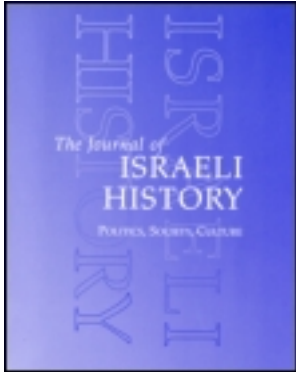


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^a "Be'er" (a well)

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Women of the Wall: Radical Feminism as an Opportunity for a New Discourse in Israel

Leah Shakdiel

*It seems I am a descendant of mute women.
It seems there is in me a beehive of words I will never enounce.
It seems I am condemned to be spread daily in the sweetness
of their formless honey, to be bitten with the needle of their speechlessness.
Gathered-in, distorted notes, will come, will come, and open up my choking throat.
Whispering, storming, sub-wombian waves, will come, will come, and break
through the dam of shame.
My deserted, saddened voice, frozen in the silent pole, will come, will come,
will burst and flood and sip into the abyss of earth like hot burning foaming red
lava.
My whole, my voice will come, fierce immense tall strong and echoing forward
silencing all
those whispering mouths:
"The honor of the king's daughter is heard inside only."
Smadar Falk¹*

Thomas Kuhn taught us that paradigms change when they no longer reasonably explain phenomena that defy them, while at the same time a new theory develops in the margin of the known discourse that offers a better explanation for those phenomena.² I will try to examine one such phenomenon which remains inexplicable by the current paradigm for the analysis of Israeli society — “Women of the Wall” (WoW). I think that tackling problematic phenomena such as WoW has the potential to produce a new perspective, which cuts across the boundaries of current social categories. In other words, this group can serve as a litmus paper that diagnoses the changing Israeli society, if we understand its history as a chain of noisy interactions with active “chemicals” that are usually invisible.

I should disclaim the following in the beginning: I do not belong to the WoW group, but I am a close friend of some members, share many of their ideals, and care a lot for their struggle, though I feel ambivalent about the site

they chose for action (namely, the Western Wall in Jerusalem).³ Over the years I have also shared with them my critique of some strategies they adopted. I wrote this article from this standpoint, mingling the private and the public, the personal and the political, theoretical research and political action. I thank group members for the information and the ideas they shared with me; the conclusions drawn are mine alone.

Background: Group “Herstory”

At the very end of 1988, in the Hyatt Hotel in Jerusalem, the First International Conference of Jewish Feminists was held, 15 years or so after the sprouting of Jewish feminism in New York.⁴ Jewish women had worked for the women’s rights movement since its beginnings, and many Jewish women who had been active in various political movements since the nineteenth century have had a feminist agenda; however, the term “Jewish feminism” marked a new development within what is known as “the second wave” of feminism — no longer contained within the struggle for equality with Jewish men, they now committed themselves to changing both Judaism and Jewish society in light of the feminist vision.

Some participants in that conference in Jerusalem have been Modern Orthodox activists from North America, feminists who had been involved since the 1970s in organizing women’s *tefilla* (prayer) groups (WTGs) in their communities.⁵ These groups are motivated by the urge to change the place of women in public prayer from a passive audience to active participation, albeit within the limits of Orthodox Halakhic policies — that is, the accepted interdiction in those circles to hold mixed-sex prayers. No longer willing to remain an addendum to men’s prayer, behind a partition, these women hold separate prayers for females only, where they can experience active roles such as leading group prayer, organizing the event, reading aloud from the Torah scroll for all present, or being honored with various parts of the ritual (*Aliyah* — stepping up to empower the reader to read for them, opening the Holy Arc for taking out the Torah, holding the Torah up following the reading, etc.). Many of these women are familiar with prayers in a women-only group, the daily routine in the single-sex schools they attended; nonetheless, the novelties these prayer groups introduced — reading from the Torah scroll, as well as reading the Book of Esther from a scroll on Purim — are welcomed with tears of revolutionary excitement. These are adult women, often recognized scholars in various Jewish studies, finally included in an experience that is considered basic and universal in the life of every Jewish boy from his bar mitzvah (when he turns 13) onwards — looking at the inside of the holy scroll from up close, in the very center of the prayer group and not in the margin.

These women prayer groups meet on Simhat Torah, a holiday marked by calling up to the Torah every male present in the synagogue, a custom that emphasizes the redundancy of females; on Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of every Jewish month, as a new expression for a forgotten women's monthly holiday; and for celebrating bat mitzvah, the coming of age for girls who turn 12 in the same way this event has been marked for boys in recent times. Some women also wrap themselves in a prayer shawl during these services, though they make sure to wear shawls with feminine designs that distinguish them clearly from the traditional ones used by men. It is worth noting that at the time (1988) there was only one such prayer group in Israel, in the Yedidya congregation in Jerusalem;⁶ this prayer group derived its practice from the custom imported to Israel in the 1970s by an immigrant from the US, Pnina Peli.⁷

One of the proponents of this new practice in the Jewish world who came to Jerusalem for the 1988 conference was Rivka Haut from Brooklyn, New York. Haut had already edited a newsletter named *The Women's Tefillah Network*, which since then has become an electronic forum, WTN, that enables the groups to stay in touch, consult with each other, and evolve towards a "movement" with some loose guidelines. The most radical groups function just like an all-male quorum of ten (*minyan*); the most traditional ones make a point of considering their reading from the scroll as Torah study only, meticulously avoiding imitating rituals reserved for males; and the mainstream includes the majority of the groups, those who enable women to say the blessings over the reading (thereby marking its status as fulfillment of a *mitzvah*, a ritual obligation), but omit the three "sanctifying texts" that can be shared in a male quorum only (*Barkhu*, *Kaddish*, *Kedushah*). The Network has given rise to a group of Modern Orthodox rabbis who support this new practice and are willing to provide Halakhic guidance to specific issues.⁸ I think that the most important achievement of the WTN is the legitimacy it has created in certain Orthodox circles for the seeming oxymoron "religious feminism," first propagated by Rebbetzin Blu Greenberg from New York.⁹ Eventually, this gave rise to two organizations that hold large-scale periodical conferences: the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in New York (founded by Blu Greenberg in 1997), and the Religious Women's Forum "Kolech" (Your Voice) in Israel (founded by Hannah Kehat in 1999).

That winter of 1988, in Jerusalem, Rivka Haut initiated another novelty: women's prayers at the Western Wall, with a Torah scroll and prayer shawls.¹⁰ At the time, Israel was undergoing a governmental crisis over the "Who is a Jew" issue, and Haut thought she had two advantages. First, as a diaspora Jew, she was free of the sharp dichotomies that typify Israeli discourse concerning religious issues and had experience in cross-denominational negotiations. Second, as a feminist she was used to the solidarity of "sisterhood," and

therefore free of the rivalries that paralyze male politics in general. This self-image, by the way, is characteristic of other WoW activists even today.¹¹

Haut and other Orthodox feminists who lobbied in the conference halls for the new idea convinced the others who joined them to hold the planned prayer service at the Western Wall within the Halakhic parameters of most Orthodox WTGs, while sharing roles among all denominations. A scroll was borrowed from the Reform movement in Jerusalem, and on Thursday morning, 1 December 1988, a big group of women, mostly American tourists, arrived at the women's section of the Western Wall, crowding around the scroll to protect it, singing softly the popular "Oseh Shalom" verse ("He Who makes peace in his Heavens will make peace upon us and all of Israel"), while being accompanied by reporters and photographers. The video sequence documents their excitement and anxiety, how they hurried to leave the site following the service, while the onlookers were beginning to show curiosity and protest.¹² Haut records that on this occasion the women escaped unharmed, but the violence was already beginning to set in (insults and curses were yelled, men shaking the *mechitza* (the partition separating the men's and women's sections) threateningly), in spite of the explicit admission by Rabbi Yehudah Getz, who was serving at the time as the *Memuneh al ha-Kotel*, the official supervisor of the holy site on behalf of the Ministry of Religions, that the women were not violating any *Halakhah*.

Some participants from Jerusalem, mostly immigrants from the US, decided on the spot to turn the event into a tradition, to be held every Rosh Hodesh with a Torah scroll, as well as every Friday (when the service does not include such reading). Following Psalms 97:1, they started calling themselves "Shirah hadashah" (new song), though they have been known in Israel as Kvutzat Neshot ha-Kotel, in accordance with their official English name, Women of the Wall. They soon became victims of repeated violence from Ultra-Orthodox women and men alike — they were pushed around, beaten up, chairs were thrown at them. They naturally demanded that the police protect them, but were stunned to learn that they were the ones accused of disrupting public order, and not those who attacked them: police officers stood by and did nothing to stop the violence, and special female law enforcement workers were hired by the Ministry of Religions to drag them away, in spite of their quiet behavior and only passive resistance.¹³

The group's impression that the media in Israel were biased against it was substantiated by research that compared media coverage of various struggles conducted by women around the same time.¹⁴ In spite of their cross-denominational ideology and practice, they were consistently presented as "American Reform." Otherwise, their issue was cut to fit the prevailing "media concepts" in Israel — women as silenced and invisible, and when mentioned at all the interpretative context can be either "feminists as provocation" or "women as victims of violence (preferably with dramatic visuals)." The

steadfast prejudice of reporters resulted in gross factual mistakes in the coverage with regards to “who was who”, “who said what,” and “what happened.” The only newspaper well disposed for accurate coverage of the group’s issue over the years has been the English-language *Jerusalem Post*. These findings were indirectly corroborated by subsequent research, even though the media were not exclusively the focus of research.¹⁵

The WoW group has also failed to rally support from Israeli women’s organizations: their struggle was and is still considered weird and objectionable. The only known politicians who have been prepared to lend their name to the cause are Reform group member Anat Hoffman (Jerusalem City Councilwoman, Meretz Party), and ex-American Meretz MK Professor Naomi Chazan, whose background is traditionally Jewish. The lasting core of the group is very small, and its activities attract mostly Jewish feminists who are only temporarily in Jerusalem — tourists, overseas students, academics on sabbatical.

Early on, the angry women decided to seek legal support for their cause. Rabbi Getz, drawing his authority as supervisor of the site from the 1967 Law of Protection of Holy Sites and the 1981 Rulings for Protection of Sites Held Holy by Jews, issued that same first winter a formal prohibition for women to wrap themselves in prayer shawls and read from a Torah scroll while they pray at the Western Wall. Later he even added a prohibition for women to sing aloud during the service at the Wall. On 21 March 1989 the group appealed to the Supreme Court demanding that their right to pray at the site according to their customs be upheld against the authorities (Rabbi Getz, the Ministry of Religions, the Chief Rabbis of Israel, and the police).¹⁶ This appeal resulted in an interim order to the police to defend the praying women, as long as they abided by the instructions of Rabbi Getz.

Since contacts with Jewish feminists in the diaspora have been maintained throughout, the group’s activities actually have two facets. On the one hand, these are Israeli citizens struggling for their rights (free expression, organization, ritual, religion). On the other hand, they are also Jewish women who work on importing ideas about Jewish feminism that originated in the US — empowering women’s voice in the public sphere, including public religious ritual.¹⁷ Their friends in North America organized the International Committee for Women of the Wall (ICWOW) which joined the legal struggle;¹⁸ it should be noted that the latter is the only organization that grew out of the conference in Jerusalem in 1988, which naturally ended with many declarations concerning future action in various fields.¹⁹ On 11 November 1989 ICWOW members gave WoW an expensive gift for which they had raised funds — a Torah scroll, which relieved WoW of the need to borrow scrolls from benevolent “radical” synagogues. ICWOW also arranged women’s prayer services abroad, as publicized acts of supporting the WoW’s struggle in

Israel. The American Jewish Congress, the organization behind the 1988 conference in Jerusalem, extended its support for the group, in administration and finances, so that the need to establish a separate formal organization for the group (*amutah*) did not arise until recently. Throughout all these years Haut and others have also tried to make this issue central to the activities of the WTN at large, but with only partial success: there is no consensus among WTN members about WoW, and most of them prefer to concentrate on building local prayer groups and networking with other groups for mutual support.

During these years, the Western Wall has been in the public eye for another reason: the Reform and Conservative movements have tried repeatedly to struggle for their right to hold egalitarian mixed-sex services in the site. Even their attempts to hold such services in the back of the official prayer area, and only twice a year (on Shavuot and Tishah be-Av), have ended with violent reactions of Ultra-Orthodox men, curses, spitting, flinging dirty diapers at worshipers, bullying and blows. The authorities have time and again tried to tie WoW's struggle with this one, by promoting the same solution for all appeals to hold "non-normative" prayers in the area: sending the groups to hold their services along the Wall but not in the officially designated prayer area — either in the tunnel (to the north) or in the open (to the south) — which actually means praying in areas of intense archeological interest to site visitors. These suggestions were rejected by WoW and by the Reform movement, whereas the Conservative movement did work out an agreement with (then) Government Secretary Yitzhak Herzog and moved its services to the southern area, under Robinson's Arch. At any rate, it seems that confounding the struggle of a multi-denominational women's group for single-sex prayers in the existing women's section and in accordance with Orthodox *Halakhah* with the struggle of the non-Orthodox for mixed-sex prayers in an area that cannot possibly be part of the existing division of the space, makes it even more difficult for Israelis, including official authorities, to understand WoW's agenda accurately.

The procedures of the Supreme Court have lasted over a decade already, and there seems to be no end in sight. Judge Aharon Barak rejected the appeal on 21 August 1989. On 31 December 1989, the Minister of Religions and the Minister of Justice jointly issued a ruling that accords stronger legal status to the restrictions on WoW's prayer practices that Rabbi Getz had publicized earlier. Every once in a while the Supreme Court issues decisions that tell the authorities how to find speedy solutions to the problem, but the phrasing of those decisions lends itself to different interpretations, so that the mood of WoW members, as well as their supporters and their opponents, continues to fluctuate between optimism and pessimism accordingly. On 26 January 1994, for instance, the Supreme Court decided to set up a governmental committee

in charge of solving the issue. This decision was read on the one hand as Judge Elon's opinion that WoW should be directed to hold services outside of the currently designated prayer area,²⁰ with the aura that has always surrounded Elon's written opinions, as the only rabbi then on the Supreme Court, and the occupier of the traditionally designated slot in the court for a scholar in Jewish law. On the other hand, others have stressed the explicit statement in the decision that invites WoW to appeal again to the Court's aid if the problem is not solved in the committee's negotiations.²¹ Indeed, the ensuing "work" on the issue dragged on, and WoW appealed again to the Court with the demand that it forced the State to institute acceptable prayer-service arrangements in the site.²² The most recent scandal to date occurred following the publication of the Court's decision in this case (this time it was unanimous, and with explicit sympathy to WoW's cause) on 22 May 2000, which instructed the authorities to find a solution to the problem in no later than six months. One week later, the Knesset ratified the first reading (of the three-stage process required for passing new laws) of a proposition to inflict imprisonment of seven years on women who pray in the Western Wall area with either prayer shawls or tefillin (phylacteries), blow the shofar there (!), or read there aloud from a Torah scroll. For a short time it looked as if WoW was enjoying unprecedented public support for their courageous and just struggle against the outrageous farce promoted by the "forces of darkness," but the scoop faded fast, and when the Attorney General appealed to the Court to reconsider the case in a nine-judge forum (as opposed to the previous three-judge quorum), the Court granted the government its wish, and this time no deadline for solving this issue was specified.

To date (2002), the only explicit achievement of WoW's Supreme Court struggle is the 1989 temporary compromise. The group is allowed to hold services in the archeological garden up the stairs to the west of the Wall area; ironically, these are the ruins of a church built by the crusaders in 1127 CE, Saint Mary of the German Knights. The women start by praying *Shaharit* (the morning service) and *Hallel* (additional psalms for Rosh Hodesh) in the back of the women's section, and this includes singing aloud. Only then do they go up the stairs to the relatively secluded space off the main street, where they take out the Torah scroll as well as their prayer shawls, and some even put on their tefillin at this point. Over the years, a few bat mitzvah girls from Israel and abroad have marked the celebration in this framework. The violence directed at the women has died out — protest shouts are heard occasionally, but it seems that the "regulars," Ultra-Orthodox men and women, have gotten used to WoW's monthly presence in the early morning.

An important side effect of the publicized legal struggle is the development of the Halakhic discourse concerning WTGs, in Israel and not only in the US. The journal *Tehumin*, generally considered as reflective of Chief Rabbinate

positions, naturally chose to start addressing the issue with an article by the Jewish law expert who wrote the relevant part of the defense docket for the State; the title — “Women’s *Minyanim* at the Wall” and not “a women’s prayer group at the Wall” — is not completely innocent, as it reflects the ongoing policy of WoW’s opponents to unite its unique cause with non-Orthodox practices.²³ Only in “response to the first article” did the journal publish an article by Shmuel Shilo, the Jewish law expert who had written the relevant part of the original appeal, together with another Halakhic response by a woman, Rivkah Lubitch, who thus made history by breaking into this male rabbinical bastion, and Shochetman’s “response to the responses” which left the last word with the Chief Rabbinate.²⁴ Other articles in Modern Orthodox journals exposed for this audience the existing Halakhic options to hold women’s group prayer services under certain conditions.²⁵ During the 1990s this new practice spread considerably throughout Israel, but whether this is a belated impact of earlier similar developments in US Jewry or a direct result of WoW’s struggle is hard to ascertain.²⁶

*The Usual Explanation: War of the Daughters of Light
against the Sons of Darkness*

A “Protestant” Struggle in a “Catholic” State

A Group of men began screaming at us, rhythmically, cursing us, warning us, shouting asur — forbidden, pigs; and tameh — unclean. For them, the sight of women reading from the Torah was more than they could bear. I lifted my eyes from the words of the Torah for a moment to glance at them. They seemed garbed in darkness, in intolerance. I forced my eyes back to the Torah scroll, to the holy black letters suspended on the white parchment. We women assembled were like the letters of the Torah, each one individually different, yet creating meaning in our unity, surrounded by the whiteness of the ancient stones.²⁷

Haut’s report, quoted above, is pervaded with emotional contrast between her pure religious experience, as a prayer in communion with God in the holy site, and the dark primitivism of the “black” men across the partition. This description fits well with modern Jewish Enlightenment literature, which has documented since the eighteenth century the struggle against Jewish clericalism, in the apocalyptic genre of “the children of light in war with the children of darkness.” The very use of the terms “tolerance vs. intolerance” plants the discourse well in this context.

Yet, this literature deals generally with the process of secularization — the modern, humanistic spirit of reason, facing the future and progress, clashes with the evil ghosts of institutionalized religion, as it clings to the past and

violently suppresses all openings for free thought and life. Can this discourse then encompass also a clash between a new group of religious people and the ruling religious establishment? We are familiar with this dynamic in Judaism of earlier times, such as the sects that split off from Jerusalem towards the end of the Second Temple period, or the outburst of hasidism in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. But can we apply this model to contemporary Israel? Maybe this is what Rabbi Getz, the Western Wall Supervisor, meant in his letter to WoW on the first of Tammuz, 5749 (summer 1989):

My dear and respected sister,

I welcome you as you come to the Western Wall, remnant of our Temple. You are now in the holiest approachable site for our people in these times ...

I beseech you, dear sister, to help me protect the holiness of the site from desecration, God forbid, *and not to change anything in our people's tradition of many generations.*

And I bless you with the blessing of the High Priest Eli to Hannah [the prophet Samuel's future mother]: "And may the God of Israel grant you the wish you put forward to Him."²⁸

Hannah's prayer at the Shilo Tabernacle was a ritual innovation right in the religious center of that time, and Eli, the supreme religious authority then, became convinced of the appropriateness of her act only after she had insisted and begged (1 Samuel 1). Moreover, the Babylonian Talmud already mentions her prayer as the primary source of many laws that Jewish men must abide by when they pray (Tractate Brahot, 31). Rabbi Getz, then, understood at the time the revolutionary potential of WoW as a change within religion — neither easy nor welcome, albeit not impossible. Could the other actors in the arena, including WoW members, also conceptualize the issue in this way?

I think that WoW members can be characterized as "Protestant Jews," according to the distinction introduced by Akiva Ernst Simon, and not only because most of them have immigrated to Israel from the US.²⁹ They all belong to the minority among Israeli religious Jews who have internalized the social contract that considers religion as completely voluntary, as well as the discourse of rights and liberties that comes with it — freedoms of religious practice, expression, organization and religious pluralism. Within the conceptual framework of "Protestantism" it is possible to include the struggle of a group who claims it has more faith in God and purer religious feelings than the fossilized established "church" and its followers. Do Israelis have the appropriate cognitive map that can take in this worldview?

The responses of the Israeli media point at the difficulties involved here. The issue has been covered in the news as a violent clash between the Ultra-

Orthodox and their victims, and not enough attention was paid to the need for accurate identification of the victims. WoW has had the image of American Reform Jews, because in Israel not only the Ultra-Orthodox but also many secular Jews look upon Reform Judaism as a brand of secularism. I choose to exemplify this with a quote from an article on a totally different subject:

The Shimshon Center is located at the eastern tip of the Hebrew Union College campus, on a hill in the western city, across from the Old City walls, David's Citadel and the Jaffa Gate.... The most prominent visual element in the Shimshon Center is the multi-purpose hall that towers about three stories above the roof of the building, proclaiming its existence from afar with provocative transparency.... Without knowing the secrets of worshiping God, certainly not according to Reform tradition, it seems that a transparent hall is not exactly the place for intimate communion of humans and their Creator, but rather a kind of loud proclamation, externalization and exhibitionism.³⁰

Indeed, the hegemonic Zionist narrative creates for Israeli society a conceptual and interpretative framework founded upon processes of secularization from the Enlightenment onwards, a linear continuum with slots for all of us, from the primitive to the complex, from the early to the progressive, from the fossilized to the dynamic. This applies as a matter of course to the secularization of the public sphere: modern politics takes pride in its exit from the private sphere, in fortifying it as the realm of rights and freedoms, and in protecting it from invasions of the authorities. The transfer of religion to the private sphere is the inevitable consequence: every attempt of religious groups to compete for control in the public sphere is conceptualized as "a cultural war" at best, if not as "dangerous corrosion of the foundations of state and society." Religion is likened to an unreliable wild animal — it must be "domesticated," kept inside clearly designated borders, as limited as possible. The image is no coincidence, since this is how modernism treats "nature" in general: humans control it with the various sciences, and therefore it can only reside within culture in its interpreted, fenced in, domesticated expressions. This logic is all the more spelled out in Israel, because the task of Zionism was to turn a people defined by its religion into a people defined by its nationality as conceived in modernity — that is, to educate the Jewish masses towards a new reality.

So "provocative transparency," visibility, externalization and exhibitionism cannot go hand in hand with religious faith, which "naturally" belongs indoors and not outdoors. This assumption leads easily to the conclusion reached by many that WoW members are not sincerely motivated by the urge to worship God, but rather engage in a kind of weird provocation, a nuisance that

disturbs the public peace, another outbreak of "the Jerusalem syndrome," a passing episode of anthropological value only.

Status Quo

Moreover, Israelis feel exhausted by the ongoing struggles of "the religious" for control of the public sphere, both in its geographic and in its political sense. In Simon's terminology, Israelis are familiar only with struggles of "Catholic" religion with the "Catholicism" of secular Zionism — that is, its claim to be all-embracing and universal. Much like the Thirty Years War in Europe, these religious feuds end periodically in status quo agreements that signify defeat and giving in to the enemy, always with reluctance. The arena is conceived as a split between two binary camps and not more; such a perspective has room for "Protestant religion" only as a polite, tame renter of a sublet apartment in the house of secularism, never as an assertive contestant in the public sphere.

One of those status quo agreements relates to the Western Wall Plaza in Jerusalem since 1967. The site was entrusted to the Ministry of Religions, on the assumption — based on the political reality in Israel — that this ministry would forever be in the hands of whatever religious party was included in any government's coalition. No one was particularly surprised when the Ministry of Religions soon organized the space just like an Orthodox synagogue, with a partition between men and women that leaves about two-thirds of the visible part of the wall to the men; later on, an underground section to the north, under Wilson's Arch, was added. This partition not only separates the sexes physically, it also marks the gender hierarchy accepted by Orthodoxy, between male hegemony in religious ritual (public prayer with all its signifiers) and the secondary status of the women's section (private prayer only).

Every attempt to tip the existing status quo in religious–secular relations in Israel is conceived as triggering dangerous explosives. In such circumstances it is necessary to assess the relative power that the challenging party can rally: how many seats in the Knesset? How many vital junctions in the country are threatened? How will the proposed change influence the daily lives of the secular? Admittedly, these criteria indicate that no small group, especially no small women's group, can compete successfully with the big drama-generating issues in this field: conscription of Yeshiva students, the closure of the Bar Ilan Road in Jerusalem on the Sabbath, the imprisonment of Shas Party leader Aryeh Deri.

Constitutional Revolution

During the past decade, many have thought that the decline of the collectivist discourse in Israel — socialism as well as Zionism — is twinned with the rise of the Liberal Democracy discourse of individual rights and freedoms, especially since the "constitutional revolution" led by the President of the

Supreme Court, Aharon Barak. Does this change mark improved prospects for WoW? After the Court decided in 1994 that the government should set up a committee that must solve the problem within six months, one group member, Bonna Haberman, wrote as follows:

In the letter appointing the committee, the principles of freedom of religious practice and access to the holy site were emphasized.... We are looking for a clear affirmation of pluralism as a constitutive part of religious practice in Israel, which includes women. For Women of the Wall, the January verdict is one milestone in a long process of educating the political, judicial, religious, and social sectors, both in Israel and abroad, about women's religious and spiritual activism.³¹

Haberman integrates here two movements of European history — the Protestant revolution (tolerance to the plurality of officially recognized religious groups), and the democratic revolution (individual rights and freedoms) — and expresses her view that it is both possible and necessary to educate all Israelis and diaspora Jews to acknowledge the value of a women's group that embodies all of this at once. Was her optimism realistic?

This assessment of the situation is reflected in a change in the legal strategy of WoW. The first petition in 1989 emphasized arguments in favor of freedom of religious practice at the Wall, whereas the explicit feminism of the group was not mentioned at all.³² The second petition in 1995, orchestrated by law professor Frances Raday, who served inter alia as the legal advisor to the Israeli Women's Network (IWN), already brought out the claim to women's equality. Several critical studies had already proved that the commitment to forbid gender discrimination, as included in the 1948 Declaration of Independence, is only a baseless myth.³³ Nonetheless, the impression during the 1990s was that Israel, or at least its judicial discourse, was finally ready to ratify at least some liberal feminist policies, that is, practices that indicate the alignment of women's status with that of men. Did this strategic change in the struggle produce any additional value?

During this second stage, WoW's activities were documented in a video which is mainly used for public relations and fundraising abroad.³⁴ On the one hand, the video includes the previous arguments: the Ultra-Orthodox who monopolize the Wall feel threatened by the demand to concede one hour a month for a different ritual; there is no religious freedom in Israel; the authorities portray WoW as some grotesque provocation, in an anti-Semitic style, in order to de-legitimize it. On the other hand, the video shows WoW members as they discuss sexist Halakhic practices such as men daily thanking God for not having made them women; and Raday explains that the egalitarian inclusion of women in an individualistic and pluralistic world increases the threat of WoW and therefore also the opposition to it. The

meeting held in the presence of the camera is conducted in English. Could the same discourse, which sounds quite elementary in the English language, have occurred in Israel in an equally smooth manner if it had been conducted in Hebrew?

If the constitutional revolution is only as successful as the transition from the discourse of conflicting collectives to the discourse of civil rights, then it has failed so far. Israelis largely cling to the dichotomous model of reality, and tend to interpret *public* events in the terminology of “the secular vs. religious cleavage” (whereas extensive research of *private* beliefs and practices displays enormous complexities).³⁵ It is even possible to argue that the constitutional revolution has worsened the situation so far: it seems that the religious tend to oppose it, and classify all its supporters automatically as secular. Due to the contrast between the Israeli electoral system (universal suffrage without prior registration, a Knesset that reflects the raw citizenry with no mitigating mechanisms) and the way judges are appointed by the judiciary itself, the motion to invest the Supreme Court with constitutional properties has funneled the religious feuds in the past decade into a war between this institution and the Knesset. How well can WoW fare then if it expects the Supreme Court to settle a controversy over religious ritual?

All three judges of the second court case expressed unequivocal support of WoW's right to hold services at the Wall (2000), and this seems to confirm that the expected change has indeed happened and liberal democracy is on the rise in Israel. However, as Shmuel Berkovits points out, this change resulted directly from the new policy of “judicial activism.”³⁶ It is an unprecedented case in Israeli legal history, where the Supreme Court stretched its authority without really substantiating the need for such a move, and insisted that the Court and not the government should settle issues of freedom to pray in a holy site. This is in sharp contrast to the Court's own earlier policy on similar issues — it used to reject petitions of Jews to hold services on the Temple Mount. And indeed, the government as well as the Knesset reacted immediately and found ways to circumvent the Court's decision.

It looks then as though WoW's supporters as well as its opponents continue to appropriate its struggle into the general discourse of cleavage between the two familiar camps. They only differ on the question on which side of the frontline these women belong. WoW's supporters prefer to contain it in the “kosher” religious camp, whereas its opponents see it as anti-religious dangerous heresy.

The inclusion of WoW within the religious camp is expressed first and foremost in the rich discussion of the issue and its corollaries in journals of religious Zionism in Israel and Modern Orthodoxy abroad. There is no parallel discussion in other Israeli publications, whereas in the US WoW's struggle is

considered of relevance to Jewish and Israeli politics in general. Downsizing the issue to the religious realm, and more specifically to the Modern Orthodox realm, goes well with the traditions of secular modernism. As long as religious strife is played out in the inner court of the religious, it is tolerated, mainly because this arena has no bearing on the lives of the secular. Let the women settle the controversy with the rabbis, and/or the Ultra-Orthodox, in the Wall's very plaza, since we had conceded it long ago and they go there as they please.

Susan Sered compared three struggles of religious women in Israel who tried to enlist help from the Supreme Court to advance their public status: women's election to municipal Religious Councils, women's election to forums that elect state-official rabbis, and women's group prayer at the Wall. Her research also shows that WoW's issue was narrowed down to the religious realm. In all three cases, the women involved made a point of presenting their struggle as "rebellion" and not as "revolution," that is, as a complaint about injustice in dispensing existing procedures and not as an attempt to bring about fundamental turnover of the social and political order.³⁷ This finding, incidentally, is corroborated by research on Orthodox WTGs in North America, who appear to exercise the same restraint in the course of their struggle for legitimacy in their communities.³⁸ Sered then shows that in the first two cases this is indeed how the struggles were perceived by all, whereas in the case of WoW the religious establishment reacted fiercely to events that it perceived as an attempted revolution of the foundations of culture. By and by it transpires that this research too found that the case unfolds in the arena of religious politics, while other Israelis respond from the standpoint of onlookers from outside.

The response of the Knesset to the Supreme Court decision in 2000 indicates that the dichotomous discourse was not even questioned. When religious Members of the Knesset (MKs) were asked off the record how come they had voted in favor of imprisoning Jewish women who dared to pray according to *Halakhah*, they simply said, "No one intends to put this law into effect, the vote is meant to express our protest against Supreme Court policies in general." This, then, is still the "grand narrative." And for its sake it is even conceivable to "export" to the secular camp a group of women who hold Halakhic prayer services, as if the whole thing is only artificially resuscitated by the Supreme Court.

Summary

This discussion may explain why WoW has such a hard time rallying public support. In a society that instinctively gravitates towards the modernist dichotomy of religion and secularism around every new issue, WoW is perceived as too religious for the secular and too secular (that is, too

“Reform,” or too “Protestantly Jewish”) for the religious. However, this does not explain why the issue has dragged on over so many years, or the difficulty faced by Israeli society as it attempts to resolve an issue that it formally considers small and negligible so that it can cross it off its agenda. It seems that the phenomenon of WoW outgrows the limits of the present discourse and cannot be addressed within the accepted paradigm for analysis of Israeli socio-politics.

*A Different Reading:
Do Women Belong in the “Founding Rock of Our Very Existence?”*

While the secular enlightened discourse continued its efforts, as analyzed above, at drawing the lines around legitimate religiosity in Israel (in Ari Elon’s words, “riboni” vs. rabani,” that is, the sovereign vs. the rabbinical),³⁹ new research has been brought forward that deals critically with the symbiosis between the two. It is claimed that Jewish religion was “nationalized” by Zionism, and that this project of political co-optation is at the center of Israel’s social and cultural problematics.⁴⁰ This approach goes beyond a critique of Judaism as a religion, a culture, a politics, and demands that we apply the same analytical tools to the civil religion that arose out of modernism and its political project, the Zionist nation-state. It is in this scholarly context that I want to point at a missing link connecting that critical discourse with feminist critique of Judaism, Zionism and Israel. Likewise, I want to subject to this perspective not only Judaism as a patriarchal religion and culture, but also the sexist patterns that modernism produced as it proceeded to reinterpret the sociopolitical nexus it pretended to usurp but ended up inheriting.⁴¹ This is the real challenge that WoW presents; I think that this missing link explains the cognitive dissonance that bars us from understanding this group on the basis of the paradigm which is commonly used for examining relations of religion and state in Israel.

War and Peace

On December 1988 Israel did not only face a crisis concerning the “Who is a Jew” issue. It was the end of the first year of the first Palestinian uprising in the territories occupied for 21 years, the year a new word — *Intifada* — entered the Hebrew language. One member of the planning committee of the international conference in Jerusalem was Letty Pogrebin, a well-known Jewish feminist from New York and a long-time activist on behalf of peace in the Middle East. In her autobiography she devoted the last two chapters to the possible interactions of Jewish feminism and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the first of which deals with the feminist conference in Jerusalem. This chapter describes not only the birth of WoW. Pogrebin reports that together

with another committee member, Lilly Rivlin, she struggled to include the issue of peace in the conference agenda, but they had to settle for an academic session titled "Women, War, Peace." They found, however, support for their position in the Israeli organization "Shani" (Israeli Women against the Occupation), whereupon they jointly prepared a "post-conference conference" for Friday, 2 December 1988, under the title "Occupation or Peace: Feminist Response." That other conference ended with participants joining the weekly protest of Women in Black in a central Jerusalem street junction.⁴²

Not a trace of all this can be found in WoW's "official" published record of that week.⁴³ The video that documents Jewish feminism of those years includes separate sequences of both demonstrations (the one at the Wall, and the one in the street junction), as if they did not happen within two days, nor took place in the same city; as if they did not grow out of the same conference.⁴⁴ After all, these are two different issues, each of them attracting different Jewish feminist women. I have a personal confession to make here: I too participated in the big conference, but when invited to join the prayer service at the Wall, I expressed my reservations. I did, however, participate in the conference on Friday as one of the panelists, and also joined the street protest it ended with.

Are these two issues really mutually exclusive? One possible explanation may be found in research on Women in Black,⁴⁵ a group with some elements resembling those of WoW. Both groups involve educated, middle-class, Ashkenazi women, "rich in personal resources" and experienced in political activity. Both groups concentrate on producing "a minimalist public event" which gets reproduced regularly and amasses momentum, thereby shaping "a symbolic bordered site" with "new interpretation of the social order," challenging political patterns and popular images.⁴⁶ Sara Helman and Tamar Rapoport stress that the effect of such a group hinges on the economical minimalism of its actions — concentrating on one thing and insisting on it for a long time — in spite of the frustration expressed by some participants who have failed in their attempts to convince others to stretch the ideological agenda further.

Susan Oren included in her research interviews with women who had reservations about joining WoW because, just like me, they had different political priorities. But mostly I find support for Helman's and Rapoport's thesis in interviews with those, as quoted by Oren, who were initially hesitant but joined WoW later. These women ended up intentionally separating their political activities on behalf of peace, which they continued elsewhere, from their activities in WoW, which they perceived to be focussing on something else. Moreover, whereas Women in Black created "a symbolic bordered site" in a previously neutral arena, WoW had even more of an interest to separate their actions from all other issues — their site had already borne a heavily

symbolic baggage, which they had to lift from the public mind in order to succeed in their unique "public event":

I still don't see myself as a Kotel [Wall] person. It strikes me that people view it as a symbol beyond the symbolism that it has, that it's a remnant. I think there's almost an element ... that people worship the Wall rather than what it symbolizes in the place, which is one of the things that bothered me over the years.⁴⁷

I want to note that praying with WoW has changed my attitude to the Wall. In the course of the 1980s I had undergone a process of gradual alienation from this place. Coming there I had felt increasingly estranged, uncomfortable, for reasons I will not go into here, I will only say that it had to do with changes in the daily life at the Wall. Participation in WoW has "given me back" the Wall.⁴⁸

This article is written during a continued bloody "situation" of unsettled security since October 2000. Palestinians call this second uprising "The Al-Aqsa *Intifada*," and not only because it was triggered by Ariel Sharon's entrance to the mosques' area (he was then leader of the opposition in the Knesset). Rather, the inter-religious conflict over the Temple Mount/El-Haram a-Sharif embodies the heart of the territorial dispute between the two peoples.⁴⁹ A peripheral news item concerning the joint visit by Supreme Court judges and WoW, in order to check closely on possible prayer service arrangements, disappears shortly under piling reports of another issue: stone throwing and gun shots, Muslims digging up their own archeology thereby destroying Jewish remains underneath, heated declarations on both sides about eternal holiness and *casus belli* and indivisible area control, waving flags, stamping civilian fighters (theirs) or soldiers (ours).

The Wall's status in the context of national security has unquestionably been at the center of Israeli and Jewish consciousness ever since the liberation of Jerusalem in the Six Day War, and the photograph of the overwhelmed paratroopers who reached it then, looking upwards, has since decorated every patriotic assembly held to honor the city. No wonder then that Levy Zini chose the title "We Got the Wall" (*Ha-kotel be-yadeinu*) for his documentary even in the year 2000 — this is a well-known code in Israeli discourse which has blended us into one "generational experience" since 1967. Zini filmed mostly men — praying aloud in various ways (this includes the voice of the Muezzin that travels over the loudspeakers from the mosques above), celebrating bar mitzvahs, soldiers in uniform carrying guns, policemen looking into a "suspected object," beggars. Most women appear cast into the role of onlookers, enablers of the male experience: mothers carrying refreshments for bar mitzvahs, teachers leading schoolboys to the prayer site, mothers, sisters

and girlfriends watching soldiers being sworn in. They exist in the margins, hold individual silent prayers behind the partition, and watch from the sidelines an exclusively male drama. One interviewee, writer Yochi Brandeis, who was brought up Orthodox but is no longer religious, basks in her nostalgia over the impact of collective male prayer at the site. All this is mixed with a voice-over report of “the Reform WoW”: they are heard singing the Rosh Hodesh additional prayers and then “Oseh Shalom,” a verse from the Psalms which serves as lyrics for a popular prayer for peace, but they remain unseen. The camera focuses on the Ultra-Orthodox men yelling at them, on the policemen dragging away some of those men, with the voice-over coming on again saying “WoW left the Wall at the conclusion of a rowdy event.”

Even Rabbi Getz, the site Supervisor in 1989, in the letter quoted above, did not limit his comments to matters of religious practice, but found it necessary to allude to the 1967 war, as the constitutive myth of Israeli Zionism ever since, when he wrote to WoW: “Remember that in this very generation young Israeli men shed their blood and sacrificed their youth, so that you can approach it [the Wall] safely and peacefully.” Does a group of women have any chance of changing the symbolic content of such a site, all maleness and war? The problem is emphasized in the following quotation from a totally different context:

According to the commercials ... we immediately feel a strong urge to get up and act, to do bungi-jumps, to ride a horse, liberate the Wall, something like that. And we won't settle for simply liberating the Wall, we must do it in a white bikini.⁵⁰

The liberation of the Wall in 1967 as a historical event has become, then, a metonymy for every important “act,” for asserting oneself, for leaving a mark on the world at large, that is, for victory in war; it is the ultimate male “act.” Pogrebin insisted on juxtaposing this aggressive militarism with direct feminist critique, but not at the Wall — whereas WoW chose the exact opposite, to produce a regular event at the very site, an event that clearly breaches the discourse that organizes and controls all occurrences there.

The Civil Religion Is Catholic

On the surface, Zini's documentary video deals with daily life at the Wall plaza, brings out the variety of simultaneous events, and the plurality of voices in the interviews. However, the subtext throughout is none other than the message of national Jewish unity as centered on the Wall. Even the few interviewees who express a mental distance from the site, interpret their attitude in the context of their personal post-nationalist, universalist politics, thereby affirming the main content of the Wall as a symbol. A decade of

WoW's activity there has not changed at all the perception of the site as observed and analyzed by Danielle Storper-Perez and Harvey Goldberg in 1984-85:

Much goes on at the Wall which is neither the subject of ancient doctrine nor of modern administrative regulation, so that only an ethnographic approach, focusing on actual behavior, and attempting to view the Kotel as a "Total social fact," can begin to make inroads into understanding this contemporary shrine whose religious and national meanings intersect with many aspects of social life.... While the Kotel takes on a multitude of specific meanings in relationship to this medley of cultural categories, it also represents the totality of Jewish peoplehood, fragile as their interrelations may be in the flux of routine life.... There thus are expressed at this site a multitude of patterns in which pan-Jewish sentiments and identities congeal with the more particular objects of the life cycle and ritual calendar.... The very fact that the Kotel plaza, as a ritually important space, is available to everybody at all times, points to its attributes as a shrine that transcends the interpretations and claims of any specific group.... Along with the uniformity embodied in established Kotel roles and their incumbents, is an active, but partially predictable, diversity.... The heterogeneity of the Jewish people, brought together in a single space, is captured, condensed, and highlighted.... Each must admit, happily or begrudgingly, that he or she is part of a larger national whole.... The person is able to link his [sic] existence to wider identities.... All the Jewish communities and ethnic groups, all the religious tendencies — including the Lubavicher Hassidic "mitzvah tank" ... are present. Individual and collective, communal and national can be found, compounded with one another.... It is possible to view the Kotel as a physical space, suffused with history, in which the story (or stories) of contemporary Israel are condensed. A clearly circumscribed area in the midst of an eminently Middle Eastern setting, the Kotel proclaims Israel's deep roots in the past, even as its newly expanded plaza and the care with which it is guarded are evidence of the political will which created and maintains the new state. ... Official and informal pressures placed upon visitors to the Wall to act in accordance with its sanctity provide the framework for the range of mutually reinforcing religious, national, and ethnic expressions, which characterize its ambience.⁵¹

Storper-Perez and Goldberg complement this "social ecology" and "sacred geography" with two more aspects of the Wall which they describe extensively but do not analyze at all, they simply seem to take them for granted: the organization of the space as the only synagogue imaginable, which is

Orthodox, and the totally unproblematic place women occupy willingly in the margins of the hegemonic “stories” taking place there at all hours. The hegemony is bordered by “extremists” on the right (Jews claiming their right to hold prayer services on the Temple Mount itself) and on the left (followers of Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitch who argue that the sanctification of the Wall as a national-religious shrine is idolatrous). Zini’s video, years later, repeats the same perception of the hegemony, and can only brand WoW as “Reform,” a momentary dissonance.

Zali Gurevitz and Gideon Aran show that, in contrast to Eliade’s theory concerning the cosmological meaning of holy sites (“axis mundi,” where heaven and earth touch), Judaism has limited this perspective since antiquity, by removing holiness from concrete human lives so that it is embodied instead in the Torah scroll. Jewish holy sites then should be analyzed first and foremost from an anthropological perspective. Even the Temple was the political center of government, and only as such did it become also the center of national religious ritual.⁵² The “Catholic” religion we are looking into is therefore the civil religion, above all. The meaning of the Temple substitute, the remnant of its outside Western Wall, has been constructed over the years along the same lines of nationality and civil society politics.

The Western Wall became a famous Jewish concept in the twelfth century, when the Muslims turned it into a permanent site for Jewish prayer services; they were anxiously strengthening their hold on the Temple Mount by removing both Christians and Jews to arranged ritual places away from the mosques. Suleiman the Magnificent, the sixteenth-century Sultan, officially reaffirmed the right of the Jews to pray there and instructed his court architect to design the site accordingly.

In the course of the nineteenth century, Jews started bringing with them to the prayer area chairs, tables, Torah scrolls and other ritual objects, and their awakening interest in settling in the land included attempts to purchase the place. These actions changed the attitude of the Muslims towards the Wall. They started claiming that the “El-Buraq Wall” is holy to Islam, by retroactively “moving” to it the tradition concerning the exact spot where Mohammed had tied his magical animal El-Buraq, on which he had flown at night, with the angel Gabriel, to the Haram a-Sharif. They also appealed successfully to the Sultan to limit Jewish activities at the Wall.⁵³

When the land came under British rule, the Mandate charter included a commitment to ensure free access and freedom of religious practice in the holy places. The Jews lobbied with the British in order to expand their rights at the Wall, so that the site could become a real synagogue.⁵⁴ On 23 September 1928, the Eve of Yom Kippur, they placed there a folding partition (a wooden frame with curtains), for separation between men and women, while preparing for the “Kol Nidrei” service that evening. The British police commander,

pressured by the Muslims, instructed the Jewish attendant to remove the partition. The next morning, when he saw that it had not been done, he ordered his men to destroy it. A fight broke out: the officer later described the screaming women who attacked his men as "agitated ladies, just like a demonstration of suffragettes." Even though during Turkish rule Jews had been allowed to bring prayer furniture on the High Holidays, this time Muslims regarded this to be a more severe act. They now considered this as an attempt at shaping the site as a synagogue in the context of Zionist efforts to establish a national home in the land of Israel under the auspices of the British Mandate. To them the incident seemed to be in line with continued attempts by Jews to purchase the Wall area from Muslims, and with the founding of "The Committee for the Wall" by Professor Joseph Klausner of the Hebrew University. The political status of the Jerusalem Mufti was on the rise, while Jabotinsky (as well as Chief Rabbi A. I. Kook) scored points in the Zionist movement: the linking of religious strife to national conflict sparked fire on both sides. What followed is better known: the feud at the Wall deteriorated into the 1929 pogrom.⁵⁵

The British set up an investigating committee, which reinstated the status quo at the Wall: the site was recognized as holy for both religions, but as a place for prayer services for Jews only, within the limits of the 1928 White Paper. This became law in 1931, and remained the status quo until 1948, when the Jordanians conquered the Old City of Jerusalem and no longer allowed Jews to pray there.⁵⁶

Immediately following the liberation of the city by the Israeli army in 1967, Moshe Dayan, then Minister of Defense, set up status quo arrangements for the Temple Mount that left the area of the mosques under Muslim control though accessible to members of other religions. This necessarily left the Wall area as the holiest Jewish-Israeli site, supervised by the Ministry of Religions (whereas the area to its south was entrusted to the Ministry of Education and Culture, for archeological digs and eventual tourism). A few months later, all important rabbis, Ultra-Orthodox and Zionists alike, published a Halakhic prohibition on going up to the Temple Mount, in an attempt to hold active Jewish messianism in check and avoid provoking the Muslim world into Jihad. This rallied overall support to Dayan's policy, with the exception of the relentless "Ne'emanei Har ha-Bayit" (Temple Mount Loyals), whose numbers increased in the 1990s when the Israeli government seemed to respond too meekly to increased Muslim Palestinian activity there.⁵⁷

Immediately following the Israeli conquest in 1967, a large plaza was cleared of houses, and all was ready for the final institution of a stately Jewish-Zionist shrine in the form of an outdoors synagogue. Mass prayer services are held there (such as the large-scale priests' blessing during Pesach and Sukkot), reinforced by attributes of "national sanctity": archeological digs that leave

intact only the Jewish narrative of the area, the transfer of military ceremonies to the site, inclusion of a photographed close-up with the Wall in the itinerary of visiting heads of state.

Shmuel Berkovits notes that the 1967 law (Protection of Holy Sites) that underscores the status quo at the Wall does not include the definition of the term “holy site,” but only authorizes the Minister of Religions to institute rulings for its implementation, as was done for the Wall (though not for the Temple Mount) in 1981. He argues that as long as there is no statutory definition, the secular law should be read as referring by default to religion and religious law for relevant decision making.⁵⁸ In 1994, while ruling on the first WoW petition to the Supreme Court, the Deputy President of the Court, Professor Menahem Elon, stated that the prayer site at the Western Wall is “the holiest synagogue in the world of Judaism,” that “the nature of the site customs should be set according to the widest common denominator of the people praying there, which is the generations-old custom,” and therefore the petitioners could not be allowed to hold their services there, since they offended all of this. As he put it, “the local custom and the status quo are one and the same.” Judge Levin disagreed, but the Court President Shamgar joined Elon’s ruling, which left that interpretation intact,⁵⁹ until the unanimous ruling on the second petition in May 2000, which caused the Knesset to anchor Elon’s 1994 reading explicitly in the language of the law, as noted above.

I have surveyed this history at length so as to substantiate my claim that the site where WoW act is not only reserved for religious ritual. Rather, the Wall epitomizes the changes that the Jewish notion of nationhood, and eventually nationality, underwent in the last millennium. At first, the people were defined by its “holy teachings” (in Rabbi Sa’adya Ga’on’s words, meaning the Jewish law), tolerated as a “people of the Book” in the bosom of Islam, and therefore relegated to prayer services in a visibly marginalized site and format. Zionism, much later, translated religious traditions into the pattern of modern nationalism striving towards territorial sovereignty, which in turn encouraged the development of symbols with a highlighted territorial dimension.⁶⁰ Finally, Zionism matured into a nation-state that sanctifies its civil religion with a mix of symbols and rituals both old and new.⁶¹ Pierre Nora supports this argument by pointing to a causal relationship between the decline of spontaneous familial and communal memory in the modern age and the complementary rise of national “lieux de mémoire” (sites of memory) that enable the weaving together of personal lives into new collective bonds.⁶²

WoW’s activities then are not only addressed at the religious and the Ultra-Orthodox, those who pray at the Wall, the rabbinical establishment, the religious parties. They are addressed at the hegemonic Israeli ethos — and since Israel is at the center of collective consciousness of organized Jewry

abroad, it is possible to include here also the hegemonic Jewish ethos in the diaspora: as expressed even by the polemic inside the Reform movement concerning the necessity to engage in a struggle to undo the Orthodox monopoly of prayer at the Wall.⁶³

A "Catholic" Civil Religion in an Ethnocratic State

Of all the terms suggested to mark this hegemonic national perception, I prefer Oren Yiftachel's "ethnocracy." He uses it to designate a regime centered on the "ethnos" (and not the "demos," the citizenry) as the main political principle, even though many democratic elements can be detected in it at the same time.⁶⁴ Israel, a modern nation-state created by the Zionist movement, is defined as a Jewish state in its Declaration of Independence. This enables the different groups included in the Jewish "ethnos" to take part in the project of Judaizing the territorial space while excluding the Palestinians. It also enables the construction of a hierarchical system of unequal resource distribution on an ethnic basis, even within the Jewish people. Yiftachel notes that ethnocracy is characterized inter alia by diffused borders: Palestinian citizens of the "demos" are only second-class members of the collective, whereas all diaspora Jews are potential Israelis (as defined by the Law of Return), and have a share in "the state of the Jewish people" (e.g., through the Jewish Agency and its rights in land ownership and settlement). This process gained force since the Six Day War, due to the discriminatory arrangement applied in the "liberated territories" — Jews settling outside of the international borderline of Israel ("the Green Line") have full membership in the collective, in contrast to their neighbors who are "conquered," and many of whom are "refugees."

The so-called dichotomous struggle between democracy and theocracy takes place then against the background of the existing social and political order, which is held in place by the ethnocratic perspective shared by most of the religious (including most of the Ultra-Orthodox) as well as most of the non-religious in Israel (the traditional and even many of the secular). Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin shows that this background is made invisible by the popular discourse concerning the breach between the religious and the secular. In this way the "enlightened secular" manage to blame the general problem of Israel on the "parochial religious." In Freudian terms, it appears like an obsession with the unimportant, coupled with the projection, or the suppression, of the main problem, which becomes a silenced, half-conscious, sanctified taboo: one ethnocratic half is perceived as "democratic" whereas the other ethnocratic half is "theocratic."⁶⁵ Elsewhere, he brings out the Jewish-Ashkenazi nature, and therefore also the colonialist and orientalist nature, of this problematic process, because it is based on exclusion, silencing and marginalizing of Palestinians as well as *Mizrahi* (Eastern) Jews.⁶⁶

I argued above that the Western Wall epitomizes more than any other site the ethnocratic nature of our society: in every historical period, the Jewish

prayer arrangements there demarcated the respective political status of the Jewish people (“Judea Captiva,” “Ahal el-Dama”). Since the creation of the “national home” mechanisms under the British Mandate, following the Balfour Declaration, these prayer arrangements have reflected the status of the Zionist and Israeli ethnocracy. This may explain why Israel, a modern state, finds it so hard to separate between the religious and the political elements in the conflict over the holy sites, and consequently fails to stabilize a status quo that will pull the two parties apart — two indispensable phases of conflict management in holy sites.⁶⁷ The Israelis and the Palestinians alike melt religion and nationalism into one mold, and all inner struggles in each of those communities take place in this “melting pot.”

Moreover, this analysis works well not only for the leaders’ formal politics, but also for the practices of the different groups that participate in constructing the meaning of the Wall as an ethnocratic site: their attitudes to the Wall reflect in fact their respective attitudes to the State of Israel as the embodiment of Jewish ethnocracy. Some are satisfied with things as they stand, whether or not they define themselves as religious, even if they actually happen to visit the site infrequently (bar mitzvah, school trip, guests from abroad, basic training ceremony of a son). Others, mostly secular, have long lost interest in the Wall and what it stands for, so that their indifference to the place expresses their democratic, universalist, post-ethnocratic views. Groups who struggle to change the existing arrangements do so within the general assumption concerning the national role of the site, even when this role is founded in the religious act of prayer: “Ne’emanei Har ha-Bayit” want to expand Israeli sovereignty to the Temple Mount vis-à-vis the Palestinians, who reinforce their hold (in competition with the Jordanians) in order to push back the territorial limits of Israeli ethnocracy.

The ethnocratic ethos, then, diffuses the borders demarcated by the usual identity discourse, e.g. between “left” and “right”: the conceptual infrastructure of these two camps unites them both as “the national camp.” I choose to exemplify this border diffusion with another group that is often juxtaposed to national Zionism — the Ultra-Orthodox — as expressed by Avishai Stockhammer:

The Western Wall has turned not only into the center of the country after the war, but also the center of the world. All feet led to it and all eyes were lifted up to it. It was not only the peak moment of spiritual catharsis in the middle of the Six Day War, when the Wall was liberated, and the tough paratroopers, the conquerors of Jerusalem, embraced it — and wept. It was a permanent phenomenon, that the secular started seeing Jews praying. It must have been the opening point of the age of *hazarah bi-tshuvah* [return to religion], which gave rise to a whole generation of “returnees,” numbering by now many thousands who have integrated completely into the ranks of Ultra-Orthodox Jewry everywhere.⁶⁸

Other researchers claim that the attitude of the Ultra-Orthodox to the State of Israel has changed over the years, from opposition and self-exclusion to active nationalism. However, Stockhammer, an Ultra-Orthodox political activist, argues that they had always seen religion and nationalism as one, and had opposed Zionism because of its Modernist view that religion is only an issue of the private sphere. This explains the devotion of the Ultra-Orthodox to the Jewish character of the public sphere in the State of Israel, in the state symbols and its calendar, in the non-religious state schools and state bureaucracies. Stockhammer adds his voice to the slogan of Israel's 50th anniversary, "together in pride, together in hope": "Indeed, in spite of all the shadows in the State, there is a lot in it to be proud of."⁶⁹ If Raz-Krakotzkin is right and the "secularization" is actually the sanctification of the state, then this may explain how the reconnecting of the Ultra-Orthodox to Zionism is enabled by the very moment when this suppressed narrative explodes to the surface, in 1967.⁷⁰ That is why Stockhammer anchors his entire social perspective in a specific historical moment, in the liberation of the Wall in the Six Day War. This event takes on eschatological dimensions, because it brings together secular Zionism, as epitomized by the weeping paratroopers captured in a poem by Haim Heffer, an icon of the 1948 war, to which Stockhammer refers in the article cited above, and the mystical vision of the Temple as the site where spirituality flows out into the world. The Ultra-Orthodox then do not participate in the post-1967 flourishing Israeli ethnocracy for instrumental reasons only, because for the first time since the destruction of the Temple their freedom of ritual practice at the Wall is finally secured by the army and the police. The embodiment of Jewish nationalism in this very site — that is, public prayer service with all its attributes — enables the sanctifiers of secular Zionism to experience transcendental union with traditional religious holiness as represented by the Ultra-Orthodox worshipers, and this union paves the way towards universal redemption.

The ethnocratic infrastructure common to so many Jews may explain why the existing status quo arrangements at the Wall are perceived by most Israelis as an authentic, sovereign expression of Jewish-Israeli nationalism, to the point that every attempt to disrupt them meets with vigorous opposition.

Women in Men's Ethnocracy

Israel is a common name among Israeli men. It is first mentioned in the Bible, when Jacob "Sarah" (fought) with God all night. Then he received the name "Israel" — "for you have fought with God" (Genesis 32). For a woman, the name is Israela. But Israela is a rare name, because our women do not fight with God...

My intention is to try and develop a dialogue on the status and roles of women in Israel, to try to unveil the myths and rituals, so that Israeli women can see and be seen without the distorting shadow of ideology and mythology. In such a dialogue Israela [a rare name for Israeli women, even though Israel is a common one for men] may succeed in recognizing her struggle. If she reaches this recognition, she will find in herself the strength to “fight,” to struggle with her image, and then, at the end of the road, she will become Israeli in her own right.⁷¹

As Lesley Hazleton points out, the ethnocratic Israeli partnership is gendered. In spite of the deeply set rivalry between those devoted to secular Zionism and the followers of Jewish religion, in spite of their different lifestyles, they are in agreement concerning the secondary place of women in the “polis” under construction. On the one hand, the Israeli ethnocracy is tribal in essence, and therefore also patriarchal. On the other hand, just like other “modern” societies, it gave birth to new brands of sexism and machoism, in spite of the rhetoric of commitment to gender equality.⁷² Women’s struggle for equality in the Israeli ethnocracy is therefore double; they have to act on two parallel fronts: against the legacy of the discrimination of women in religion, as well as against the oppression, the violence and the exclusion from seats of power and so-called “neutral” resources. In contrast to the tendency to blame the inferior condition of Israeli women on religion and the religious,⁷³ I find it more accurate to emphasize the collaboration of both sides on this issue, as they use different but complementary practices, because there is only one camp here, the ethnocratic camp. WoW chose to take on this double political alignment, in a specific site that unites the parties participating in the production of its double meaning, religious as well as national.

Judith Baskin analyzes the separation of women from the main collective arena of rabbinical Judaism. From the many sources she quotes to support this analysis, I choose the following two quotes from the Talmud:

Rabbi Eliezer said to him [to his son]:

“May the words of Torah be burned rather than be given to women.”

Talmud Yerushalmi, Tractate Sotah, 3/4.

Rabbi Yohanan said:

“We learned to be cautious of sin from a maiden.”

... For he heard of a maiden who prayed fervently, and said:

“Master of the world! You created heaven and You created hell,

You created the virtuous and the evil ones.

Let no man fall unwittingly because of me.”

Talmud Bavli, Tractate Sotah, 22a⁷⁴

These teachings exemplify, according to Baskin, the basic Jewish perspective on the place of women in the natural Godly world order — they do not

participate in Torah study, and their prayer is expected to support the male community from the outside. Breaching these norms interferes with creation itself, desecrates purity and warps the righteous. Women are therefore dangerous, and they have to be controlled by physically separating them from holiness, just as they are excluded from centers of public activity in secular patriarchal societies.

I would like to note further that there is no need to lock women up hermetically at home; it suffices to exalt their roles in the private sphere, and at the same time to limit their presence in the Temple (and in later historical periods, in the "mini-temple," the synagogue) to the periphery of "the women's auxiliary" (*ezrat nashim*). The name of this space marks not only the act of distancing women from the center, but also its subordination to men's ritual — women's spirituality is assigned to the role of "man's fitting helper" (cf. Genesis 2:18). The lack of symmetry transpires also through the daily practice that constructs the women's section as penetrable by men — they pass through if they need to — whereas the men's section is completely closed to women.

According to Baskin, the effort to reproduce on earth a social order that reflects the divine, leads to perceiving man as normal and woman as a deviation from the normal, by definition. This perspective, however, did not fade away when secular politics of religion succeeded Torah scholars and rabbis.

The production of modernism as a multifaceted project can be understood as the melting of forces into one coherent, "scientific," "rational" essence, as distinguished from various kinds of "otherness." Hence the centrality of the new meaning accorded to "male" vs. "female" as binary stereotypes applied to political structures (e.g. the nation-state),⁷⁵ and subsequently also to Zionism and the ethnocentric State of Israel. Patterns from the pre-modern past (in the case of Zionism, "the exile," "the diaspora") are portrayed as weak and effeminate, whereas the new force is male, defining itself through its release from femininity.⁷⁶ A hierarchy of oppression and colonialization arises, within which real people (women, for instance) are trapped in hegemonic concepts, in "a history of victors." This feminist analysis then shows how modernism was constructed through the subjugation of women worldwide, and further points at the cardinal role, both concrete and symbolic, assigned to women throughout the rise of modern nationalism in general and Zionism in particular. The term "chauvinism" first signified the perspective that attributes "natural" superiority to "our" people, and therefore justifies a hierarchical regime where "our" people rule over others; small wonder it was expanded later to include the perspective that attributes "natural" superiority to "our" sex, and therefore justifies the politics of ruling over "the other," or "second," sex.

Several scholars have stressed the link between the concrete societal ethos that constructs gender in all arenas and the myth that nourishes it.⁷⁷ Yvonne

Haddad and Ellison Findly, in the preface to their anthology titled *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, warn against the attempt to separate “society” from “culture” in the analysis of political change. Such compartmentalization, they claim, renders it impossible to discuss the role of women as active historical agents. Janet Bauer too argues that the usual male discourse often constructs women as passive, victimized objects who can only “react,” at best, or as a symbolic category, “woman.” The same point was made by Sered: “woman,” unlike “women,” is a cultural symbol, and just like other symbols she is perceived as an indivisible resource — it is only possible to compete by controlling her, all of her.⁷⁸

This is how Hazleton exposes the specific Israeli narrative: “Zion” is the wife and the mother, and the sons, the pioneers, return to her so as to redeem her by “knowing” her, thereby realizing the pictorial vision of the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 62). They are thus reborn as men and heroes, liberated and strong, in contrast to their passive and effeminate fathers in exile. They return to the historical womb in order to fertilize it, and create “her” revival, which is also their own revival. Israeli women (the Jewish ones of course, the Palestinian women are completely invisible) are required to identify with this male saga, cornered into a “choice” between imitating male roles and adopting the role of “the real woman,” she who dedicates herself to the ritual of fertility. Nitza Berkovitz complements this analysis, by showing how the State of Israel constructs motherhood as the preferable track for the inclusion of women (once again, the Jewish ones only) in the citizenry. Yosef Ahituv completes the picture by surveying the obsession with bodily modesty typical of religious Judaism as it deals with modernity.⁷⁹

If Jewish manhood needs to be purified of effeminateness as it rises towards national sovereignty, then it stands to reason that grounding that sovereignty in the Wall plaza requires first and foremost the establishment of a partition that separates women and hides them from view (in 1928, and then again in 1967), thereby freeing collective Jewish manhood, not only for prayer but also for a variety of national rituals. Hazleton notes that these men gave in to tears only for a brief historical moment (and even then it was only the rank and file, not the top command), a “window of opportunity” for gender maturity that was shut immediately and left gender dichotomies intact. The liberation of the Wall became the metonymy of national homecoming, except “the united people,” an ethnocracy of the religious and the secular, are all male. Even Leftists prefer fraternizing with Palestinian men to the inclusion of women, Jewish or Palestinian, in this newly found solidarity.⁸⁰

Can Radical Religious Feminism Decolonize Jewish Nationalism?

Given that secular feminists have not yet successfully challenged cultural patriarchy (the ethos and structures that support male advantage and control in various spheres of activity), that they are often no more successful in putting gender issues before communal (ethnic or national) ones, that they recognize the variety of women's circumstances may require different strategies for liberation or justice in different situations, and that religious communities have traditionally offered women some cultural/religious power at different moments in their life cycle — perhaps we should take a closer look at religious feminism. ... Perhaps religious and secular women can, at that point, reclaim the democratic impulse to recognize, discuss, and confront the common forms of patriarchy that will, most certainly, remain.⁸¹

The variety of WoW's activities yields different meanings in accordance with the different discursive directions suggested in the above quotation from Janet Bauer.

By turning to the judicial system for support, WoW joined the secular discourse of liberal democracy, and therefore cannot escape the problems that this strategy entails: Jewish-Ashkenazi exclusivity, and an antireligious struggle concealed in the rituals of secular nationalism. As I noted earlier, a "pure" model of liberal feminism would have produced a group that contents itself with the demand to align their rights and freedoms with those of the men praying at the Wall. Such a group would have soon pushed to the fore the Reform and Conservative members, and their struggle would have soon blended into the struggle of these non-Orthodox denominations, for mixed-sex egalitarian prayers, under the leadership of male rabbis.

Other group actions point elsewhere, within the range demarcated by Nitza Berkovitz as a differentiated track for republican (rather than liberal) participation in the citizenry of the Israeli ethnocracy, meaning, joining the collective by winning the right to fulfill duties of "female soldiering" and thereby contribute to nation-building.⁸² A women's group that insists on holding prayer services as a forum representing the entire Jewish people, in the main national site, proclaims its intention to participate actively in the definition of the collective good.

It is worth noting that Berkovitz discusses motherhood as the alternative track for civic participation into which women are forced by the patriarchal state. Another study describes women (religious-Zionist girls) who are educated by the male establishment of their social sector, through continuous, mutually compatible experiences, towards contribution to the nation as an extension of their future role in the familial home sphere.⁸³ This model of

collective female national activity can be traced in the special women's prayer service by the Wall on the 29th of Sivan 5647 (1887), marking Queen Victoria's jubilee, for "she removed the bars separating nation from nation" and was favorable to the Jews.⁸⁴ Indeed, singling women out periodically in this fashion, as a separate social category, fits Victorian politics, which excelled in refining gender hierarchies in the service of colonialist modernism.

This unique event foreshadows the history of the Wall half a century later. It reminds us that earlier already, under Ottoman rule, Ashkenazi Jewish settlers enjoyed the protection of European consulates ("the Capitulations"), thereby situating their collective identity on the side of Western Christianity, and disregarding the immediate concrete Eastern, Muslim context. Women accepted unconsciously from their men the role of demarcating the borders of the collective and its territorial politics, and with that "baggage" came the politics of colonialism and orientalism. At that point Jews had not yet succeeded in placing a real partition separating women from men at the Wall, but the separate prayer service in honor of a woman, a queen, already fits into the pattern. The modern bureaucracy of patriarchal organizations — churches and synagogues, but also political parties and the like — gives such female "orders" the title "sisterhoods," busy and faithful helpers who know their place in the hierarchy.

The oral and written rhetoric of WoW, as well as their behavior in public as recorded by the media, appear at times to fall inadvertently into either one of the two traps described above: co-optation into the religious–secular cleavage (including the struggle for legitimacy of Jewish-religious pluralism); or into the maintenance of Jewish national sovereignty in the Wall plaza ("Judaizing the space")⁸⁵ through Orthodox women's prayer uniting Israelis, diaspora Jews, even settlers, of all denominations, in the "auxiliary" of "the second sex." At this point I want to clarify my standpoint once more: I have often advised WoW to emphasize these aspects, in words and photographs, as the strategy most likely to "succeed," as long as they define "success" in terms of winning legitimacy to holding service prayers their way in this Israeli-Jewish site.

Can WoW skip these traps and emerge with another message? Consider, for instance, the hermeneutic dilemmas involved in the reading of this new prayer:

May it be Your will, our God and God of our mothers and fathers, to bless this prayer group and all who pray within it: them, their families and all that is theirs, together with all women's prayer groups and all the women and girls of Your people Israel. Strengthen us and direct our hearts to serve You in truth, reverence and love. May our prayer be as desirable and acceptable before You as the prayers of our holy foremothers, Sarah, Rivkah, Rahel and Leah. May our song ascend to

Your Glorious Throne in holiness and purity, like the songs of Miriam the Prophet and Devorah the Judge, and may it be as a pleasant savor and sweet incense before You.

And for our sisters, all the women and girls of Your people Israel: let us merit to see their joy and hear their voices raised before You in song and praise. May no woman or girl of Your people Israel or anywhere else in the world be silenced ever again. God of Justice, let us merit justice and salvation soon, for the sanctity of Your name and the restoration of Your world, as it is written: Zion will hear and be joyful, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, over Your judgments, O God [Psalms 97:8]. And as it is written: For Zion's sake I will not be still and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be silent, until her righteousness shines forth like a great light and her salvation like a torch aflame [Isaiah 62:1].

For Torah shall go forth from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem [Isaiah 2:3]. Amen, selah.

Rahel Jaskow, "Prayer for Women of the Wall," 2000

This text smoothly joins the tradition of the "Tekhines literature" of Jewish women in Europe as of early modern times — in Yiddish (from Holland in the West to Poland and the Ukraine in the East) and Hebrew (Italy) — in genre and style, and also in its intention to be added to the accepted male prayer book, most of which obligates women too. Chava Weissler, the best-known scholar of the Yiddish *Tekhines*, tries inter alia to identify their authors. She argues that most of them were written by men for women and for "men who are like women" (i.e. lack proper Jewish education), as a means of appropriating female fermenting literacy, and their religious motivation was to bond their personal lives with the collective whose borders are marked above all by Jewish prayer. Nonetheless, Weissler goes out of her way to recover here and there a text written by a woman. Through meticulous comparison with similar male texts she portrays the author as a Torah scholar, who masters Jewish writings of different periods, as well as the hermeneutic methodology peculiar to the genre. Weissler's research traces a portrait of a "proto-feminist" woman, wise enough to resist patriarchal bondage and seeking to empower all Jewish women through her version of the *Tekhine*, including the majority of women who did not have enough Jewish education to tell the difference between its several available versions.⁸⁶

The above "Prayer for WoW" was surely authored by a woman, and the text testifies to her extensive Jewish education. Generally speaking, it resembles many national (and religious-Zionist) prayers, but it includes some feminist additions, more explicit than the ones recovered by Weissler in earlier materials. Jaskow skips earthly politics, the Supreme Court and the media, and addresses God directly, as the God of our foremothers and not only our

forefathers, appealing to Him for justice and salvation. She rejects outright the notion of “sisterhood” as an institution set up by men for women, as a pale imitation of their male “fraternity” (known in Israel as “Re’ut,” warriors’ love for one another, “sanctified in blood,” according to one popular 1948 song by Haim Gouri). Instead, she relies on the two-fold meaning that radical feminism endowed this term with when it appropriated and reinterpreted it. On the one hand, “sisterhood” means diachronic solidarity with women of the past, who are thus elevated out of their invisibility and marginality. On the other hand, there is the synchronic solidarity with all contemporary women, not only Jewish. Jaskow’s rejection of the male “divide and rule” politics reaches its peak in the explicit protest against the violence involved in silencing women wherever they are. Her text does not seek to construct Jewish women as “equally kosher” when compared to Jewish men; rather, it situates them as leaders in all areas, in prayer and song, in family and community, in the dispensation of justice and in national redemption.

Jaskow’s prayer then yields more than the previous two narratives can contain. WoW’s agency as historical subjects transpires also through Helman and Rapoport’s analysis of “Women in Black,” when they note that their researched group does not translate political protest into the creation of an alternative to the social order it undermines.⁸⁷ WoW, by contrast, adopted from radical feminism not only the commitment to question the very epistemology that underscores “objective” perceptions of reality and to expose them as male, but also the organizational strategy for building their sample utopia right here and now. They founded a “consciousness-raising group,” an originally Marxist mechanism reinterpreted by radical feminism as a viable small “community” in all its aspects.

WoW is, first of all, a new discourse community that transgresses and therefore transcends existing codes and paradigms, as exemplified for instance when one group member discusses why the group’s perception of spacial categories such as “interior” and “outside” clash with existing notions. She actually points at the fact that life in the group over the years has been conducive to the development of some theoretical innovations that need to be expressed. This life includes, beyond the periodical public event at the Wall as discussed above, also regular meetings not only designed for political strategizing, but also for social purposes typical of full-scale intimate communities, sharing an exclusive calendar and life-cycle rhythm — after all, WoW deviates from the norms in these areas by designing their own rituals.⁸⁸ As Plaskow emphasizes, Judaism, unlike Western modernism, is organized around the concept of “covenant,” which creates community and people as collectives wherein individual identities are incessantly created and recreated, interpreted and reinterpreted. Life in such a context helps in fighting off the pressures towards reification and essentialization of the individual.⁸⁹ This

understanding of Judaism goes well with feminist theories concerning the interaction between individuals and communities, notes Plaskow; in other words, when WoW combines Judaism and feminism, they constitute their group as a concrete preview of alternative peoplehood. Theirs is also a religious community, and as such it embodies a paradigm breach in the history of Judaism, with their innovations in the study of canonized texts and in ritual,⁹⁰ and in this sense WoW follows precedents in ideological pioneering such as the hasidic group (*edah* or *havurah*) or the kibbutz.

Above all, WoW is a political community: in Berkovitz's terminology, they constitute the republican meaning of their civic activity. They reject the "choice" between participating in the collective as either "male-soldiers" or "female-mothers," and present instead an androgynous model — praying with some explicitly male ingredients such as the prayer shawl and the Torah scroll, but within an overall design that is clearly feminine. Hazleton highlights the contrast between feminism, adopted by few Israeli women, and femininity, an identity preferred by most of them; I propose that WoW proves, as emphasized by Bauer, that a feminist group can empower women by empowering womanhood. Plaskow too writes along these lines: feminism that arises when women choose consciously their group difference as identity, can lead to real equality, better than liberal feminism, that makes group difference invisible in order to open the way for equal opportunity but has no power to prevent gender blindness from serving as cover-up for gender discrimination.⁹¹

It is in these practices of WoW that I see the revolutionary potential of the group to change not only existing religious patterns but also "secular"-national patterns of Israeli ethnocracy. Perhaps the very impression of political innocence they leave is crucial in enabling them to produce an event of resistance that undermines the social order, to shape an anarchistic project that cannot be fully interpreted within existing narratives. Otherwise put, in Raz-Krakotzkin's terminology: WoW imports radical feminism to Israel from the exilic diaspora, in order to use it as an Archimedal point for their critique on Israel. Radical feminism is their tool for demarcating a different "horizon" than the one drawn by colonialist Zionism. And the moral validity of this "horizon" is universal, an attribute it owes, paradoxically, to the particularism of the conscientious cultural identity of the people who produce it, as Jews and as women.

Finale: A Decolonized People Is a Feminist People

Early on in the affair discussed in this article, in 1990, the "high priestess" of radical Jewish feminism, philosopher and theologian Judith Plaskow, published a short piece that expressed her reservations about WoW. At the time she saw their struggle as limited to the liberal claim to women's equal rights and

freedoms, whereas she was already beyond that point in feminist theory. That same year she also published her most important book, *Standing Again at Sinai*, where she expounded her critique of the Jewish world, women and men, phrased succinctly in her short article: "To name the real issue as that of the power to define what Judaism is and will become.... [To move] far beyond the language of rights to the language of transformation."⁹²

By 1999, in the title of another article already cited, Plaskow already worded the goal of this national transformation as "A Feminist People of Israel." The new cultural politics that she preaches there resembles the "horizon" marked by Raz-Krakotzkin; whereas he directs it explicitly at Zionism and the State of Israel, she deals with the Jewish people wherever they live. Since this 1999 article does not mention WoW at all, I suggest that this study is an attempt to respond to her complaint in the 1990 article, with the tools of her own thought.

The story of WoW brings together a variety of themes in a bordered-in, focused site. It is a story about women in a men's world, about female Jews in Israel, about the alienation of newcomers among veterans. It is a story about Jerusalem as the epitome of the Israeli-Palestinian as well as the inter-religious conflict. It is also about religion in a regime that does not separate it from state matters, about dangerous tensions between lawmakers and judges, and about tradition and creativity. Last but not least, it is a story about violence and hatred but also about song and prayer. The aggregation of all these materials in one affair turns it into an easily excitable cord of exposed nerves that are connected to all members of the body, both national ("ethnos") and civic ("demos").

Looking at the issue as a religious controversy, in a society perceived as torn between the religious and the secular, is too narrow. It is a perspective that fails to explain the resilience of this affair to proposed solutions over too many years, nor the passion it is met with. The most important impediment of this perspective is its inability to provide a satisfactory analysis of the involved social segments as they align themselves around WoW. By contrast, applying the lenses of "ethnocracy" sheds more light, not only on this particular nervous cord, but also on the entire "body" of Israel. This explanation combines the analysis of Israeli culture from the perspective of radical feminism with other critical theories that study it at this time. And this combination is necessary, because even when women bring about substantial social change, they may remain invisible, while revolutionary men get all the credit.⁹³ Or, in other words:

This intricate waltz of religion and social change ... is adding a seldom-asked question: What has been the role of women during this process? The question is important, for women are the great "sleepers" of history.

Often as much ignored by the religious and political establishments of their own times as they have been by modern Western historians, women have often provided the unpredicted balance of support that determines whether a new direction "takes."⁹⁴

NOTES

- * The original Hebrew version of this essay was written for the Forum for Research of Non-Secular Perspective of Israeli Society of the Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem. The author wishes to thank them for their support.
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 - 3 Leah Shakdiel, "Amdah na'arah mul ha-kotel, ve-gurshah" (A Girl Was Standing at the Wall and Got Chased Away), *Hadashot*, 27 April 1989.
 - 4 Martha Ackelsberg, "Introduction," in Liz Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman: An Anthology, Response*, Vol. 18 (Summer 1973), pp. 7–11.
 - 5 Rivka Haut, "Women's Prayer Groups and the Orthodox Synagogue," in Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (eds.), *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (Philadelphia, 1992), pp. 135–58.
 - 6 Deborah Weissman, "'Et la'asot la-shem — haferu minhageihem' (al ma'amad ha-ishah be-kehilat Yedidya)" ("It's Time to Do for God — Let's Disrupt Their Customs" [On Women's Status in Yedidya Congregation]), *Amudim* (Journal of the Religious Kibbutz Movement) (Fall 1999), pp. 23–5.
 - 7 Pnina Peli, "Celebrating Simhat Torah in Jerusalem," in Grossman and Haut (eds.), *Daughters of the King*, pp. 271–3.
 - 8 For the best known among them see Avraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Groups* (New York, 1990).
 - 9 Blu Greenberg, "Judaism and Feminism," in Elizabeth Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York, 1976), pp. 179–92.
 - 10 Rivka Haut, "The Presence of Women," in Grossman and Haut (eds.), *Daughters of the King*, pp. 274–8.
 - 11 See Haviva Ner-David, "Israel: Building," in idem, *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination* (Needham, 2000), pp. 226–40.
 - 12 Francine Zuckerman, *Half the Kingdom*, documentary video, 60 minutes (1990).
 - 13 Susan Lynn Oren, "Claiming Their Inheritance: The Emergence of Religious Activism among Israeli Women" (Ordination thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1992), Chap. 2, pp. 89–135.
 - 14 Ronit Kampf, "Ha-hipus ahar ha-beki'im: Ha-interaktiyah bein kvutzot meha'ah shel nashim levein ha-itonut ha-yisre'elit" (Seeking Breakthrough in the Wall: Interaction of Women's Protest Groups and Israeli News Coverage), *Patu'ah*, No. 3 (March 1996), pp. 4–23.
 - 15 Susan Starr Sered, "Women and Religious Change in Israel: Rebellion or Revolution," *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (1997), pp. 1–24.
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 - 17 Ner-David, "Israel: Building."
 - 18 *Susan Alter et al. vs. Minister of Religions, et al.*, Supreme Court Case no. 2410/90.
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 - 20 Shmuel Berkovits, "Ha-ma'amad shel har ha-bayit vaha-kotel ha-ma'aravi ba-mishpat ha-yisre'eli" (The Status of the Temple Mount and of the Western Wall in Israeli Law), in Yitzhak

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- 21 Bonna Devora Haberman, “Nashot [sic] HaKotel: Women in Jerusalem Celebrate Rosh Chodesh,” in Susan Berrin and Jason Aronson (eds.), *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology* (Northvale, NJ, 1996), pp. 66–77.
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 - 23 Eliav Schochetman, “Minyanei nashim ba-kotel” (Women’s Minyanim at the Wall) [on Supreme Court Cases no. 257/89 and 2410/90], *Tehumin*, No. 15 (1995), pp. 161–84.
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