WOMEN’S STATUS AND IDENTITY IN THE RELIGIOUS ZIONIST MOVEMENT

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Bar-Ilan University recently held a symposium on education and personal identity among young religious Zionist women in Israel. The opening session was chaired by a lecturer from the School of Education who had just completed several years of research on that topic. After briefly explaining her methodology, she shared her sense of surprise in discovering the low priority that her subjects had placed on their female identity within the scale of identities presented to them.¹

All of the young women who participated in the study were graduates of ulpanot² who had chosen army service in place of women’s national service, an unusual choice among those graduating from those institutions, ostensibly pointing to independence in thought and action. As the lecturer had chosen not to explain her theoretical background in detail, no information was supplied as to the various components of the “female identity” she wished to examine. Nevertheless, that these young women placed their religious, national, and human identities before their female one was not a complete surprise to the symposium participants. In view of the discourse that evolved after the lecturer presented her opening volley, it was obvious that a large number of participants had concluded that the national religious educational “bulldozer” through which the young women in the study had passed simply managed to combine their female and religious identities and turn them into a single entity.

² Ulpanot [pl. of ulpana] are semi-private religious girls’ schools that offer more religious studies and a more rigid religious framework than state sponsored religious schools.

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Review of Rabbinic Judaism 8.1
They were now “religious-females,” with no contradiction or tension between the two identities. Thus, the female identity of the subjects of this study was actually placed on the top of the list, albeit under a different name and with a combined contents. There are those who see this as a positive phenomenon, particularly among the rabbinical and much of the educational establishment, in view of the fact that it grants primacy to the religious identity but not at the expense of the female identity. Other groups in religious Zionist society, and particularly those with feminist leaning, see this as a worrisome phenomenon, as the female identity is subjugated to the combined one and disappears within it. This is one of the points of contention and discussion existing today regarding the status of women within religious Zionist society. It can be viewed as an expression of some of the changes taking place among women found in religious Zionism today.

In this article we discuss the background of the changes that have taken place regarding the status and identity of women in the religious Zionist world from the early 1980s until today. We then analyze these changes as a performative text within a broader historical and ideological context. The discussion therefore begins with the historical background of women in religious Zionism and continues with an analysis of the developments that have taken place within that framework regarding the status and identity of women during the past two decades. We emphasize that this article deals with the phenomenon of religious Zionist women first in Palestine and later in the State of Israel, while the same phenomena appeared in the diaspora in a somewhat different form and according to a different timetable.

A. Social and Historical Background

The struggle over the status and identity of women in religious Zionism has developed in several major stages. Here we portray a number of developments according to their chronological appearance.

Suffrage

The first issue worthy of discussion is that of women’s suffrage. This topic became a matter of confrontation between Rav Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook and a large number of religious Zionist leaders. Rav