**The Feminine Voice: The Jerusalemite 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. Therefore, Shilo stresses how women’s voices are silent, even absent, from the sources. Nonetheless, she asserts that the sheer quantity of documents enabled her to “listen to the feminine voice, the heartbeats and the silences” and convey them to her readers.[[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 (1874-1948) 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) which was dedicated to “advancing the liberation of the Eastern woman and the improvement of her life” on May 1, 1899. In the monthly’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 marriage 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 and kindness. 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. A group of married Jerusalemite women wrote a letter to the Hakham Bashi (chief rabbi) Haim Nachum in Istanbul. These women were neither members of the upper class nor the upper middle class. Rather they were women of much more humble origins, and, in their letter, they begged him to see to it that their husbands would not be required to meet their obligation to mobilize for the army, as the new draft law demanded of them. 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 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) The Jews of Jerusalem, especially members of the Old Yishuv, had not been expecting these changes, 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 days 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. 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” to oversee economic aid and educational assistance to households whose heads would be conscripted. It was proposed that this committee of “eminent and reliable individuals” would not be composed exclusively of Ottoman subjects. Rather there would also be members from “amongst our brethren who are foreign subjects, because many of our Ottoman brethren have wives fathered by foreign subjects.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

As the unprecedented conscription of young Jewish men to the Ottoman military was about to occur, various rumors spreading through Jerusalem’s Jewish community created a panic. The fear of Jerusalem’s men and their wives was described as follows:

“For most Jewish families, the general military service law about to go into effect has generated a great deal of excitement. This is not surprising, because most of the young Jewish men living in our city safeguard our Torah and voice our holy religion. It is hard for them not to celebrate the holy Sabbath and to preserve its commandments, not to be careful about avoiding forbidden foods, and to disregard those things that prove most important to Jews looking to properly observe the laws of their Torah and their religion. Furthermore, most of our brethren whose age requires that they serve in the military are burdened by the need to provide for wives and children. They struggle to earn a living, and they find it hard to even provide their wives and young children with sparing bread and scant water. If these men were taken away from their homes for three years or more, it is easy to understand what would happen to them. Even if these households had supportive male relatives living nearby, this problem would not be resolved, because these relatives would also be poor men struggling to support their wives and children. How would they be able to support additional people? (The ancient law that requires that men perform military service if their wives have fathers or brothers was meant to ensure that vineyard and farm owners, as well as merchants whose business a surrogate can perform, served. Among our poor Jerusalem brethren there are almost no men like this. They are happy to keep themselves and their families out of indentured servitude. Furthermore, debt collectors have made people even more fearful and a well-known pest[[20]](#footnote-20) has forecast a dark future. Consequently, fathers are fearful and sons tremble… Therefore, the fact that women are up in arms is understandable… yet the fear that men twenty-four years of age and above will be called into service this year has little to stand on. Indeed, since such men are to be included as part of the first reserve corps, the order has come to down to prepare lists of the names. Yet, according to information obtained from a reliable source, only twenty-one, twenty-two and twenty-three-year-old men will be conscripted into service this year, and twenty-four, twenty-five and twenty-six-year-old men will only have their names recorded and will not be called up.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

This statement points to three primary reasons for alarm: The fear that the draftees would be unable to maintain observant lifestyles while serving in the military, the fear that many families would lose their sole breadwinner, and rumors that many more people would be effected by the draft than the conscription law led people to believe. Additional sources of fear included the physical burdens of military service and the possibility that conscripts would be sent to serve far away from Jerusalem. Things were only made worse by efforts to instill and enflame fear made by those looking to profit from a panic.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Indeed, fear of the unknown sparked a variety of responses. On the one hand, as a letter received from Jerusalem by the Vilna newspaper *Hed ha-zeman* indicated: “And the Old Yishuv? It mostly did what one would expect it to do based on its nature, its education, and its habits: it rose up and fled, it rose up and prostrated itself on the graves of the righteous, and it rose up and prayed for the decree to be annulled.”[[23]](#footnote-23) On the other hand, there were protests and violent opposition to the draft. For example, young Ashkenazi men in the Meah Shearim neighborhood rebelled against the leaders of their Kollels, because they felt that these leaders had not paid sufficient attention to the conscription question and its consequences. When the young male protesters seized control of a slaughterhouse and kept ritual slaughters from working for a whole day, this protest found even more tangible expression.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Support for Conscription**

Certainly, there were also members of the Jerusalem community who were overjoyed with military conscription and saw military service as a way to express loyalty to the Ottoman empire. They viewed draft evasion as a justification for the discriminatory and degrading attitude of the authorities. Eliezer Ben-Yehudah (1858-1922), who published enthusiastic articles in support of conscription in his newspaper *ha-Tzvi*, was the most obvious proponent of conscription. He viewed military induction as the primary step that Jews needed to take to show that they deserved the equal rights the Ottoman government was offering. Therefore, he called on Jews to radically transform their education institutions to take advantage of the opportunity that had been put before them. He proposed that Jewish schools teach Turkish language and that children and teenagers take part in regular physical education classes that would prepare them for military service.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Another enthusiastic supporter of Jewish conscription into the Ottoman Military was Nissim Behar (1848-1931), who was long associated with the Alliance Israélite Universelle. At the time, he was living in New York. Yet, when he saw that the constitution of limited government (Ben-Yehuda referred to as the *Hushma*) placed responsibility on subjects, principally the requirement for military mobilization, just as it guaranteed them rights, and that this had caused a panic amongst the Jews of Jerusalem he wrote in unequivocal terms: “Now that the time to serve and meet our debts has arrived, our brethren stand in shock. They unconsciously hesitate about how to proceed and how to act … Almost certainly, we, Ottoman Jews in particular, will fulfill the role our homeland assigned us with bravery, great joy, and blood. It is a role that we proved unable to fulfill up until now due to the undisciplined nature of the previous regime … After all that has happened, it is impossible for us, Ottoman Jews, to sit around and do nothing. Immediately after the first call, we appeal to all our land’s young Jewish men to mobilize without hesitation or question and join those fighting under the flag of Ottoman enlightenment! We will race to wear Turkish military uniforms with joyful fanfare [!][[26]](#footnote-26)

Unlike Behar, most of the Jewish community of Jerusalem did not feel any national or civil identification with the Ottoman state. Its members were afraid for the reasons enumerated above and they looked for ways to avoid conscription. A wave of flight and immigration from Jerusalem began. Both young Christian and Jewish men took up these options.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**Practical Organization: Sephardic-Ashkenazic Cooperation**

Members of the committee that was established to deal with the conscription issue included Rabbi Aryeh Leib Hirshler (Rabbi Leib Dayan Hirshler; 1850-1917), Nissim Elyashar (1852-1934), and Albert Antébi (1873-1919), the Jerusalem representative of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, but after a few week Rabbi Ya’akov Danon (1855-1929) replaced Antébi.[[28]](#footnote-28) These men worked out of the governor’s residence (*Saraya*), where they organized the draft lottery. Unexpectedly, after the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews had fought for years over organizational and economic issues, they developed trust and found a way to cooperate more effectively.[[29]](#footnote-29) For example, Ashkenazi rabbis supported Sephardic community leaders when they turned to the press to make a public call for charitable contributions for the Sephardic poor and Sephardic widows and orphans.[[30]](#footnote-30) Therefore, it is not surprising that a committee was established to serve both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities by providing economic and educational aid to the families of breadwinners who would be mobilized for military service. The Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel (*Rishon le-*tzion) Rabbi Nahman Batito (1846-1915) and Rabbi Hayyim Berlin (1832-1912), the chief Ashkenazic rabbi of Jeruslaem, headed the committee.[[31]](#footnote-31)

According to military guidelines, twenty-year-old conscripts were to serve three years, twenty-two-year-old conscripts were to serve two years, and twenty-three-year-old conscripts were to serve a year. Twenty-four, twenty-five, and twenty-six-year-old men were only to be mobilized for reserve service and they would only participate in training exercises for twenty to twenty-five days each year.[[32]](#footnote-32)

There was growing criticism of the Ottoman authorities among Jews, as well as among Christians throughout the empire. The empire’s desire to mobilize not just twenty-year-olds but those who had been up to twenty-six years old prior to the constitution’s passage as well was a primary reason for this. People were angry that the Ottoman government was creating economic difficulties for many families that were liable to ruin them and then using a rhetoric of equality that everybody desired to prevent objection.[[33]](#footnote-33) At the end of December, the leaders of Jerusalem’s non-Muslim religious communities sent a petition to the Grand vizier, to the senate and to the parliament. In their petition, they complained about how the unjust nature of decision to conscript men over twenty-one years of age was being concealed. As they argued, during the years when these young men were draft age, the non-Muslim religious communities paid the *bedel-i askeri* (military exemption tax) in lieu of service.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This description of the events surrounding the military conscription of young Jewish men unfolded, from the Ottoman parliament’s passage of the law until the first stage in the conscription process in Jerusalem was completed, is based exclusively on men’s testimony. Men expressed excitement about conscription, on the one hand, and fear and worry about the unknown and the likely economic collapse of conscript’s families, on the other. Women were seemingly silent on the topic.

**The Jerusalem Women’s Letter**

In fact, in the archive of the Hakham Bashi in Istanbul, a letter exists that thoroughly voices the protest of married Jerusalemite women who feared the conscription of their husbands.[[35]](#footnote-35) Indeed, conscription did not threaten them directly, because the Ottoman army did not draft women. Yet it indirectly posed a serious threat to their economic survival and the vitality of their families. More than fifty Sephardic, Yemeni, and Ashkenazi women signed the letter sent to the Hakham Bashi Rabbi Haim Nachum.[[36]](#footnote-36) Keeping in mind the increasing comity and cooperation that characterized the interaction between Sephardic and Ashkenazic men in Jerusalem described above and the shared threat besetting Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews alike, it proves unsurprising that women decided to work together to voice their position. There were, however, additional factors at play. Interethnic Jewish marriages broke the firm boundaries that divided the communities and positively advanced the relations between them.[[37]](#footnote-37) Furthermore, the newly founded educational institutions for boys and girls in Jerusalem made interethnic Jewish integration one of their goals. The special character of Jerusalem, as Margalit Shilo has referred to it, created a type of shared experience for the boys and even more so the girls of the various Jewish ethnic groups.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The women’s signatures testify to the fact that some of them knew how to at least write their names; examination of the handwriting of specific signatures makes it clear that others needed their friends’ help to sign their names. It is not easy to decipher the signatures, especially the Ashkenazic women’s signatures. There are two reasons for this: First, these women appear not to have been experienced writers, and, second, they do not employ standard Hebrew letter forms, as was common in Sephardic texts whose authors employed the Solitreo form, to sign their names.

The letter’s opening declaration expresses a great deal: **We have decided to express our freedom** [my emphasis-Y. H.] by presenting copies of the letters that we sent to the most important ministers of the kingdom to you, your honor. As far as I can tell from my research, these women’s direction of such a statement to a governing authority is unprecedented.

The letter’s style and penmanship, however, make it clear that a professional male scribe who earned his livelihood by formulating and writing letters, rather than one of the undersigned women, actually wrote the letter. Furthermore, as we will discuss below, it is clear that the letter’s actual author was a member of the Ashkenazi community, because the formula he employs to indicate the date points to his familiarity with the liturgical poetry of the Polish-Lithuanian tradition. Furthermore, as the opening of the letter provided above notes, the women also sent letters to Ottoman government ministers, probably the Minister of War and the Interior Minister, and they certainly did not know how to write them in Ottoman Turkish or eloquent French.

It seems that the writer was the activist Rabbi Solomon Joseph Eliyach (1860-1941), who is mentioned in the letter as someone who aided the women in their efforts to prevent their husband’s conscription. Eliyach, the scion of a Hasidic family of the Karlin sect, was born in Tiberias in 1860. In 1895, he was sent to the United States by the Kollel Committee to organize charitable contributions on behalf of kollels, religious educational institutions, and benevolent organizations. There he established the *Tzion ha-metzuyenet* (Excellent Zion) association dedicated to efforts on behalf of Jews in the Land of Israel. Eliyach returned to Jerusalem in 1899 and was appointed secretary of the Kollel Committee in Jerusalem. That year a Cholera epidemic broke out in Jerusalem and Eliyach founded and managed an aid committee that dedicated itself to providing medicine and food to the sick and those negatively impacted by the medical quarantine that was imposed on the city. The committee continued to operate after the epidemic ended and Eliyach was the man behind it. At that time, he operated a soup kitchen in Jerusalem that performed various functions, including provision of food to Jewish soldiers serving in the Ottoman army. In the years following the passage of the Ottoman conscription law and even more intensively during the First World War, he worked hard to free religious functionaries from obligatory military service. Together with the judge Malki’el Mani (1860-1932), he founded the *Anshe Hayil* (Men of Valor) society to help the families of conscripted Jewish men. Eliyach already made his way to Istanbul in September 1909. He met with the Hakham Bashi Haim Nachum and explained the numerous problems that the mobilization of young Jewish men in Jerusalem posed.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Perhaps the clear indication of Eliyach’s support testifies to the undersigned women’s reticence to even dare to write and send a petition to the upper echelons of the bureaucracy in Istanbul. It seems as if they needed to give their letter a masculine voice to lend it the authority and legitimacy that they desired. Yet, on the other hand, one could argue that by alluding to Eliyach, an individual known for his efforts on behalf of young male Jerusalemites in matters pertaining to the draft, the women looked to emphasize their participation in this masculine struggle.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The women express their belief in the just nature of the act of conscription, which is grounded in the enlightened attitude of a government looking to grant equality to all of its subjects, and they publicly declare their readiness to prepare their sons for mobilization into the Ottoman army when the time comes. One could view this clear statement of political independence, and its overt expression of women’s national obligation and their participation in efforts to help promote the significant changes underway following the Young Turk Revolution as a way for the petitioners to justify their involvement in a matter that had been previously understood as one of exclusive male concern.[[41]](#footnote-41) Yet regardless of whether this statement was written out of self-persuasion and actual recognition of military service as an expression of the equal obligations placed on all citizens regardless of their religion or it was written to please the addressees and convince them that the petitioners were not rebelling against the monarchy, when it came time for them to request that the military authorities not mobilize their husbands, the women stressed the economic threat to their families’ lives posed by conscription. Their assertion that when they married their husbands neither they nor their husbands knew that a day would come when they would need to part from each other due to their husbands’ military conscription accords with the protest of the non-Muslim religious communities’ leaders opposed to the mobilization of men over twenty-one years of age discussed above.

Three days before the women of Jerusalem wrote their letter, this is the pessimistic and shocking way that one of the protesters in the Saloniki press envisioned the expected fate of the conscripts with families:

There is no doubt concerning the young men who have yet to reach twenty-one years of age. They will have the time and ability to prepare themselves for army life. The same cannot be said for those twenty-one years old and above. Every one of these men set a course for his life, built a home, found some type of livelihood and did not give a second through to the idea that the military would suddenly arrive and disrupt his life. In general, how many difficulties did the law create for families precisely because of its suddenness? For example, let us take a twenty-three-year-old man. He has a wife and child and he is earning eight Turkish liras. It is clear that this salary is not enough for him to save anything. On the contrary, he amasses debt. Suddenly they call him up for military service. What can he do? He cannot pay a military exemption tax, because he is poor. He burdens his family with his wife and child, but his family is incredibly poor. Then let us imagine that his years of military service pass uneventfully. He, his wife and his parents do not encounter any undue hardship. Behold he returns home. Whatever will he do now? Somebody else took his job; there he cannot find a different job, because he did not return alone. Tens, if not hundreds, return home with him, and they are all looking for jobs. If this wretch proves unwilling to starve, he will light a coal fire in his bedroom hearth and allow the smoke to asphyxiate him, his wife, and his children.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

There is another significant thing that should be noted. It seems as if the Jerusalemite women beg for their lives, plead with the authorities to act mercifully and save them and their children from the frightening possibility that their sole means of support would be taken from them. Yet, between the lines, one can sense the first inklings of a change in the way that women participate in the public sphere that will take place in the coming years, even if the women themselves were not conscious of this when they wrote the letter.[[43]](#footnote-43) In their letter addressing the conscription issue, they are not just looking out for themselves. Rather, it is likely that they are looking out, first and foremost, for their husbands whose ability to remain faithful to their religion is in danger in the best-case scenario, and who, in the worst-case scenario, will soon be faced with physical abuse and potentially even death. The weakness and impotence of men, both the young men required to perform military service and the Jewish communal leadership, and their inability to deal with the conscription law pushed women to assume the role of men’s defenders. Indeed, these men were presented as their wives’ sole means of support, but they were no less threatened than them. In fact, it is likely that they were even more threatened that their wives were by the military service act.

**Appendix—The Women’s Petition**

Blessed be the Lord here in the holy city of Jerusalem. May it quickly be rebuilt and reestablished. The morrow of the Tenth of Tevet fast **be-**‘**A`Th`R`** elav tidreshi (with a plea you shall come before him for aid) [December 23, 1909]. [[44]](#footnote-44)

His Honor, the Crown of Israel’s Splendor, the Rabbi of Rabbis and Prince of Princes, Father of Wisemen and Chief Rabbi in Ottoman Lands, may his majesty be exalted. He is our illustrious Rabbi Haim Nachum, who is greater than the mighty and more virtuous than the righteous and the guileless, may the Lord protect him and grant him long life.

He resides in the capital city, a metropolis of a great king, Istanbul, may the Highest One build it up and may its name be continued as long as the sun![[45]](#footnote-45)

Rabbi and Hakham of the Kollel,

We have decided to express our freedom by presenting you, your honor, with copies of the letters that we sent to the most important ministers of the kingdom, and we implore you, rabbi and leader, who the Lord our God has dealt kindly with and granted the charm righteous Joseph wielded in the presence of Pharaoh and his ministers, to act as a redemptive angel and arouse feelings of mercy for us, miserable women whose husbands are those who were assigned to perform military serve for the empire, may its majesty be exalted. How will we, our children, and our infants survive? Who will have mercy on us and who will grant us the daily bread we need to survive?

We know that the merciful kingdom deals kindly with its children and servants who shelter themselves under its wing and that it recognizes that we swear fealty to it with our whole bodies and that we are prepared to do its will. Therefore, we are ready to prepare our school-age children for conscription when the time comes. Yet before the military service law was even contemplated, we married our husbands, bore them children, and began to raise our families with them. Then an outstretched arm removed the fathers of the house, and this left us like widows and our young children like orphans until we shall wholly perish.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Coming as a surprise, such an order is hard to deal with anywhere, but it is even more unbearable in a land like our holy land that is completely different from everywhere else. While in other places women are able to support themselves through their own labor, women cannot do that here. In our land, there is little trade, available merchandise is poor quality, there are no factories, and there are no travelling salesmen, because these things are of little interest to those of our people who reside here. Our livelihood is wholly dependent on our husbands. Their knowledge of the Torah and the trades helps them support us through provision of service one to another. Yet this forces us to live a meager life, and we live hand to mouth without any way to save up for a rainy day.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Therefore, when these men are suddenly taken for military service that we had never believed possible for a number of years, it is as if, God forbid, our families have been banished from the land of the living.

Therefore, our lord Rabbi, please do not dismiss our tears that flow like a river. With your great strength, gird up your loins and courageously speed off to awaken the benevolence of a king and his ministers in the manner of the heralding messenger Elijah.[[48]](#footnote-48) The Lord will be with your mouth and your heart, and you will bring the verse “the path of life goeth upward for the wise” to life.[[49]](#footnote-49)

We will always bless you before the Lord, who will raise your lofty throne and shall exalt it and lift it up, and small make it high.[[50]](#footnote-50) As the days of a tree shall be your days, your years shall be as many generations, and through you the verse “I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations” will be realized.[[51]](#footnote-51)

We would like to inform you that the excellent man and wise rabbi Rabbi Solomon Eliyach, may he live long, is the one who assisted us. When we encountered difficulties, he aided us by diligently making use of the well-known skills in public affairs that have made him famous throughout our holy city. He put all of his energy into this good deed. Therefore, we will expect to receive a letter whose words humble themselves before the glorious power of our Rabbi who has delivered God’s salvation onto us at Rabbi Eliyach’s address and dispatched to him.

The wives of the Jews who are obligated to perform military service here in the holy city of Jerusalem, blessed be the Lord. May it be quickly rebuilt and reestablished.

Sarah, daughter of Havvah

Siniora Baher [?]

Rebecca Cassuto

Miriam Idelond

Hannah, wife of Moshe Grabiner

[--] wife of Samuel Mizrahi

Esther, daughter of Yichya

Esther, wife of Moshe Buton

Bokhura, wife of Meshulam Ninio

Beyn Bindo, wife of Joseph Malool

Tiya, wife of Menachem Ashkenazi

Sima Perl, wife of Moshe Levi

Leider Groyber

Rachel Groyber

Helbee, wife of Benjamin Abraham

Leah, wife of Jacob Stone

Ayala [?], wife of Raphael Meyuhas, son of Joseph and Rebekah Meyuhas[[52]](#footnote-52)

Sarah Rebecca, wife of Isaac Bacharach

Rachel, wife of Yechye Adar

Simchah, wife of Shalom Cohen

Naamah, daughter of Nadav and Mina

Malkah, daughter of Hayyim Iraqi

Rachel, daughter of David Nigrin

Rosa, daughter of Isaac Mizrahi

Simchah di Tajir

Jacob [---][[53]](#footnote-53)

Sarah, wife of Moshe [?] Gotterman

Haya Rebecca, wife of Rabbi Jacob Solomon Rosenthal

Gracia, wife of Shalom, son of Joseph Shatal

Simchah, wife of Solomon di Calderon

Rachel Pearl Morvutch [?]

Simchah [!], wife of Jacob Calderon

Joseph Amozig [?][[54]](#footnote-54)

Simchah [!], wife of Jacob Calderon[[55]](#footnote-55)

Miriam, wif [?] of Abraham Aaron Menachem

Racel [?], wif [?] of Raphael the Cuhen [?]

Missing

Hanoon, wife of Judah Moshe

Atil, wife of Meyer

Rachil [?], wiif [?] of Abraham Levi

Naamah, wife of Yehye, May His Candle Illuminate

Hannah, wife of Jacob Mordechai Borodon

Simchah, wife of Makhlouf Hazan

Joya, wife of Eliezer the Levite, Blessed above Women

Saada, wife of Masood Menachem

Rachel, wife of Yehye Dar

Hannah, daughter of Menachem Cohen

Flor, wife of Masad

Bida, wife of Avraham Cohen

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)
19. *ha-Herut*, September 3, 1909, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I have not been able to identify the individual being referred to here. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Havatzelet*, September 10, 1909, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Havatzelet*, September 5, 1909, 2. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda also pointed out that complete ignorance of the Turkish language made people, especially among members of the Old Yishuv, fearful of the situation. For more on this, see *ha-Tzvi,* September 12, 1909, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Hed ha-zeman*, December 23, 1909, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *ha-Herut*, September 15, 1909, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *ha-Tzvi,* September 12, 1909, 1. For more on Ben-Yehuda’s position, see Yosef Lang, *Speak Hebrew: The Life of Eliezer Ben Yehuda* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2008), 2:618-620 [Hebrew]. Also see the following article by Ben-Yehuda’s son: Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda, “I am a Soldier,” *ha-Tzvi,* November 18, 1909, 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *ha-Herut*, October 22, 1909, 2. For more on Nissim Behar, see Elizabeth Antébi, “Nissim Behar,” in *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*, ed. Norman Stillman (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1:361-362. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *ha-Tzvi,* December 22, 1909, 1. See also *ha-’Or*, May 5, 1910, 3. The flight and immigration of young men due to the new conscription law was a phenomenon observable throughout Syrio-Palestine. See Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Nouvelle Serie, Turquie (Syrie-Liban), 112, Laronce, 28.10.1909. On the immigration phenomena and efforts to obtain foreign citizenship, see Carter Findley, “The Acid Test of Ottomanism: The Acceptance of Non-Muslims in the Late Ottoman Bureaucracy,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982, 2:342; Eyal Ginio, “Mobilizing the Ottoman Nation During the Balkan Wars (1912-1913): Awakening from the Ottoman Dream,” *War in History* 12 (2005): 158. For a biting criticism of flight from Palestine, see *ha-Herut*, February 2, 1909, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *ha-Herut*, September 15, 1909, 3. It turns out that the original trio knew each other through various development projects for new Jerusalem neighborhoods. Nissim Eliashar, the son of Rabbi Yaakov Shaul Elyashar (1817-1906), was a devoted community activist, member of the Jerusalem municipal rabbinical court, and the honorary president of the Sephardic community. For more information, see Moshe Ga’on, *Eastern Jews in the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: n. p., 1938), 2:71-73 [Hebrew]. Rabbi Leib Dayan Hirshler served on the rabbinical court of Shmuel Salant (1816-1909) for 25 years. Like Nissim Elyashar and Albert Antébi, he was one of the Beit Yisrael neighborhood’s founders, and he served as the head of its neighborhood committee. On this, see *ha-Herut*, October 12, 1909, 3. He was also a member of the government court and a representative of Ashkenazic Jews on the Jerusalem city council. On Albert Antébi, see Elizabeth Antébi, *L'Homme du Sérail* (Paris: NiL éditions, 1996). On Rabbi Ya’akov Danon, see Ga’on, *Eastern Jews in the Land of Israel*, 212 [Hebrew]; in more detail, Yaron Harel, *Between Intrigues and Revolution: The Appointment and Dismissal of Chief Rabbis in Baghdad, Damascus and Aleppo 1744-1914* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2007), 236-270 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Yehoshua Kaniel, “Organizational and Economic Fights Between Communities in Nineteenth Century Jerusalem,” in *In Transition: The Jews of Eretz Israel in the Nineteenth Century Between Old and New and Between Settlement of the Holy Land and Zionism* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2000), 120-145 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Havatzelet*, October 29, 1909, 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *ha-Herut*, September 15, 1909, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *ha-Herut*, September 15, 1909, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For example, see *ha-Tzvi,* December 20, 1909, 3. Indeed, the pressure of this criticism led to discussions in the Ottoman government about whether those between twenty-four years old and twenty-six years old should just be required to perform reserve duty. See *ha- Herut*, December 29, 1909, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *ha-Herut*, December 13, 1909, 3; *ha-Herut*, January 17, 1910, 2. For a feuilleton about the conscription of even older men and youths under the draft age, see *ha-Herut*, December 13, 1909, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Women’s Petition to the Hakham Bashi Haim Nahum, December 23, 1909, TR/Is 64, Hakham Bashi Archive Istanbul. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For further information about Rabbi Haim Nachum’s position on conscription, see Ashkenazi, “Jewish Conscription in Istanbul,” 215-216. It is worth noting that the numerous petitions and the extensive pressure that numerous communities from throughout the empire placed on the Hakham Bashi concerning the military service law at this time almost destroyed him. This is how Haim Nachum put it in a letter to the president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle Jacques Bigart (1855-1934): “My current duties are so vast and difficult that they have made me ill. I have come down with a nervous condition that I never suffered from before. I am completely alone. I am left alone to perform a huge quantity of work, most of which relates to military service.” See Esther Benbassa, ed., *Haim Nachum—Sephardi Chief Rabbi in Politics 1892-1923: Selected Letters and Documents* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Dinur, 1998), 167 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. On this phenomenon and for an estimation of its dimensions and influence, See Kaniel, *In Transition,* 100-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For a discussion of interethnic Jewish marriages, see Shilo, *Prisoner or Princess?,* 257-259. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See David Tidhar, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel* (Tel Aviv: self-pub. 1947), 1:348 [Hebrew]; *ha-Herut*, September 15, 1909, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. On the need for a masculine voice to lend support to a feminine one, see Mira Tzoref, “A Mountainous Route: A Personal Journey to the Collective in the Autobiographical Work of Fadwa Tukan,” in *Women and Gender in the Twentieth Century Middle East*, ed. Ruth Roded and Noga Efrati (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2009), 74 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. On this topic see, Beth Baron, “Mothers, Morality, and Nationalism in Pre-1919 Egypt,” in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, ed. Rashid Khalidi et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 271-288; Deniz Kandiyoti, “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation,” *Millennium* 20 (1991): 432. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *ha-Tzvi,* December 20, 1909, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. On the empowerment of Jerusalemite women during and after the First World War, see Margalit Shilo, “Gender in Jerusalem: The Right to Vote—Jerusalem the Capital of Hebrew Suffragism,” in *The Ways of Daniel: Studies in Jewish Studies in Honor of Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber*, ed. Adam Ferziger (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2017), 517-529 [Hebrew]; Margalit Shilo, “The First World War: An Arena for the Empowerment of Women in the Jewish Community in Palestine,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1-15; for more on a Jewish women’s society for equal rights in Jerusalem, see *Do’ar ha-yom*, September 19, 1999, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. As previously discussed, the author provides the Hebrew date in a manner that displays his erudition. By scrambling the letters employed to indicate the year and appending two words, the author alludes to a phrase employed in one of the selichot of the Polish-Lithuanian tradition for the Rosh Hashanah holiday. See *The Selichot Rite of the Lithuanian, Byelorussian and Samogitian Tradition* (Vilna: Widow and Brothers Romm, 1879), 51 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Psalms 72:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Allusion to Number 17:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Indeed, in their petition the women make it seem as if they are not involved in the support of their families. Yet in the beginning of the twentieth century, the women of the Jerusalem community were increasingly involved in the city’s economy. For more on this, see Shilo, *Prisoner or Princess?*, 135-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This sentence alludes to 1 Kings 18:46. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Allusion to Exodus 4:12 and quotation from Proverbs 15:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Sentence alludes to Isaiah 52:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. This sentence alludes to Isaiah 65:22 and Psalms 61:7, and quotes Isaiah 60:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. That is to say Ayala [?], wife of Raphael Meyuhas, son of Joseph and Rebekah Meyuhas. She passed away on November 30, 1930 and is buried on the Mount of Olives. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. It is unclear why a man named Jacob signed here. His family name is unclear. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. It is unclear why a man named Joseph signed here. His family name is unclear. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. It is unclear if this is the same woman who signed two rows earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)