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WOMEN AND WOMEN'S ISSUES IN ISRAELI POLITICS

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The Myth of Equality

What is Israeli society's attitude towards women and what is the relationship of women to the political structures and power bases in that society? Someone once said, "A democracy is measured by its attitude towards women." Yet it is a myth that women are equal in Israeli public life, in the contemporary sense of the term.

Everyone points to the fact that Israel had a woman prime minister, Golda Meir, to prove that women have power. However, women who are involved in women's issues, and specifically women who are involved in politics, know that after having had a woman prime minister, there is going to be a regression because since it has already happened, women no longer need to try to reach such high positions.

Modern Israeli society was begun a hundred years ago by people who came here in revolt against the structure of society in the shtetl and who sought to create a revolutionary movement. Zionism was seen as a national liberation movement just

like other national liberation movements in Europe at the time. Except that of the Jews was different because they had to immigrate to a foreign country in order to make their dream come true and not just revolt within their own countries. At that time, women were equal as in other national liberation movements all over the world, where women are equal when they are fighting. They are equal in the trenches, but after an independent state is achieved they are immediately sent back to the kitchen, and many times they agree to go.

In Algeria, for example, women were at the forefront of the liberation movement and they certainly fought. Then immediately after liberation they were thrown out of every position of power. Only now, thirty years later, are they beginning to come back.

At the beginning in Israel, women were equal. They went out to work together with men, especially on the kibbutz. Yet today, women on the kibbutz are concentrated in the children's houses and in the kitchens. In the beginning they went

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out to work in the fields, during the period of liberation, but when things became easier they went back to the traditional women's occupations. It was not that someone else was keeping them down, but rather that they did not choose to take other roles or to fight to take on other responsibilities.

Independence was followed by an influx of Jews from Arab lands and Jews coming out of the DP camps, all more or less at the same time in the early 1950s. The population of the country doubled and after a short while even trebled. The influx included populations that came from two types of traditional backgrounds. One was the religious tradition, both Sephardi and Ashkenazi, where women's place in society is very defined. The second was the Sephardi tradition, both religious and non-religious, which includes a specific place where women are found and a specific place where women are not. These influxes changed the basic initial mold of Israeli society.

A religious man once explained to me that in Jewish tradition women were *bat melekh panima*, not equal but different. In his worldview, women have a traditional role to perform which is to educate the children, thereby shaping the new generation, and doing all sorts of things that are better than what the men do. We were just talking at cross purposes. He really could not understand what I meant by being equal. I do not buy the safeguards for women in religion. The safeguards that religion supplies for women come from the thought process that women have a specific place. That place is where they should stay and that place is not equal. Keeping them there is not where the modern world is.

The fact is that within religious law there is discrimination against women. As long as there is no separation between state and religion, then women have a problem and we will be discriminated against by definition. For example, according to religious law in divorce cases, from the age of six a male child belongs to the father and not to the mother.

Major Women's Issues

One of the first laws passed in this country for women was the right of women not to work at night, a law pushed at the time by traditional families. This was seen as progressive at the time, as this allowed women into the workforce who would not be there if they had to work after dark. About twenty years later, it became very important that women be allowed to work at night because of the higher pay for after-hours work. There are also jobs that are simply not open to

people if they are not allowed to work at night. So a law that was once quite progressive later became very regressive, keeping women at low-level, non-competitive jobs.

Child care has always been a basic women's issue. Most of the women's movements set up creches and other childcare frameworks to allow women to be able to go out and work. The whole question of going out to work is very much related to equality because it raises a woman's stature in her own eyes as well as in the eyes of her family and the general community. Having a job gives a woman an enormous amount of independence. This does not mean, however, that women have to go out to work to show that they are equal. Women should have the choice. If a woman wants to stay home and raise her family, she is certainly not a lesser person than a career woman.

Another important issue is violence in the family, not just violence against women. Violence against women is also usually against the children as well. We are trying to enact laws that will at least see to it that the punishment for such crimes is not minimal. Together with this comes education, educating the women to complain, not to keep it within the family, and knowing that they have some place to go. It also means educating the men. One of the more important things that has happened in the past two years is the creation of support groups for men who batter women, where they come and say, "Yes, I know I am doing it, I know I have a problem, help me deal with it." The groups help the men psychologically overcome this. Why must the focus be on women and children? Because most men who batter women were themselves battered as children and when they become adults they just enact what they saw from their role models. We have to stop the cycle not only by helping the victim but also by stopping the perpetrator.

We used to say that violence in a Jewish family just did not happen. Now that it has come out of the closet and we know that it does happen, we have become experts. Today our experts are asked to come to various countries to help others set up programs to deal with violence in the family.

A new issue for Israel, though not for the United States, is the question of sexual harassment. If anyone feels threatened now in this country, it is the men because as it becomes an issue, laws are being enacted to deal with it.

The Supreme Court is becoming an important means to advance equality. For example, a Supreme Court decision allowed Alice Miller the right to try to become

a pilot in the air force. Recently, the court has focused on equal subsidies in sports. The municipality in Holon was taken to the High Court over the demand that the women's basketball team receive the same subsidy as the men's basketball team, and the court ruled in favor of the demand.

The difficulties of single parent families has become an issue in Israel because of the women coming from the former USSR. There were single parent families in Israel before, but not enough to make it an issue. Now, because this is a very prevalent problem of this aliya, laws have been passed relating to housing and job rights of single parents.

Political and Economic Empowerment

The last three or four years have witnessed a coming of age. There are a lot of new women's organizations dealing with a lot of different issues, but even the traditional ones are looking, first of all, at the question of political empowerment — of targeting positions and sending women out to take them.

Financial and economic empowerment is also a goal because we see how this helps men succeed. The old boys' network is a very important part of why men reach certain positions. There did not used to be enough women in financial and economic positions to help open the way for other women. This is now beginning to change as women have risen higher in the ranks of corporations and other economic firms, as well as entrepreneurship.

This is related to the problems women face in raising funds to run for political office. By and large, women have to rely first of all on women to put up the money in order to help women get elected.

Becoming part of the economic and financial power structure is very important. For example, in the rural community, women who live in moshavim are now being told, "You may not realize this but you are not an adjunct to your husband and the moshav; you are actually a co-president of a corporation, if you see yourself that way." They are being encouraged to set up entrepreneurship projects from home. The result is the development of an enormous network of women entrepreneurs in the rural areas, such as caterers or jewelers, which also changes their perception of their standing in the community and raises their level within the power structure.

Women's organizations have also begun to use the courts in order to achieve greater economic empowerment. For example, over the past few years the courts have ruled that the boards of directors of government

corporations have to be open to women and in many boards of directors, if there are no women, then men cannot be appointed until a number of women are appointed.

The women's movement in Israel has also been compiling a catalogue of women who are qualified experts and can be proposed for these various directorships. It is not that we believe in putting women in positions just because they are women. Rather, we know that there are enough qualified women that fit the needs of these boards of directors and we want to help the boards to find them. Often we are told, "Find me a qualified woman and we will put her on the board," in a tone of voice that implied that there were none. So we set out to show that we could recommend about ten qualified candidates for each of those boards. Because of this, every year more and more women join the boards of directors of corporations, and once we get a critical mass, then bringing women into the power structure will no longer be an issue, as this will become a natural flow.

In the last four years, the attitude of the political power structure in the country has changed. Today there is a lot more openness. I have been active in politics for almost thirty years, since my student days on campus. At the beginning, even I, myself, had the queen bee syndrome where I was convinced that I had made it because of myself and not because women helped me. Women's issues were not important to me and it did not matter if I brought other women along with me. Then I realized that you can only get to a certain level if you are on your own and from then on you are stuck and you do need the women's networks to back you. You do need other women to help you, and therefore the more you branch out and the more you bring other women up with you, then the more power you are going to have afterwards because a group and not just one person is involved.

The Struggle for Knesset Representation

In the current Knesset there are nine women as compared with twelve in the outgoing Knesset. The breakdown is: Labor 3, Likud 2, Meretz 2, Communist 1, and Israel B'aliya 1. One of the reasons there are less women is because there are more *haredi* factions in the Knesset. Some of these factions will never include women.

The main reason, however, is due to what may be called playing around with American democracy. There is a difference in the relative representation of women in parliamentary systems such as in the Scandinavian

countries or Great Britain. In Norway, 50 percent of the parliament are women and about 40 percent of the cabinet ministers. All of these countries have a quota system. In Norway the elected bodies must be comprised of 40 percent of each gender. The British Labour Party has an empowerment system for women candidates — the result can be seen in the newly elected Parliament and Cabinet.

Israel is now moving towards American-style primary elections which, from a woman's point of view, are the death knell for women's representation. About five years ago, when the Labor party began running primaries, Senator Barbara Boxer from California was in Israel talking about how to get women into elected positions. She said, "If you are going to emulate American democracy, the only thing I can tell you is — don't." Looking at the number of women in both houses of the most important democracy in the world, we can see she was right.

In the Israel Labor party of which I am a member, there is a quota system that says every elected body must have 20 percent women or it is not legal. Why did we accept 20 percent when it should be 50 percent? Because that was the best we could do, that was all we could manage to pass in the bodies voting on the issues. We could not even pass 25 percent so we accepted 20 percent. Today there are not 20 percent in any of these bodies, but we never took any institution to court in order to have it declared illegal because we also feel uncomfortable with the quotas. We fought for the quotas, but we are not comfortable with them because we want to achieve success on our own merit. If there is a quota, then we will always receive positions on sufferance and not because we deserve them. Yet initially women need quotas in order to achieve a critical mass. Once a lot of us are in, then we have to prove that we are qualified, but first we have got to get in.

This time around there was not a single category where at least one woman and maybe two were competing for a place on the Labor party list. This means that women do want to become involved and next time they are going to succeed. Not everybody has to want to, but those who do want to, have to be given the opportunity.

Within the Labor party, the quotas are helping a bit. Even with the primaries, Labor's system mandates that legally, within each group of ten on the Knesset list there must be one woman. So even if she receives less votes than the man, she moves up on the list. Out of the top forty candidates on the Labor list, four were

women, which is 10 percent and not 20 percent. Even this was a very difficult fight because all the men felt threatened that we were going to take their places.

The women in Likud are trying to get a quota now because they have only two seats as opposed to Labor's three. Labor would have had four if Ora Namir had not waited to resign (to become Ambassador to China) until after the Knesset list was closed. So we women do not always help each other.

People are elected in primaries first of all because of name recognition. Who has got name recognition in Israel? Generals, to a great extent, or people who have held other public office beforehand. This leaves women at a disadvantage. So either we have to fight for having safe seats or we have to find another way of running our primary elections.

Becoming active in politics takes an enormous amount of time, especially outside of the house. We very definitely do not want women not raising their families. So we have to recognize that women are behind by perhaps ten years when they begin to enter politics. At the entrance stage they are often competing with a man who is at least ten years younger, or if the same age, then he is ten years ahead in experience and in the contacts he has amassed which help him move ahead. There is no question that women have a much later starting point and this is just another one of the inequalities that we have to contend with in our fight for equality.

One bright spot is the Committee on Women's Affairs established in the last Knesset that includes all of the women Members of Knesset and some of the men. There is total cooperation among the women of all political parties working together on women's issues, which was not always the case. Everyone now realizes that if we do not work together, if we let our own political stance take over, then none of us will ever get anywhere in any of the political parties.

The Upcoming Municipal Elections

The next fight coming up on our agenda as women are the municipal elections, to take place in another year and a half. There are no women mayors in the country, while there are 15 deputy mayors. Many municipalities and local councils have women's advisory committees to the mayor. (I am a member of the Jerusalem committee.) In Israel there are 75 women's advisory committees to the mayor, 15 of them in Arab local councils — an advisory committee of Arab women to the Arab mayor or head of the local council. From that point of view, women have managed to do better

in the Arab sector than we have in the Jewish sector.

But none of these voluntary groups have funding and are limited in what they can do. Even the advisor to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Etya Simcha, did not have a budget. She received a salary but did not have a budget to run the office, and sometimes put her hand into her own pocket in order to help run certain projects. These are all things that lead back to the need for financial empowerment.

We are now targeting women and helping them with preparatory courses on how to run a municipality, explaining why it is important for them to be on local councils and municipal councils. We also plan to work very systematically with all the political parties to see that women are placed in realistic slots on the lists for the municipal elections. We then hope that some will receive enough name recognition to bring them into national politics. This does not happen very easily because usually only the mayor gets any media coverage.

Peace is a Women's Issue

The question of peace is a women's issue more than it is a man's issue because women are mothers and men are soldiers and sometimes soldiers like to fight. For the past six years I have been having conversations with the leaders of the Palestinian women's movement in the West Bank and Gaza to try and work out together how we are going to live in this area. As we were having these conversations, we came to realize that one of the first things we have to recognize is that on each side there are fears that the others never knew existed.

I have since discovered that in places like Angola and Ireland, before there was a dialogue for peace on the state level, there were women's dialogues, talking about how we work with each other and how we bring peace to the area. Yet when it came to the actual peace talks, the women were excluded from the table, and we were not brought to the table in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process either. I personally think that had we been, it may have made a difference because there is a difference in attitude among women.

Interestingly, the Palestinian women have asked us many times to be put in contact with Turkish women's organizations because Turkey is a secular Islamic state. They want to learn from the Turkish women how they manage, because when the Palestinians set up their constitution it is important for them to have a secular state and not a religious Islamic state. Here we have a common interest in opposing fundamentalism.

Equality for Both Men and Women

Equality must be for both men and women. This past summer at the Jewish Agency Assembly I helped pass a resolution regarding equality in pension rights for Agency employees. Widows of pensioners of the Agency continue getting the pension for a certain amount of time; widowers do not. We passed a resolution to have the system organize itself in such a way that widowers would get the same pension rights regarding their wife's pension as do widows. Equality goes both ways.

Similarly, we also passed a law for equality concerning a leave of absence from work after a child is born. It used to be that only the mother had this right. But after she has rested from having the baby, she does not need a full six months to recuperate physically. The law now says very clearly that a couple can choose who gets those six months off to take care of the child. Sometimes the mother takes three months and the father three months.

Fighting for Equality on All Fronts

The fight for equality touches many varied aspects of society. For example, the army is not conducive to equality, but we as women are fighting for that. The whole concept of the Women's Corps is like a quota. It is a separate framework instead of being equal. The last three officers who headed the Women's Corps all fought to have every position in the army be open to women and that women not be held in stereotyped positions.

In another example, in the rabbinical courts there has been a very positive development. Zehava Malkiel started a program to educate women to be religious court pleaders so that women can be represented by women who know the ins and outs of the specific legal process and who also understand those whom they are representing. There is a totally different type of representation when a woman pleads before a rabbinic court. I do not think that women have to be represented only by women in court, but when we are dealing with a rabbinic court that has a certain concept of what is right and wrong, at least the people who are representing the women have got to know the *halakhic* answers pertaining to the rights of women, because there is room in *halakhah* to find the correct answers to most of the problems.

A women's party has been tried twice in Israel and it has been unsuccessful, giving rise to the myth that women do not vote for women. First of all, you need

both men and women to vote for women. Secondly, women see themselves first of all as part of society and only then as women, which is fine. But, therefore, their allegiance most of the time is to an ideological party rather than to a women's party. In my view, the amount of energy put into such a party would be better used in helping those same women get elected in their own political parties.

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Judi Widetzky is the chair of the World Labor Zionist Movement and Past President of the Council of Women's Organizations in Israel. This *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* is based on her presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.

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