**Old Zionists, Old Masculinity:**

**Veteran Zionist Organizations in Mandatory Palestine**

1. Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)

Menachem Ussishkin—68 years old, chairman of the Jewish National Fund

Meir Dizengoff—70 years old, mayor of Tel Aviv

Zalman David Levontin—75 years old, board member of the Anglo-Palestine Bank

In the summer of 1931, this group of old men was very busy. It labored over the establishment of an association that would be a home for elderly Zionists who had personal histories of public endeavor under the patronage, and for the sake, of Zionism. They succeeded. In February 1932, their association was officially registered under the title of “Brit Rishonim”—the Ancestors’ Covenant.[[2]](#footnote-2) They acknowledged that Eretz Israel, as they wrote in their position paper, is “an entirely new creation, and like any new creation, it is axiomatic that it will seek, in the main, obscure strengths for its action.”[[3]](#footnote-3) They wished to believe that Zionism would neither forget nor forsake those who acted on its behalf for years. Reality, however, was often quite different: veteran Zionist activists who had immigrated to Eretz Israel in the 1930s and 1940s were unable to find work due to their age. Eretz Israel was a place where young and middle-aged people worked. Many were unfamiliar with the years of endeavor put in by the veterans, some of whom had tumbled into financial distress.[[4]](#footnote-4) Four years after Brit Rishonim was founded, another veterans’ association was set up: the Organization of Veteran Zionist Activists. Both entities held regular meetings and initiated social activities for their members, as well as financial aid when necessary. They published their own newspaper—*Hed haTsiyyoni haVatik,* Echo of the Veteran Zionist—and in 1936 they established their own labor bureau and persuaded the longstanding Zionist institutions to publish a call to “Give jobs to veteran Zionists” in the press.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 1946, after holding joint discussions, the two organizations decided that there was no point in having two entities that pursued the same goals for the same group. Thus, they merged and henceforth acted jointly.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The men on whom this article centers were born between 1860 and 1880; many of them reached Eretz Israel in the 1930s and 1940s, at the age of fifty or over. Most had come from Russia and Poland, where they had imbibed the late nineteenth-century ideas of Hibbat Zion and took guidance from them; others originated in Central Europe. In their countries of birth, alongside their vocations as white-collar workers, merchants, or teachers, they engaged in Zionist activity: attending Zionist Congresses, writing for the Jewish press, and raising donations for the Zionist funds.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although these associations fit into the web of civil organizations that came into being during the British Mandate years in Eretz Israel, they merged on an ideological basis and played a role in the development of the autonomous Jewish community.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is my conviction that their conspicuously male complexion, on the one hand, and their members’ advanced age, on the other hand, warrants a reference to aspects of gender and old age as well. In this article, I will argue that these two organizations challenged dominant outlooks on masculinity in Palestine of the 1930s and 1940s and, by internalizing the identity category of their elder age, attempted to promote broader acceptance of other forms of masculinity and openness to elderly men’s needs and abilities.

In the historiography of the Yishuv, the organized Jewish population of pre-Israel Palestine, [הוספתי הגדרה] the elderly have not been discussed extensively[[9]](#footnote-9) and the gender aspects of old age from a historical perspective have not been studied at all. In this article, I wish to begin to fill these lacunae. In 1986, in her article “Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” the historian Joan Wallach Scott conditioned the study of social history on attention to gender as well. According to Scott, gender is an important category of historical analysis, exactly like social class, ethnic origin, and nationality. It relates, she explained, not only to anatomical and biological differences between men and women but also to meanings, ideas, and basic assumptions that are attributed to the male sex as against the female sex.[[10]](#footnote-10) Farther on, historians attempted to apply Scott’s writings to the age variable and to argue that age, like gender, is based on cultural assumptions and values, causing certain social meanings to be attributed to specific age categories. Age, exactly like gender, is a concept that has varied over the years and is a main organizing criterion of social life as a hierarchy and power system that also has legal implications: the right to vote, marry, or obtain a driver’s license. Consequently, age categories are inseparable components of interpersonal relations, institutional construction, social norms, and also public policy. Historians may make an important contribution to understanding age as an analytical category due to their ability to help comprehend the way categories and awareness of age have changed over the years commensurate with the dominance of age as a category of social organization.[[11]](#footnote-11)

2. Materials and Methods

To let the elder Zionists’ voices be heard, I use correspondence between the longstanding Zionist organizations and the institutions of the Yishuv as well as with private individuals. This correspondence includes veteran Zionists’ appeals to Keren Hayesod, the Jewish National Fund, and the Jewish Agency. The minutes of their meetings and the annual reports that they published also shed light on their activities. Another important source of information about the veterans’ organizations is their newspaper—*Hed Hazioni Hawatik* (Voice of the veteran Zionist), published in Tel Aviv for a year and a half in 1940–1941. “Only a few times, due to the virtue of some exceptional act of hospitality, did the vacillations of the veterans who had come to Eretz Israel find expression,”[[12]](#footnote-12) the old-timers wrote at the top of the premier edition, thus establishing their newspaper as a forum that would publicize their advanced age. About a year after the first edition appeared, the veterans testified with satisfaction that their newspaper “is steadily capturing hearts and becoming a mouthpiece for veteran Zionists’ problems.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The elderliness lurking behind these documents sought its place in the Yishuv then being built in Palestine. It needed financial aid and displayed physical weakness, but it acted on behalf of its members and wished to do the same for the Yishuv as well.

The nature of the sources illuminates parts of these elders’ lives, and to understand them one has to anchor them in the time and the social reality in which they were written. I begin with a brief discussion of Jewish masculinity in the Yishuv, reviewing the historiography of the topic and creating an opportunity to evaluate the case of the veteran Zionists relative to other masculinities. Even though this article concerns itself with males and maleness, I relate briefly to women in the context of the veterans’ organizations or, to be more precise, the absence of women in the associations and possible reasons for it. I then explain the phenomenon of aging in the 1930s Yishuv and show how it found expression in groups other than the veteran Zionists. In the second part of the article, I employ gerontological theories that relate to gender to draw a cultural and social profile of the veteran Zionists’ organizations. This approach allows gerontology and history to mingle, yielding gero-history, so that both disciplines may contribute to each other and let us examine issues related to the great question—what is it mean to grow old?—with emphasis on historical and cultural representations of aging.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Masculinity and Zionism

The development of nationalism in Europe from the late eighteenth century onward reveals a strong nexus between nationalism and masculinity. Much the same resonated in other coeval political ideologies, particularly colonialism and imperialism.[[15]](#footnote-15) Accordingly, much historical research about masculinity and Jewish nationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries presents a rather standard theme: Zionism acted for the national liberation of the Jewish people and, within this collectivity, of the Jewish male, from exile. In Western culture and European society, Blacks and Jews were identified with neuroticism and femininity. Lacking male characteristics such as physical strength, courage, honor, and autonomy, they were positioned as inferior to the Christian European male. These outlooks, accepted in European society, were internalized among Jewish intellectuals as well. The advent of Zionist nationalism was meant to take the pejorative passive Jewish image aside and endow it with heterosexual male values that squared with European masculine norms. This national craving was rooted in physical revitalization, and these together were to create a male national identity, a symbol of a new society and the nation’s constitutive power.[[16]](#footnote-16)

On the seam between Europe and Eretz Israel in the context of the masculinity that took shape in the Yishuv[[17]](#footnote-17) in the early twentieth century, the studies of Peled and Nordheimer Nur deal (each independently of the other) with the Hashomer Hatzair Zionist youth movement, a mythological player in the Zionist habitus. Peled presents the movement’s masculine ideal: the vision of the romantic and individualistic “new man” who wishes to fulfill himself and to bond with his collective and nation.[[18]](#footnote-18) Nordheimer Nur points to the deep crisis of masculinity that the young generation of East and Central European Jews experienced in the nineteenth century. The lack of sovereign territory and military strength was embodied in the dependent and vulnerable Jewish communities, yielding feelings of impotence. Zionist intellectual circles, including Hashomer Hatzair, spurned Diaspora Jewish life as wretched, morally and spiritually humiliating, and tainted with the overstated intellectualism of modern European civilization, which left young Jews without vitality and national consciousness.[[19]](#footnote-19) Nordheimer Nur, focusing on a Hashomer Hatzair group called Bitania Ilit that settled above Lake Kinneret, shows that even though this was a cooperative organization that accepted women into its ranks, most members of the group were young men and the type of discourse and practices that leaders of the organization promoted in the 1920s reflected a wish to reinvent the Jewish male as a “real man” who would embody physical and mental strength rolled together. Just the same, Nordheimer Nur proposed that the small Bitania community created a more complex image of man than just “muscular Judaism.” By means of community talks, confession, and community cooperation, a new masculinity, sensitive and mindful of its inner emotions, was born.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Hirsch also deals with the local aspect of masculinity in the Yishuv in the context of halutsic (Zionist pioneering) masculinity that, in its writings, coded Arab workers as more masculine than Jewish workers: faster, braver, physically stronger. Lagging behind the Arabs in these respects, the pioneers launched a competition for national prestige and masculinity by adopting behavioral norms from the Arab surroundings.[[21]](#footnote-21) Seltenreich, similarly dealing with aspects of honor and the body, points to two codes of maleness that became visible in the new Jewish villages, one promoting value aspects and the other built around the body. Each carried markers of generational cutoff, the former identified with the landowning elite and the latter adopted by the young.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In Eretz Israel, Zionism placed the farmer-pioneer at the top of its scale of national statuses.[[23]](#footnote-23) Connell, progenitor of the concept of “hegemonic masculinity,” proposes the existence of an ideal male model, in relation to which masculine and feminine identities are shaped in ways of resistance, cooperation, or emulation. The hegemonic ideal varies from one society to the next; even if some men embody the aspects of hegemonic masculinity, its idealization lends them broad normative dimensions. Gender hegemony operates not only by subordinating femininity to hegemonic masculinity but also by subjugating and marginalizing other types of masculinity. Namely, not only are there many masculinities but there is also a hierarchy among them.[[24]](#footnote-24) In a re-examination of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt emphasize that to understand hegemonic masculinity one must import a more holistic definition of the gender hierarchy that will recognize weaker groups exactly as it recognizes strong ones.[[25]](#footnote-25) Recognition of the group of elderly men may be an answer to this.

Connell and Messerschmidt also propose a three-level analysis of hegemonic masculinity: local, regional, and global. At the local level, masculinity finds expression among family members, organizations, and communities. At the regional level, it is reflected at the level of culture or state, and at the global level it manifests in fields such as global politics, media, and the business world. It is of much importance to link regional masculinity with the local tier. By shaping the cultural aspect of the male reality, regional hegemonic masculinity operates in the cultural arena as readily accessible material that may be adapted and challenged by a range of local-level masculinities.[[26]](#footnote-26) Connell and Messerschmidt summarize the discussion of the geography of masculinity by expressing the belief that interactions including global masculinities will become more important in gender politics and may even become focal in future research into this field.[[27]](#footnote-27) As I see it, however, the discussion of regional masculinity in Palestine has not spent itself because it revolves, in greater part, around young and pioneering masculinity and hardly includes other masculinities. Therefore, it is of value to expose old-age masculinity as yet another layer of local and regional masculinity.

Other studies about masculinity in the Yishuv present a non-pioneering masculinity. Boord examines the way the hegemonic elite of the 1930s Zionist Labor Movement shaped its masculinity by reviewing the writings of Yossef Weitz and Shmuel Yavnieli. Both personalities defined themselves in view of the pioneering cultural ideal and by testing their role in the urban family. The masculinity that they proposed revolved around professional education and managerial and supervisory positions; it also emphasized labor as a value of male identity.[[28]](#footnote-28) Hollander, similarly relating to a non-pioneering masculinity, detects in the Hebrew literature of the early twentieth century a group of male writers who promoted a self-evaluative masculinity. Brenner, S. Y. Agnon, L. A. Arieli, and Aharon Reuveni, in contrast to their Zionist contemporaries, did not cleanse themselves of the Diaspora Jewish culture and were aware of shared anxieties and conflicts in regard to expectations of masculinity and the challenge of creating a new society. Their writing, probing these concerns, offers self-reflection without necessarily promoting a specific project of reform. They tried to crimp the enthusiasm for the new masculine model under construction in Palestine, that of the New Hebrew and the Sabra, as against the erstwhile model of the Jewish male—weak and dishonored in nineteenth-century Europe—by allowing the possibility of self-contemplation and evaluation of the advantages and drawbacks of both models. Inner contemplation and a long-term commitment to attaining common goals in the community were central aspects of an alternative Zionist masculinity that, in their opinion, was not only realizable but also better suited to the attainment of collective goals. Such a masculinity demanded that Jewish males take responsibility for their actions, stop blaming others for their own problems, avoid anti-social behavior, and improve the personal and collective condition by means of collective activity. Finally, Hollander describes how self-evaluative masculinity failed to attain cultural hegemony within the Yishuv, but the main cultural status of Sabra masculinity in the early state of Israel era had to cope with other masculinities,[[29]](#footnote-29)

This review shows that the Yishuvic masculinity discussed thus far in historiography was largely a hegemonic phenomenon: pioneers, the Labor Movement, and farmers and their villages. Old-age masculinity is hardly referred to in the Yishuv historical research, and this perhaps can be explained by the contrast existing between masculinity and old age, and the elders are perceived as gender-less— men not elders and elders not men.[[30]](#footnote-30) The study that follows is intended to join the studies that pivot from young and labor-pioneering masculinity in order to broaden the male ambit to include old-age masculinity.

Women in the Context of Veteran Zionists’ Associations

Brod, observing the important role of women in masculinity studies, explains that women’s role in the analysis is not an empirical question but a theoretical and conceptual matter. The importance of any given category in the analysis cannot be dictated by its importance in the sources. The absence or presence of any category in any source may itself become a problem and a topic for analysis.[[31]](#footnote-31) Such is the case in regard to the veteran Zionists’ organizations, in which women are almost totally absent. It is specifically their absence that beggars attention. The construction of the male gender identity in the Zionist vision took place along two fault lines: new Jew versus old exilic Jew and masculine versus feminine. Women were included in the Zionist act when they were not “too feminine” because Jewish femininity carried an aftertaste of exile; also, however, they were not included as “full-fledged men” because this role was earmarked for the new Jewish males. Therefore, political Zionism invited women to participate in the national project by assuming male sub-roles and traditional women’s roles, without which a nation could not be built. In Zionism *à la* Herzl, only aberrant women who failed in their mission and their standard roles as wives and mothers were employed in the public sphere and found their calling in their professions. Men preferred beautiful and tender women and distanced themselves from “masculine” women who strayed from traditional female behavior patterns and wished to take part in the national and pioneering tasks as equals.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Few women appear as members of the veterans’ associations, even though these bodies when established were open “to every Zionist, man and woman, who engaged in Zionist work abroad or in Israel for no less than twenty-five years.”[[33]](#footnote-33) It is this entrance requirement, however, that emphasizes women’s inability to belong to such an organization because women were far from Zionism in the Zionist Movement’s first years; indeed, the first Hovevei Zion gave women no entrée at all. Women were not co-opted into the Zionist leadership and were excluded from decision-making centers. Not a single woman delegate attended the first Zionist Congress; the few women who were there anyway came along with their husbands or fathers. Most of the few women who were active in the Zionist Movement retained their family roles as mothers and educators.[[34]](#footnote-34) If so, Zionist endeavor was largely a male affair and, ipso facto, those who aged in it were men and not women. Thus, when the associations of veteran Zionists were established in Palestine in the 1930s, hardly any women met the basic condition of at least twenty-five years of work on behalf of Zionism.[[35]](#footnote-35) Women did appear conspicuously on lists of support grants that the veteran organizations distributed to the wives and daughters of veteran Zionists who had died. For example, Rivka Cholodenko, the widow of Avraham Cholodenko, an active Zionist in Kiev and Palestine who had immigrated to the latter country at the age of fifty, received support. Hannah, the widow of Shraga Feivel Margulin, erstwhile publisher of the Hebrew-Russian newspaper *Hasman* in Vilna and an immigrant to Palestine at the age of sixty-three, was also supported. The list of supported widows again underscores their status as helpmeets of veteran Zionist functionaries, as distinct from the Zionist functionaries themselves, who belonged to the association.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Old Age in the Yishuv

The “new Jew” ethos emphasized the centrality of the young people who would reach the Land of Israel in order to transform the face of Jewishness. This Jew was a young and healthy male, self-confident and able to defend himself and perform physical labor. Shapira points to an even higher level of “new Jew”: the offspring of Zionism, the Hebrew-speaking, shorts-wearing Sabra.[[37]](#footnote-37) It is worth dwelling on youth as a characteristic of Zionism due to its contrast to old age. The new, young Eretz-Israeli overtook the old, exilic, elderly Jew. The oldness attributed to Judaism clashed with the aspiration to youthful life and rested on a common metaphor in Christian European society concerning the antiquity of Judaism, associated with rejection of Jesus and refusal to recognize the modern era. The crystallization of a youth consciousness that demands its place in society found public expression with modernization and rapid demographic growth in Europe in the course of the nineteenth century, when youth found its place as a social element per se. Organizational initiatives of the young as factors in various revolutionary movements, particularly after World War I, attest to a generational consciousness that sought to change the way of life of offspring relative to that of their parents. Among the Jews, as Almog shows, this awakening of youth began at the outset of the twentieth century and aimed to change the nature of Jewish identity, which it perceived as suffering from antiquity, and to allow the Jewish young a way out.[[38]](#footnote-38) In the 1930s and 1940s, the Zionist Movement relied on youth circles and movements in the West and the East.[[39]](#footnote-39) These settings exhibited the perennial generational tension that exists between the exertions of youth and the myth of the old generation, the latter resting on two metaphors. The first is the “Diaspora old-timer” who belongs to the Old World and perpetuates the ways of the world that used to be, in contrast to the young generation, which turns its eyes to the morrow, the future. The second and more complex metaphor of the elder, also common among Zionist youth movements, is the “old man,” the responsible adult, involved in leadership and functionary roles, sometimes perceived by the young as an obstacle to the attainment of the movement’s goals.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The transition to what had once been new and had become old, and between the person who was once young and had become old, was manifested in the 1930s in the Yishuv’s diverse population of elders. The elders of the Mandate era were those who had reached Palestine with their families as young immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when they were in their twenties, or as young heads of household. Along with them were elders from veteran families that had been living in Palestine for generations—Sephardi and Ashkenazi families, most associated with the “Old Yishuv.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The markers of old age in the 1930s and the transition from what had been new to what had become old appear, for example, in Tel Aviv, which in those years was transitioning from renewal to aging.[[42]](#footnote-42) Writers and intellectuals discerned, on the one hand, indicators of the great city that left their marks on Tel Aviv: cafés, show windows, and glittering signs; contrastingly, they also identified in it the dirt, the dust, the street beggars, and the salient marks of urban aging: “The city has aged and has suddenly turned gray in a sense. Creases line its crumbling face, its bones steadily calcifying, its attire worn and falling from its budding body.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

The urban aging of Tel Aviv was noticeable in the city’s twenty-fifth year, but the first Hebrew colonies established in Palestine in the 1880s and 1890s were already fifty years old and their founders even older. In 1932, the Bilu movement marked its fiftieth anniversary. Bilu was a movement of young Zionists that was established in Russia after pogroms swept that country in 1881; the first Bilu’im—members of the movement—reached Palestine in 1882 under the leadership of Israel Belkind. Some Bilu’im were among the first settlers of Rishon Lezion; another group founded Gedera village. Bilu was engraved in the collective memory and became a paragon for a group of pioneers that pledged its life to building the country.[[44]](#footnote-44) The Yishuv celebrated the organization’s jubilee with three days of festivities in September 1932, with an artistic bash, lectures, and a concert held in honor of the first of the Bilu’im—including David Yudilovich, Chaim Hissin, and Menashe Meirovitch—who were more than sixty years old by then.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The Yishuv also got a taste of old age in the “second wave” of the *moshave zekenim—* homes for the aged—that were established in Palestine in the 1930s and onward into the 1940s. The first old-age homes in Palestine dated to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The share of older people among the migrants to Palestine, and particularly women, had been growing in the course of the Ottoman era, particularly since the seventeenth century. Widowers and widows left family members behind and immigrated to the Holy Land in order to live out their remaining days there and, in due course, to be buried in its soil.[[46]](#footnote-46) With the growth of the Yishuv in Jerusalem in the late Ottoman era, it came time to establish homes for the aged there. The first to be set up in Jerusalem, and in all of Eretz Israel, was the United Aged Home in the Old City in 1878. In 1906, Reuven Yona Churgin’s *moshav zekenim* was founded in the Bukharan Quarter; the Sephardi moshav zekenim was established on Jaffa Street two years later at the initiative of the Sephardi Community Committee.[[47]](#footnote-47) In Safed, the General Aged Asylum was founded in 1901 for lone, frail, and impoverished elders,[[48]](#footnote-48) and in Jaffa an old-age home was set up in 1910, relocating to Tel Aviv after World War I.[[49]](#footnote-49)

As stated, a second wave of new institutions for the elderly appeared in the 1930s due to waves of immigration that had brought elders among others to the country and due to rising life expectancy. In Tel Aviv 14 percent of residents were over the age of fifty in 1931 as against 9 percent in 1916. Growth took place in Jerusalem as well; there the share of residents over the age of fifth climbed from 10 percent in 1916 to 14 percent in 1931.[[50]](#footnote-50) Haifa served as a gateway for young immigrants, some arriving with their parents, and over the years many of the elders were left without adequate housing provisions. In 1931, this state of affairs prompted several players to establish the Moshav Zekenim society in the Hadar Hacarmel neighborhood in order “to provide a materially and spiritually, tranquil life for elderly men and women.” When it was established, it was run by the city’s chief rabbi, Baruch Markus.[[51]](#footnote-51) In Tel Aviv, a second old-age home was established in 1932,[[52]](#footnote-52) and in 1936 local functionaries in Petah Tikva founded one for lone and unsupported elderly men and women.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Another manifestation of old age in the Yishuv among the pioneers during those years was the arrival of their elderly parents to the first kibbutzim in Palestine. Many of the pioneers’ parents came from families that had needed their offspring’s help back in the Diaspora; in other cases, the offspring had been the sole breadwinners of their families, whose livelihood was impaired when the young immigrated to Palestine. The material situation of parents who had remained in their countries of residence troubled the offspring, whose kibbutzim sent the parents monthly financial support and helped to bring them to Palestine. The pioneers’ commitment to their parents’ welfare clashed with their undertaking to the kibbutz, but they wanted to satisfy both.[[54]](#footnote-54) Once they reached the kibbutzim, the elderly parents found that their status had changed. They were not members of the collective, did not take part in the kibbutz assemblies, and their days of labor were not counted in the kibbutz books. Just the same, they wanted to contribute to the collective effort and found various ways of doing so: Women sewed and cooked, an elder at one of the kibbutzim [ניסחתי את זה כך כי מדובר בקיבוץ אחד בלבד] looked after the grain silo, and another marked eggs at the poultry run.[[55]](#footnote-55)

The Zionist organizations, too, showed manifestations of old age in Palestine in the 1930s. Associating on the basis of age was not unique to the veteran Zionists; in the 1930s, additional organizations that linked ideology to old age came into being. Examples are the Alliance of Maccabi Veterans in Eretz Israel, founded in 1935; Veterans of the Mizrachi Movement in Eretz Israel, established in 1937; and the Veteran Workers Club, founded by the Histadrut in 1937.[[56]](#footnote-56) The old-time Zionists did not find this organizational pattern novel because they had been members of Zionist organizations in the Diaspora. In Palestine, however, the organizations were underpinned not only by ideology but also by members’ age. In elders’ organizations and clubs, the age parameter surpassed other identities in importance and, together with gender, gave shape to the entities’ characteristics.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Veteran Zionists’ Organizations—a Subculture of Aging

To analyze the characteristics of the veteran Zionists’ organizations, I will use Rose’s theory of the subculture of aging. Although it has been invoked in gerontological research,[[58]](#footnote-58) in my opinion it can also provide insights about the experiences of elders in a group separated on the basis of age in the discipline of social history; it may even be helpful in examining the historical aspects of old age in different societies. According to the theory, interaction with age peers rises with age and encourages the development of a subculture that amplifies individuals’ pride of self. Subcultures of aging create a mutual relationship with age peers that grows with age and promotes the development of a subculture. Subcultures of aging are products of the positive context that many elders feel for each other on the basis of the physical limitations, role changes, and generational experiences that they have in common. Rose also includes norms and values among the characteristics of the subculture of the aging, some reflecting the dominant culture and others contrasting with it—with one value perceived as the most positive one for the members of the subculture. The subculture also forms as the result of exclusion from interaction with younger people.[[59]](#footnote-59)

An additional matter that Rose points out is aging group-consciousness. In this phenomenon, elders begin to think of themselves as members of an aging group, join a setting that allows them to interact almost exclusively with people of similar age, and take pride in this setting. They speak about the problems that they encounter frequently: incomes that have fallen, prestige that has slumped, and general social neglect. They do so not only in reference to themselves as individuals but also in the awareness that these phenomena afflict them as a social group. Furthermore, Rose notes that group awareness or identification leads to collective action and correction of the unfair treatment that elders face.[[60]](#footnote-60) In the next part of this article, I apply Rose’s observations to the veteran Zionists’ organizations and specify “labor” and “pioneering” as values that reflected the dominant culture in the Yishuv and became important in the veterans’ organizations as well. I will examine the veteran Zionists’ attitude toward the Diaspora as a value that contrasted with the dominant culture and investigate the formation of aging group-consciousness among the veteran Zionists.

Dominant Cultural Values in the Yishuv: Pioneering and Labor

As mentioned above, pioneering in the Yishuv [הוספתי] carried positive emotional baggage and much semantic power. It left its imprint on the wishes of public elements of decisive importance.[[61]](#footnote-61) Shmuel Almog goes so far as to characterize pioneering as a “alternative culture.” Despite the wide variety of organizations and ideologies at issue, the innovative message of pioneering [in all of them?] is meant to influence states of mind and shape a way of life that strays from convention.[[62]](#footnote-62) In their gatherings, the old-timers often mentioned the pioneers as a reference group for the shaping of their desires. They fumed about the Yishuv institutions’ neglect of their rights in regard to finding work: “Young pioneers who came [here] on the basis of pioneer ‘certificates’ [Mandate Government immigration visas] [הוספתי הגדרה] […] whose place is in rural settlement, to revive the wastelands of our country—neglect the veterans totally.”[[63]](#footnote-63) With these words they the accused the new pioneers of preferring institutional jobs over working the soil in places where the veterans could not do so. At an assembly of the Organization of Veteran Zionist Activists held in April 1938, the old-timers asked the organization to establish a home for them: “A home should be built for us old Zionists, something like Bet Halutsot, workers’ quarters, and the like.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

The veterans pinpointed their weakness relative to other groups in the Yishuv: “The main thing some of us are lacking is vigor and, particularly, momentum. [...] What others get done in half a year we have to do in a month! There’s no time, life is passing, we’re aging and won’t have time to complete our program.”[[65]](#footnote-65) The elders found themselves lacking not only momentum but also force. “Our demands aren’t forceful, we surrender, we don’t pound the table, we don’t make scandals, we don’t organize demonstrations [and] strikes.”[[66]](#footnote-66) The institution of the strike was very common in Mandate Palestine; it had become part of the daily routine among workers and employers. It expressed more than the typical patterns of working relations and power struggles in an urban society that was transitioning from a community to a society; it also gave social struggles and social identity a sharper edge. De Vries identifies the strike as integral to the world of national and pioneering metaphors of the Third Aliyah.[[67]](#footnote-67) In their new country, the veteran Zionist immigrants struggled for their place in the new masculine social ladder within the bounds of their demands for cultural and social recognition. Therefore, they had to decode the cultural and social models that define the behaviors and characteristics of sound and desirable masculinity.[[68]](#footnote-68)

One of those characteristics was labor. Men participated in the public sphere as a consequence of their responsibility as heads of household, fathers, and, in turn, owners of property. Their role as family breadwinners helped to shape a masculinity that positioned the male as an active participant in the labor market and the female as dependent on his income.[[69]](#footnote-69) When they immigrated to Palestine, the old Zionists lost the status and reputation that they had acquired in the Diaspora, which had flowed from their pre-immigration vocations. This also led to the loss of a characteristic of male identity—labor. The public sphere no longer belonged to many veterans when they reached the country and, for lack of choice, they switched to the sphere of the home and the family, which were identified as feminine.[[70]](#footnote-70) Meir Nechmad, a leading Zionist personality among the Jews of Syria, approached Moshe Sharett, head of the Jewish Agency’s Political Department, and wrote: “My material situation is worsening with each passing day; I am ill and bedridden and have no one to help [me].” He asked Sharett “to send me support, quickly if possible.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Sharett also received a letter from the veteran Zionist Yaakov Volman: “I gave everything I had to the Land [of Israel] and the nation. […] I need help at once. I have no way of carrying on.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

The old Zionists expected to continue working in Palestine on the grounds of the Zionist ideal and their service on its behalf in the Diaspora. Not only did immigration get in the way of this; so did physical aging, or, as they put it: “No one hired him due to the flaw of old age.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Society’s perception of old age as a physical defect recurs often in their remarks. Avraham Kahane, a member of the organization, wrote: “From the start they looked at us as though we weren’t there,” and Chaim Neiger, erstwhile chair of the Zionist Organization in Western Galicia, who immigrated to Palestine in 1937 at the age of sixty-four, added that the elders “are neither inferior nor do-nothings.”[[74]](#footnote-74) “K” inveighed against the widely embraced view of veterans as “invalids.” They were no less productive than were the young, “K” wrote, and often surpassed them.[[75]](#footnote-75) Continuing, he noted that the large majority of old-timers were aspirationally committed to working and listed their physical capabilities. By and large, these people could not be asked to switch from intellectual to physical labor at their age, but office work was a possibility. Fundraising requires the physical effort of stair-climbing, a physical task no longer possible. However, “working in the garden or doing light farm chores are desirable.”[[76]](#footnote-76) The veterans mapped their abilities and credentials and, on this basis, sketched the physical characteristics of elder masculinity that substituted occupational credentials for physical prowess: proficiency in languages, expertise, devotion, enterprise, and experience.[[77]](#footnote-77) The veterans’ organizations wanted all Zionist institutions to mandate the hiring of veteran Zionists for office jobs, and ahead of the 20th Zionist Congress, held in 1937, even managed to meet with leading personalities in these institutions—Menachem Ussishkin, Arthur Hantke, and Eliyahu Berligne—to discuss the matter. The Congress, however, passed no such resolution and many old-timers remained jobless.[[78]](#footnote-78) In 1936, the veteran Zionists established their own labor exchange. Despite its efforts to line up jobs for its clients, its accomplishments were limited and rarely suited to the elders’ needs. However, some felt that even temporary employment would give the old-timer “relief and inner equilibrium.”[[79]](#footnote-79)

The Veteran Zionists’ Organizations’ Attitude toward the Diaspora

“Negation of the Diaspora” as a way of life figured centrally in Zionist ideology; Zionists rejected the very possibility of Jewish existence in dispersion and without national and independent territory. From their standpoint, the lack of territory and language was an anomaly that impeded modern Jewish [הוספתי] national development in its Zionist context. The practical manifestations of negating the exile were reclaiming Eretz Israel, restoring sovereignty, reviving the Hebrew language, and effecting auto-emancipation from the exilic Jewish consciousness—adopting values of landedness, working the soil, and mobilization for the collective. To power this new nationhood, masculine traits were needed. Therefore, Zionism was intended to redeem the Jewish male from diasporism and its unnatural, un-masculine, and therefore feminine state of being.[[80]](#footnote-80) In the Yishuv, however—an immigrant society in which most members had come from the Diaspora, leaving family members behind—ideological negation of the exile coexisted with identification with and sympathy for the Diaspora at the personal and emotional level. Even those who negated the exile were immigrants who had been displaced from their countries of residence and their familiar lives and surroundings. Some tried to ease their pain and repress positive elements of life back there; others remembered the past and their lands of origin longingly, often finding this a way to accommodate the hardships of life in Palestine.[[81]](#footnote-81) The old Zionists “embraced” the Diaspora and missed it and its “proximate past, pure love, [and] warm friendship.” On rainy nights, they wanted to sit together “over a glass of tea and a game of chess.”[[82]](#footnote-82) Yosef Lin, editor of the veteran Zionists’ newspaper, wrote nostalgically about “the soft Austrian accent” of Emil Marguilies, a leader of the Zionist Movement in Czechoslovakia. In the Diaspora, his voice was heard at congresses and conferences; here in Palestine, “his eyes produce silent sadness.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

In 1941, Moshe Rosenstein wrote in *Niv Hatzioni Havitik* that the veterans were exilic urbanites who engaged in petty trade, brokerage, and crafts and were “disengaged from the blessing of the soil.” Although happy to have reached Eretz Israel, the veterans also felt “the mind-numbing baggage of exile.” Aware that they had returned to the country “poor and empty,” they strove to shed the “burden of exile,” make a psychological rapprochement with nature, and lead “sound natural lives.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Rosenstein, however, had to admit that the veterans did not always pass the test: “The Diaspora habit does a lot; [so does] age.” Rosenstein’s observation seems accurate. The Diaspora, the old-timers’ place of birth and their home until recently, remained inseparable to them in Palestine as well. Berman, a veteran Zionist, attested to feeling lonely, foreign, and strange in Palestine. Was this, he wondered, a Zionism that had been voided of its content, or was it their old age? It was, he answered, immigration: “We all feel that had we not been displaced from our old workplaces, we would have continued our public work for many years, full of vigor and devotion.”[[85]](#footnote-85) The Diaspora, initially the home of Zionist endeavor, had become in Palestine a buffer between them and the young generation. “The young generation, the Sabra [rooted in the] homeland, does not know these guests at all. Those who have come from the Diaspora are of no interest to them. They are dismissed as exilic people. The young generation knows nothing about what Zionism in exile is.”[[86]](#footnote-86) Given that many of them had immigrated at an advanced age, their clinging to past endeavors and marking important anniversaries in Palestine signify a strand of continuity between the vision that they had served back there and its fulfillment upon their arrival in Palestine: “We are living in the Land of Israel! We have become partners in the pangs of the redemption!” (Frankel, 1941). They wished to translate the partnership of life in Palestine into deeds, become a unifying force for all “nonpartisan forces that exist in this country,” and establish a council that would strengthen the Yishuv’s common foundations, support the Zionist National Institutions, and “attenuate partisan rivalry in Zionism.”[[87]](#footnote-87) The initiative did not come to pass but it expressed the veterans’ outlook on Zionist action in the Diaspora as a basis for the evolving Yishuv in Palestine, and also their consciousness of age in the manner of a unifying and reconciling “responsible adult.”

Like the self-evaluative masculinity that Hollander describes, the veteran Zionist activists acknowledged the ongoing influence of the Diaspora experience on their lives and examined it critically.[[88]](#footnote-88) The Diaspora was their home and the foundation of their Zionist work, on account of which they demanded their rights in the present. Even as they celebrated in Palestine their achievements in the Diaspora (as described in the next part of this article), they realized that the masculine life led in Palestine required a commitment to the Yishuvic present.

Aging Group-Consciousness

To a large extent, one may liken the veteran Zionists’ organizations to the *landsmanshaftn* that formed in view of the migration of millions of Jews from Europe in the late nineteenth century to various destinations such as the United States, South Africa, and also Palestine. The purpose of these organizations was to serve the immigrants as a support system and ease their integration into the new country by helping with language study, housing, loans, and job-searching. They came about on the basis of their members’ country of origin, and in Palestine, as in the United States, they did not wish to insulate themselves from their surroundings but rather to adjust their members to the host society gradually and integrate recent immigrants into their surroundings.[[89]](#footnote-89) The immigration policy that the Yishuv’s governing system practiced within the framework of the quota of “certificates” that the British authorities granted and deposited with the Jewish Agency sought an immigration that trained itself to build the homeland and create a new society based on labor and agriculture. Consequently, the integration policy was applied to a small number of immigrants: those who joined the Labor-affiliated farming settlements and some urban workers who belonged to the Histadrut (the Federation of Trade Unions). The absorption policy, however, did not relate to those who were not under Jewish Agency responsibility and did not fit the model of service in the rural settlement project—for example, affluent immigrants who arrived outside the quota of “certificates” and turned to the city.[[90]](#footnote-90)

The dearth of an immigrant-integration policy created a vacuum in which landsmanshaftn mediated between individuals and the authorities in Palestine. They wished to alleviate the hardships of the immigration experience while nevertheless preserving bygone customs and traditions. They found this hard to do in Mandate Palestine, where the “redundancy” was seen as clashing with the Zionist narrative which, in a certain sense, favored disengagement from the traditional and “exilic” patterns.[[91]](#footnote-91) The veteran Zionists’ organizations may be regarded as landsmanshaftn among members who had the commonality of old age and previous vocation in the Diaspora of work on behalf of Zionism. The elderly immigrants’ arrival in Palestine did not meet the desired standard of the immigration of young and productive people. The old-timer Zionists who arrived, like many other immigrants, had no support system and their advanced age made the problem even worse. Jehuda Loeb Jonathan Toybmen, a journalist and writer who immigrated to Palestine in 1921 and worked as a department director for the Jewish National fund, called the attention of the Jewish Agency Executive to the problem of the veteran Zionists. To this, a member of the Executive retorted: “I explained to them [to the veteran Zionists] that if they are suffering from want in their shtetlakh, they should find solace in their public work in the place where they are, whereas in Eretz Israel no one will take account of you.”[[92]](#footnote-92) The analogy of the veteran Zionists’ organizations to landsmanshaftn does not, in my opinion, yield a full understanding these organizations and their characteristics. Due to the organizations’ emphatically masculine complexion, on the one hand, and their conspicuous age makeup, on the other, I propose that they should also be discussed within the frame of a gendered subculture of aging.

Barrett et al., investigating the Red Hat Society—a social organization that began to operate in 1998 in the United States to establish a social support network for middle-aged and older women—defined the group of women who share the challenges of aging as a subculture of aging that came about in response to gender ageism, i.e., a gendered subculture of aging. The subculture-of-aging theory sees age as a factor that overshadows other determinants of identity. The inequality that results from age and gender, however, combine to pose a unique challenge for aging women, abetting the growth of gender-of-aging subcultures and shaping their importance for the members. This outlook is based on feminist perspectives that underscore the way opportunities and limitations are influenced by interactions of age and other dimensions of difference such as gender. The “double disadvantage” of elderly women amplifies their marginalization relative to men and creates additional preconditions for the formation of a subculture for women.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Correspondingly, I propose that the statement about gendered subculture of aging is also valid for associations of elderly men in Palestine because the Yishuv hegemony was masculine but old men were perceived as non-gendered and certainly were not “men.”[[94]](#footnote-94)And accordingly, they were doubly disadvantaged in that they were neither men nor old.

A gendered subculture of aging acquires its substance, to no small extent, in elements that recur in meetings of old-age clubs. Ritual activities provide a sense of security, the possibility of self-expression, and an opportunity to confront some of the losses and vaguenesses that accompany aging in other societies that undergo a similar experience. These losses include previous statuses and identities, important relationships, health, and life itself.[[95]](#footnote-95) The Brit Rishonim (Ancestors’ covenant) association met regularly at the Ohel Shem hall in Tel Aviv, where it scheduled gatherings at least once a month. In 1933, for example, it held sixteen assemblies and lectures for its members and the public at large. Each began with the commemoration of veteran Zionists who had recently died, followed by the evening’s keynote lecture. In April, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, erstwhile president of the Zionist Organization in Poland, lectured about the Yishuv in Palestine and the Zionist Movement; in May, Benzion Mossinson spoke ahead of the 18th Zionist Congress; and in November the attorney Ya’akov Klivnov shared with the members his impressions of his visit to Odessa.[[96]](#footnote-96) Yechiel Frankel, former [כן? לשעבר?] chair of the veteran Zionists’ organizing committee, noted the “mutual encouragement and reinforcement” that the gatherings always offered. “The individual’s suffering found partial consolation in the woes of the many,” he elaborated.[[97]](#footnote-97)

In addition to their regular meetings, the members of the associations in Palestine were strict about marking and celebrating their achievements in the Diaspora, thus preserving their past endeavors. Brit Rishonim dedicated its first “remembrance fest” to the jubilee of Menachem Ussishkin’s Zionist work, from the time he joined the Hovevei Tsiyyon Association in Russia. The affair took place in the Ohel Shem hall in Tel Aviv in the presence of 300 invitees, and at its end the chair of the organization, sixty-seven-year-old Zvi Belkovsky, an attorney, economist, and Zionist activist in Bulgaria who had immigrated to Palestine at the age of fifty-nine, proposed that Ussishkin be awarded a certificate of “honorary membership” in Brit Rishonim.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In 1933, the veteran Zionists held in Tel Aviv a “memorial fest for the thirtieth anniversary of the Minsk Conference.” The convention in Minsk, held in September 1902, had resolved to coordinate activity between the Odessa committee and the Zionist movement in organizing financial aid, propaganda, and care for the Jewish farming villages in Palestine.[[99]](#footnote-99) In 1936, the Zionists old-timers held a festive assembly marking the thirtieth anniversary of the third convention of Russian Zionists in Helsingfors (Helsinki) in 1906, which dealt with the Jews’ struggle for their rights in the Diaspora. Seated on the stage at the Ohel Shem hall in Tel Aviv were delegates from the conference now living in Palestine; they spoke about the value of the conference for the Zionist Movement and mentioned delegates who were no longer among the living. After the gathering, the veterans convened for a reminiscence fest at the Talpiot Hotel.[[100]](#footnote-100) On Hanukkah, they assembled around long tables and held a party to the sounds of Hebrew songs, heard remarks by the heads of the organization, told jokes, enjoyed locally grown fruit, and concluded by singing Hatikva.[[101]](#footnote-101)

The organizations consistently supported veteran Zionists at times of joy, illness, and agony. They sent personal birthday cards, as Brit Rishonim did, for example, to Rabbi Simha Assaf upon his jubilee year [יובל החמישים של מה? הקריירה המקצועית שלו?]. Assaf had been [= כבר לא?] a member of the Hebrew Language Committee and a lecturer on rabbinical literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The organization feted him as follows: “May you be privileged to see mass immigration to our land and in our land; may it be [God’s] will that our situation will be such that you may study our Torah day and night.”[[102]](#footnote-102) The organizations also sent get-well letters to veterans who fell ill, and in November 1945 they wished for Michel Issac Rabinovitch, a journalist, publisher, and president of the Jerusalem bureau of B’nai B’rith, “physical and mental health; [may you] quickly recover your previous robustness and your public work.”[[103]](#footnote-103) The associations held special memorial assemblies for veteran Zionists who had passed away, and on the occasion of the thirtieth day after the passing of Chaim Hissin, one of the first Bilu’im, Brit Rishonim held a memorial event with the participation of Menachem Ussishkin and Moshe Glicksman, a journalist and editor of the *Ha’aretz* newspaper. On the second anniversary of the death of Alter Drujanow, a founding member of Brit Rishonim, the association held a memorial event at the old cemetery of Tel Aviv.[[104]](#footnote-104)

The clubs’ ritual level reflected their generational specificity and ideas about the aging process. Ritual behavior becomes important at times of doubt and uncertainty, and such were the times for many of the seniors who were winding up their working careers. Changes in the underpinnings of social esteem and the lack of clearly defined social roles become difficult at this time; now the peer group has a valuable role to play in moral and practical support. The club members collectively find behavior patterns that are appropriate to them in what is, in certain senses, a vacuum.[[105]](#footnote-105) In the case of the veteran Zionists, the vacuum was ideological—Palestine being a country of the young generation[[106]](#footnote-106)—and also practical because there was no systematic Yishuv-level policy toward old people. There were neither rules nor old-age benefits; satisfying elders’ needs was a private and voluntary matter.[[107]](#footnote-107) Therefore, the organization’s comportment created a subculture that set the elderly within a specific cultural and historical context.[[108]](#footnote-108) Marking observances in the Zionist chronology, establishing a labor exchange for veteran Zionists, assisting veteran Zionists in publishing their books, marking anniversaries of birth and death, and publishing their own newspaper—all of these strengthened the old-timers’ sense of belonging to a specific generation in terms of age and the particular generation that had engaged in Zionist activity in the Diaspora: “a veteran Zionism that encompass[ed] an entire period in the life of a member of our nation and pierc[ed] the depths of his soul.”[[109]](#footnote-109)

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8. Paula Kabalo, “Jewish NGO’s in Palestine from 1880’s to the 1950’s,” Ilan Rachum, ed., *Back to Politics: The Modern State, Nationality and Sovereignty* (Jerusalem, 2009), 302 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Roni Yavin and Reuven Gafni, “On Sabbath Eve Satan Came to Kfar Yehezkel: The Conflict over the Establishment of a Synagogue in a Socialist Village,” *Cathedra* 130, (2008): 75-102 (Hebrew). Lavi Shay, “United Old Aged Moshav Sekenim and its Photographs,” Kobi Cohen-Hattab, Assaf Selzer, Doron Bar, eds., *A city reflected through its research Historical-Geographical studies of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, 2011): 77-125 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: a useful category of historical analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91 no.5 (1986): 1053-1075. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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