Chapter 6

Family Values in Transition: Inheritance, Polygamy

Entering the realm of the modernized Jewish society in Palestine entailed substantial modifications not only of the collective communal perceptions and activities of the Yemeni Jews, but also within the private sphere of the family. The family’s daily routines as well as its position vis-à-vis the larger society underwent changes in respect to issues, such as power relations and dependency within the patriarchal structure, hierarchy within the family, and women’s rights. The encounter with codes of a modern society upset the concept of the Yemeni Jewish family and its structure, which was based on traditional and religious tenets, and which had been in congruence with their society of origin. These changes pertained firstly to the transformation in the status of women and their role in the family.

Most of these social renovations responded to extra-communal pressures, which were unknown in Yemen: the direct impact of the British colonial rule, and the pressures from the Yishuv society, which accepted much of the colonial ethos, and imposed its principles on the “other” Yemeni Jews. Some of the social changes were imposed from above by the colonial system, not allowing the Yemeni Jews sufficient time for a gradual adjustment. The immigrants were compelled to adapt and accept. This compliance was naturally painful, especially for the men who lost their absolute formal dominance in the family, and some struggled to retain their lost grounds. From a gender perspective, however, the colonial impact and the alliance of the Yishuv civil organizations with the cause of the Yemeni women empowered the women and assisted them in fighting for their rights and in consolidating their position in the family.

It is seems pertinent to note that in spite of the difference in family practices between Yemen and Jewish Palestine, Jewish women in Yemen were not totally dependent on men. While their husbands were away, pursuing their occupations as wandering artisans, and peddlers, rural women often managed the affairs of the household, thus reinforcing their power within the family. Many of them also extended their independence by developing their own economic

---

endeavors. They moved freely in the open public spaces, traded their crafts or other goods, and even participated in the weekly market. Women in the towns traded in needlework and also in other products and some managed property. Therefore many women developed a sense of self confidence and self-reliance.

In Palestine these women took advantage of the new legal and social circumstances, and endeavored to apply them on their own behalf (though this does not mean that all of them did, or could stand up firmly for their rights). Once in Palestine, they worked mostly as domestics, often earning much more than men, and proceeded, as much as they could to expand their actual position. Through their economic activities and their participation in social activities such as those organized by the Irgun 'Imahot 'Ovdot (the Working Mothers' Organization), a Labor Movement women's organization, founded in 1930, which started establishing branches in Yemeni Jewish neighborhoods in 1934), they met men and women of other, more modernized ethnic groups and became well informed.

This chapter presents several cases that exemplify changes in family values, which together contribute to the analysis of two significant transitions derived, by and large, from legal stipulations; both transitions contradicted longstanding traditions in Yemen. It will examine how women responded to men's resistance to their newly acquired inheritance and ownership rights and

---

2 For the important contribution of women's labor to the family's income, see, e.g., Gamlieli, *Heyon*, 185–191; for the growing participation of women in the labor force, especially from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, see Carmela Abdar, "ha-Mivneh ha-miqts'oi shel Surm al-'Awd ke-vituy le-ma'mado ve-ha-tahalikhim she'avrav 'alav, in Le-Rosh Yosef, ed. Yosef Tobi, 497–501; and cf. the growing importance of women's labor in Eastern Europe since the late nineteenth century, in Gur Alroey, "Halutzot she'einan po'a'lot: hagirat nashim le-eretz yisrael bereshit hame'a ha'esrim," *Cathedra* 118 (2006): 72–74; and for the contribution of Palestinian women to the economy see Ruth Kark and Roy Fischel, "Palestinian Women in the Public Domain during the Late Ottoman and Mandate Periods, 1831–1948," *Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, 10 (2012): 77–96.
