it is impossible for us to fulfill our role." In this respect, the women took feminist action by politicizing the role of the mother, thrusting their issues, via the media, into the public arena (whether the state, the finance ministry, or the Histadrut labor federation). Instead of remaining silent or regarding their "incompetence" as mothers as a sign of personal failure, they placed responsibility for their economic distress back in the public sector, where they felt it belonged. In this respect, Ahoti had no influence on the women before, during, or after the events precisely because it failed to grasp the gendered aspect of the struggle and to work in the direction of politicizing the issue of motherhood.

Similarly, the issue of ethnicity needs more clarification. Whereas the women involved in two of the three acts of protest were Mizrahi, some of the workers at the Mitzpe Atzmaut textile factory were immigrants from southern parts of Russia (mainly Georgia).⁴¹ The point was noted by the media, which thereby suggested that the Mizrahi women were economically disadvantaged in the same manner as new immigrants. This implicit comparison ignores the fact that many women of Mizrahi origin live in outlying towns, in a society where the gap between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim has always played a role in Israeli political dynamics. Moreover, the political consciousness of Mizrahi women is rooted in three decades of oppression and exclusion. This long-term oppression, according to Mizrahi feminist activists, resulted from their being made to feel inept, both as women and as Mizrahi—placed even lower on the socio-hierarchical ladder than were Mizrahi men. Consequently, these women comprise a category of their own, different from both Mizrahi men or non-Mizrahi women: a point worthy of notice in any further research regarding the Israeli feminist movement.

Notes

1. Dafna Izraeli, "Hamigdur ba'olam ha'avodah," in *Min, migdar, politikah*, ed. Dafna Izraeli, Ariella Friedman, Henriette Dahan Kalev, Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui, Hanna Herzog, Manar Hasen, and Hannah Naveh (Tel Aviv: 1999), 167–212.

2. Henriette Dahan Kalev, "Tensions in Israeli Feminism: The Mizrahi-Ashkenazi Rift," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24 (2001), 1–16.

3. On the number of women of Mizrahi origin in Israel, and the problems of obtaining precise figures, see Henriette Dahan Kalev, "Ma'arakhot hitargenu 'azmit: vadi salib ve-hapanterim hashehorim, hashlakhot 'al hama'arekhet beyisrael" (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University, 1991).

4. Brachah Seri, quoted in the newsletter *Kol haishah* 19 (1983), 4.

5. Dahan Kalev, "Tensions in Israeli Feminism," 16.

6. *Ibid.*, 11.

7. *Ibid.*, 16.

8. *Ibid.*; idem, "Ma'arakhot hitargenu 'azmit"; Vicki Shiran, "Shlish, shlish, shlish, reva', reva', reva'," *Noga* 26 (1993), 26; Mira Eliezer, "'Avarnu kivrat derekh," *Mizad sheni* 4 (Jerusalem) (July–Aug. 1996), 25.

9. See, for example, Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa: 1988), 77–78; and Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: 1984), introduction.

10. Alice Walker, "Definition of a Womanist," in *Making Face, Making Soul*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: 1990), 342; Barbara Smith, *The Truth that Never Hurts* (New Brunswick: 1998); Henriette Dahan-Kalev, "On the Logic of Feminism and the Implications of African American Feminist Thought for Israeli Mizrahi Feminism," *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* (Spring 2003), 111–117.

11. Dahan Kalev, "Tensions in Israeli Feminism"; idem, "On the Logic of Feminism"; idem, "The Gender Blindness of Good Theorists: An Israeli Case Study," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4 (2003), 126–147.

12. Dahan Kalev, "Tensions in Israeli Feminism."

13. Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: 2003).

14. Dahan Kalev, "Tensions in Israeli Feminism."
15. Lois McNay, "Subject, Psyche and Agency: The Work of Judith Butler," *Theory, Culture and Society* 16, no. 2 (1999), 175–193.
16. Catherine Krupnick, "Women and Men in the Classroom: Inequality and Its Remedies," *On Teaching and Learning, The Journal of the Harvard Danforth Center* (May 1985), 18–25.
17. Ahoti was founded by me and by Netta Amar, an attorney. We were soon joined by other Mizrahi feminists, among them the late Vicki Shiran, Vardit Damry Madar, Esther Eilam, and Ilanit Trabelsi.
18. These goals were formulated by me and by Netta Amar in April 2000. The extended agenda was sent as a funding application to the Hadassah Foundation in New York, in November 2001.
19. Henriette Dahan-Kalev, "Defusei dikui beyisrael: wadi salib," *Teoriyah uvikoret* 12–13 (1999), 31–44.
20. Ibid.
21. Yitzhak Katz, *Hafratah beyisrael uva'olam* (Tel Aviv: 1997).
22. Report by State of Israel, Government Companies Authority (1997), online (in Hebrew) at http://www.gca.gov.il/reshut/1997/heb/ikar/draft3_1.htm. In the course of privatization, the number of government employees was cut back. In 2004, the state employed some 500,000 workers, versus 1.6 million in the private sector; comparable figures for 2002 are 501,700 for the government sector and 1,040,000 (not counting foreign and Palestinian workers) in the private sector. See table in http://www1.cbs.gov.il/shnaton57/download/st10_12.xls; also Arieh Nahmias, "Yahasei 'avodah beyisrael 2004: zemiḥah ushevitah," online at <http://openu.ac.il/Adcan/adcan40/adcan-6.html>.
23. Shimshon Bichler and Nitzan Yehonatan, *Mirivḥei milḥamah ledividendim shel shalom* (Jerusalem: 2001), 68–119.
24. Shlomo Swirski, Eti Connor-Atias, Vered Krouz, and Anat Harvest, *Mabat 'al ha-takziv* (report published by the Adva Center for Social Research) (Tel Aviv: 2002).
25. The Manufacturers Association of Israel reports that, over the course of six years (1994–2000), the number of textile workers declined from 45,000 to 22,000. However, over the course of a decade including this period (1994–2004), the value of textile goods exported from Israel grew from \$1,008,000,000 to \$1,094,000,000. Two factors are responsible for the inverse relation between number of workers and the growth of exports: the reduction in wages, and improvements in technology. See <http://www.industry.org.il/SubIndex.asp?CategoryID=111>. Following the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993, a number of Israeli textile factories moved their operations to Egypt, Jordan, or the United Arab Emirates, where manpower costs were cheaper. Today there are about 80,000 Israelis employed in some 800 small and medium-sized firms. In the course of one year—2003—some 12,000 textile workers lost their jobs when their factories shut down. See table 14 (employment in industry) in the yearbook of the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, online at <http://www.sbs.gov.il/publications/industry2003/tab14.xls>.
26. In Kiryat Gat, for instance, a group of Ethiopian women hired by a cleaning agency declined to bring a suit against the company, despite conditions of exploitation. Similarly, two women in the town who were working a full, eight-hour day, but being paid for only five hours, refused to take action. This information was reported to me by Einav Himi Vaknin, an Ahoti activist who met with the women in Kiryat Gat in July 2001.
27. For instance, Shula Keshet, a Mizrahi artist, curated an exhibition titled "My Sister" in the Ami Steinitz art gallery in Tel Aviv in the spring of 2002.
28. Interview with Vicki Knafo, Jerusalem (21 July 2003).
29. I had met Knafo two days before the onset of her hike, when we were both interviewed on the Israeli educational television network (I was invited to appear because of a different issue involving the privatization of state lands in defiance of a high court decision). Hearing of Knafo's plan to hike to Jerusalem, I decided to inform fellow members of Ahoti and suggested that they organize a solidarity demonstration. Over the course of the following

month, I met with Knafo approximately twice a week. In August, I left for a sabbatical abroad.

30. The exception was an organization called Shatil, funded by the New Israel Fund (an American Jewish philanthropy), which provides managerial counseling to newly created activist organizations. Knafo's relationship with Shatil is worthy of more extensive analysis. In an interview conducted about a year after her protest, Knafo said that Shatil had "exploited me in order to promote [its] own interests." See Itzik Saporta, "Hama'avak hahevratit 'al pi Knafo" (3 Oct. 2004), online at www.haokets.org/article.asp?ArticleID=788.

31. I met with Havatzelet Ingbar several times between August 2002 and February 2003. All quotes are from interviews conducted with her during this period.

32. Ibid.

33. Flyer published in Beersheba, calling on single mothers to join the group.

34. Chris McGreal, "Trolley Dash: The Last Resort of Hungry Israelis," *Guardian International* (19 Feb. 2004), online at www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1151077,00.html; Zvi Alush, "Robin Hood, hagirsah hanashit," *Yedioth Aharonoth* (1 Jan. 2004), 16.

35. *Kolbi* (Beersheba) (4 March 2004), 24.

36. Osnat Vazana, "Zot lo haderekh," *Sheva'* (Beersheba) (25 Dec. 2003), 14.

37. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: 1977); Tedd R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: 1970).

38. In an article on the work of the gender theorist Judith Butler, Lois McNay discusses the problem of an "autonomous subject instituted through constraint" and the relation between the "psyche" and the social. However, she keeps these two dimensions entirely separate, whereas I would argue that the cause for women's silence lies somewhere between the two. Social and materialistic issues are rarely analyzed within the same context as psychic and genderial issues. Hence the dichotomy between the social-materialistic and psychic-genderial persists, and the forces that keep women silenced remain hidden within the gap between the two sides. See McNay, "Subject, Psyche and Agency." In an attempt to untangle the complexity of this situation, feminist scholars look in many directions and attempt to provide some generalizing explanations. Luce Irigaray looks into the psyche (*Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill [Ithaca: 1985]); Judith Butler into subject formation (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [New York: 1990]); and Julia Kristeva into semiotics (*Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez [New York: 1987]). They and many other scholars have produced fascinating theoretical explanations and suggestions regarding methods for "breaking-through" on the part of oppressed women.

39. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: 1988), 271–313.

40. Ibid.

41. See, for example, Yitzhak Elam, "Shimush bekoah ezel 'olei maroko ve'olei gruziyah," *Megamot* 24 (1978), 159–170.