**The Feminine Voice: The Jerusalem Women’s Protest against their Husbands’ Mobilization into the Ottoman Military[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**Prologue**

When Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Mehemet Ali, ruled in Palestine, he sent men into all the towns and villages to gather together a large army. Then a certain woman of Sefurieh (Safuriyya) sought Ibrahim Pasha at Akka (Acre), and came into his presence, bowing herself before him, and said, ‘O my lord, look with pity on thy servant, and hear my prayer. A little while ago there were three men in my house, my husband, my brother, and my eldest son. But now, behold, they all have been carried away to serve in your army, and I am left with my little ones without a protector; I pray you grant liberty to one of these men, that he may remain at home.’

“And Ibrahim had pity on her, and said, ‘O woman! Do you ask for your husband, for your son, or for your brother?’

“The woman, who was renowned for her wit and readiness of speech, replied in an impromptu rhyme:

“‘If it be God’s will that my husband perish in your service,

I am still a woman, and God may lead me to another husband.

If on the battle-filed my first-born son should fall,

I have still my younger ones who will in God’s time be like unto him.

But, O my lord, if my only brother should be slain,

I am without remedy-for my father is dead and my mother is old’

And where should I look for another brother?’

“And Ibrahim was much pleased with the words of the woman, and said, ‘O woman! Happy above many is thy brother; he shall be free for thy word’s sake, and thy husband and son shall be free also.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Women and Revolution**

Recent studies on women and gender in the Middle East have proceeded in varied and diverse ways. Some of them continue to develop existing scholarly approaches to the topic, while others are grounded in new theories and methods that were developed specifically for the study of women. More than a decade ago, research on women in Middle Eastern history freed itself from disciplinary compartmentalization and became more and more interdisciplinary. Many studies challenged the myth that Muslim women were passive and isolated in a separate sphere that was both traditional and unchanging.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similarly, in the last few decades, research on Jewish women and their exclusion from the public sphere has assumed an interdisciplinary character.[[4]](#footnote-4) Margalit Shilo’s book *Prisoner or Princess? Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840-1914* advanced new directions in gender studies research.[[5]](#footnote-5) As she characterized it, the challenge she faced was how to present a reality that had been almost completely absent from historical research: women and gender in the nineteenth century Jewish community of Jerusalem. The wealth of the sources that she relied upon is truly impressive. Nonetheless, she found relatively few sources directly expressing Jerusalem women’s voices in real time; even these usually deal with private matters related to social problems limited to specific groups of women, such as widows, agunahs, and prostitutes, rather than familial or public matters. Shilo talks about the silence, even the absence, of documentation, and how the great wealth of documents allowed her to “listen to the feminine voice, the heartbeats and the silences.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Consequently, a document written by married Jerusalemite women towards the end of the twentieth century’s first decade and addressing a significant public matter, the conscription of Jewish men into the Ottoman military, like the one that will subsequently be explored in this article, unquestionably constitutes an important contribution to understanding how women perceived the changes taking place in the life of Old Yishuv following the Young Turk Revolution.

Soon after the Young Turk Revolution took place in 1908, every aspect of girls’ education underwent significant change throughout the Ottoman Empire. These changes found expression in the establishment of governmental and professional high schools for girls, and were undergirded by the belief that girls should be educated by the community for the benefit of the nation. The education of future mothers would give them the ability to educate their children.[[7]](#footnote-7) At the beginning of the twentieth century, enlightened women in cities like Cairo, Istanbul, and Beirut published journals that enabled them to express their opinions and positions concerning all topics on the public agenda. These journals vigorously advocated for women’s rights to pursue educational opportunities and to organize to fight for their rights. In these cities, women’s societies whose stated goal was the improvement of women’s status also arose. Jewish women took part in such activities. Beirut-born Esther Moyal was the most prominent among them. After she moved to live with her husband Simon Moyal in Cairo, she founded the journal *al-ʿĀʾila* (The Family) on May 1, 1899 and dedicated the monthly to “advancing the liberation of the Eastern woman and the improvement of her life.” In the journal’s opening article, she wrote that women are cultured beings possessing free will and an active conscience whose status is equal to that of men.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Similar phenomena were not observed amongst women in Jerusalem in the years preceding the First World War. The Alliance Israélite Universelle organization, a pioneer in the area of women’s education in the Ottoman Empire that had already established a school for Jewish girls in Adrianople in 1870, only established a school for girls in Jerusalem in 1906.[[9]](#footnote-9) Indeed, the Evelina de Rothschild Girls’ School that had been established earlier had clear intentions and aspirations to remodel Jewish society in the holy city. Yet these aspirations were directed towards ethnic integration, the raising of the married age, improvement of sanitation and medicine in the city, cultivation of spiritual values, and the like. There is no clear-cut answer as to whether it is possible to categorize this school as a feminist institution.[[10]](#footnote-10) If Jewish women’s societies arose in Jerusalem, they focused on acts of charity. If women’s decisions to participate in philanthropic activity was considered a challenge to the Victorian feminine image in the United States and Europe, that was not how it was perceived in Jerusalem. Even in the first decade of the twentieth century, the mobilization of the city’s women to perform charitable acts was achieved primarily by appealing to these women’s desire to express their social and religious feelings, rather than a desire to bring about a revolution in the way that traditional women were viewed.[[11]](#footnote-11) In any case, despite the education given to many Jerusalem women, the patriarchal attitude of Old Yishuv men and their faith in men’s superiority remained unaltered. Conservative Jewish society maintained its fundamental view of gender and its belief in man’s superiority.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This article analyzes a unique document illustrating the active involvement of women in what was considered at the time to be a wholly masculine matter. It was a letter written by a group of married Jerusalemite women to the Hakham Bashi Haim Nachum in Istanbul; in it, these women, who were neither members of the upper class nor the upper middle class but rather women of much more humble standing, begged him to see to it that their husbands would be able to forgo the obligation to mobilize for the army, as they were required to do by the new draft law. From the letter, it is clear that they had earlier also requested the same from ministers in the Ottoman government. Against the background of the extended crisis that the Yishuv had faced in the decade prior to the First World War, I argue that that this petition is a preliminary step heralding the increasing involvement of women in Jerusalem’s public sphere in the years that followed.

**The Conscription Law—The Dimension of Surprise**

On Wednesday, July 2, 1909, the Ottoman Parliament in Istanbul passed a new law possessing two clauses that had a tremendous impact on the Ottoman Empire as a whole and its non-Muslim minorities in particular. The first clause officially abolished the *bedel-i askeri*, which was paid by Jews and Christians in lieu of military service—a duty previously incumbent only on Muslims.[[13]](#footnote-13) This paved the way for full military conscription of these two religious minorities’ men to commence at the beginning of the next Muslim year. The second clause granted military service exemptions to the devout of all religions; this exemption applied to rabbis, learned men, rabbinical seminary students, principals of officially recognized schools, head schoolteachers and even their assistants. On Monday, August 2, 1909, one of the first reports about the law was published in the newspaper *ha-Herut* (Freedom) and it spread the news in Jerusalem. A more detailed news item about the new law was published a week later; it was preceded by the following introduction: “Our readers were certainly surprised to read the short news item about general military service that appeared in Monday’s edition of *ha-Herut*, and most people likely did not want to believe it.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The press also reported on the decision to interpret the conscription law as applicable to foreign subjects who had dwelled in the Ottoman Empire for more than ten years and had also fathered sons.[[15]](#footnote-15) These were not things that the Jews of Jerusalem, especially members of the Old Yishuv, had been expecting, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the news about the tremendous change in approach to the mobilization of non-Muslim minority men into the army hit them like lightning on a clear day. This was the case despite the fact that when a year earlier the new Ottoman constitution enshrining full equality for all subjects regardless of religion was proclaimed following the Young Turk Revolution, it was clear that adopting universal male conscription was just a matter of time.[[16]](#footnote-16) The sense that reality had changed was reinforced two weeks later when the governor of Jerusalem received an official directive from the Interior Ministry to add the names of Jews and Christians who met the eligibility requirements to the list of those required to mobilize for military service that year, and it became known that the new draft procedure would go into effect that month.[[17]](#footnote-17)

**The Fearsome Rumor**

Several day later, Ottoman governmental guidelines began to appear in the Jerusalem press under the headline “General Military Service.” It was made clear that all Ottoman subject twenty years old and above, regardless of their religious affiliation, who lived anywhere within or outside the empire, were required to perform military service directly. According to the provisions of the new conscription law, military service was supposed to last for twenty years, from the time that conscripts were 21 until they turned 40, with a small portion of this being active military service and the remainder being reserve service. Since the army’s needs did not require the mobilization of all young men, those obligated to perform military service were divided into two groups: those actively serving and those yet to be fully mobilized who were required to participate in annual military training and needed to wait in reserve for mobilization to active service in accordance with the needs of the army. Assignment to one of these groups was determined by lottery.[[18]](#footnote-18)

At the beginning of September, the number of young Ashkenazi men who would be conscripted into the army was estimated to be two hundred fifty souls, and it was estimated that the number of Sephardic youth, Maghrebi Jews, primarily Moroccans, who would be mobilized would come close to three hundred and fifty. Since those with poor health, as well as those with families and scholars, were included in these numbers, calls were already being made for the immediate establishment of a general aid committee that would oversee the provision of economic aid and educational assistance to households whose heads would be conscripted.

1. I did not have regular access to books and libraries during the COVID-19 lockdown, and I would like to thank Professor Margalit Shilo and Professor Yaron Ben-Naeh for their research assistance. Margalit generously sent me a copy of her book *Prisoner or Princess? Jewish Women in Jerusalem, 1840-1914*, and she and Yaron sent me digital copies of several of their articles that aided my writing of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mary Rogers, *Domestic Life in Palestine* (Cincinnati: Poe & Hitchcock, 1865), 293-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Ruth Roded and Noga Efrati, eds., *Women and Gender in the Twentieth Century Middle East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2009), 1-4 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a research milestone in this field, see Yael Azmon, ed., *A Window into Women’s Lives in Jewish Societies: An Interdisciplinary Collection* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1995) [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Margalit Shilo, *Prisoner or Princess? The Feminine Experience in Old Yishuv Jerusalem, 1840-1914* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2001) [Hebrew]. For more on women in Jerusalem in this period, see Yaron Ben-Naeh, “The Lives of Jewish Women in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Jerusalem,” *mi-Kan* 8 (2007): 179-192 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Shilo, *Prisoner or Princess*, 19-20. Also see Margalit Shilo, “Philanthropy as a Feminine Path to the Public Sphere,” *ha-’Ishah be-yehadut: sidrat diyunim* 7 (2001): 17-26 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Ela Greenberg, “Women’s Education Between Cairo and Istanbul at the End of the Nineteenth Century and the Beginning of the Twentieth Century,” in *Women and Gender in the Twentieth Century Middle East*, ed. Ruth Roded and Noga Efrati (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2009), 13 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On Esther Moyal, see Yaakov Yehoshua, *Notes of an Effendi Without Royalties* (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibbutz ha-me’uhad, 2016) [Hebrew]; Lital Levi, “Partitioned Pasts: Arab Jewish Intellectuals and the Case of Esther Azhar/ Moyal (1873-1948),” in *The Making of the Arab Intellectual (1880-1960): Empire, Public Sphere, and the Colonial Coordinates of Selfhood*, ed. Dyala Hamzah (London: Routledge, 2012), 128-163; Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, eds., *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture 1893-1958* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), 31-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Aron Rodrigue, *De l'instruction à l'émancipation: Les enseignants de l'Alliance Israélite universelle et les Juifs d'Orient 1860-1939* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1989), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Shilo, *Prisoner or Princess?,* 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Shilo, *Prisoner or Princess?,* 152-153,169. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Shilo, *Prisoner or Princess?,* 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Auguste Sarrou, “The Young Turks,” in *Civilization since Waterloo: A Book of Source Readings*, ed. Rondo Cameron (Itasca, Illinois: F. E Peacock, 1971), 40-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *ha-Herut,* August, 4, 1909, 2. For an historical overview of the changing attitudes towards the service of non-Muslim minorities in the Ottoman military and the reception of the conscription law, see David Ashkenazi, “Jewish Conscription in Istanbul 1909-1910 as Reflected in the Newspaper *El Tiempo,” Pe‘amim* 105-106 (2006): 183-187, 191-192 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *ha-Herut*, August 13, 1909, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *ha-Herut*, September 3, 1909, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *ha-Herut*, August 18, 1909, 2 & 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For further details, see Erik-Jan Zürcher, “The Ottoman Conscription System in Theory and Practice, 1844-1918,” *International Review of Social History* 43, no. 3 (1998): 437-449. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)