**Waving goodbye to the waves?**

The concept of “feminism” is diverse and constantly shifting. Throughout history, it has been assigned different theoretical meanings, and new modes of action have been associated with to it (Herzog, 2009; Sasson-Levy & Mishgav, 2017). One central metaphor in feminist history describes this innate diversity as an evolution of currents, or waves, on the timeline (Sandoval, 2000).[[1]](#footnote-1) In the hegemonic narrative, these waves include liberal feminism (equality based on similarity and the transition from private to public space); Marxist-socialist feminism (class and labor market struggles); cultural feminism (equality based on diversity and increasing the value of “feminine” traits); radical feminism (body, fertility, and female sexuality as an object of control, desire, and coercion); multicultural, Black, postcolonial feminism (emphasizing the differences between women and the intersections of gender, race, class, nationality, etc.); post-modern feminism (disintegration of the subject, and separation between sex, gender, and sexual desire), and more. Today’s period is known as the fourth wave, wherein digital spaces are characterized as an infrastructure for feminist action, neo-liberal feminism, and more (ref).

The historiographical reference to feminist ideas as waves expresses feminist diversity, thereby signally to the wider public that feminism is not a monolithic ideology (Tong, 2009). The wave metaphor is a useful tool on a number of levels: narratively, it helps in clarifying the chronological and ideological development of feminism (Baumgardner, 2011); analytically, it conceptually distinguishes between different feminisms (Tong, 2009); and didactically, it enlighten us about them (Ref). According to Tong (2009), the division into waves or phases reflects the breadth of the feminist canvas with respect to the causes of women’s oppression and the solutions that have been proposed to promote gender equality. In this sense, the concept of waves expresses the dynamics of feminists who “moved from subject to subject, and changed our thoughts as we went” (Tong, 2009, p.1). However, there are those who have opposed this narrative structure, arguing that it sets feminist currents in stone and assumes certain relationships between them because, among other things, it (incorrectly) assumes that later waves came in response to the first and second waves of Western (liberal) feminism (Tong, 2014). For example, Hannah Herzog argues that the multiplicity of waves and currents is actually part of a struggle within feminist discourse over boundaries and meaning, as it simultaneously criticizes and examines blind spots and points of exclusion from the feminist struggle for equality and social justice. This type of development, Herzog argues, runs as a second thread between all types of “feminisms,” adapting the feminist orientation to meet shifting social conditions, and fixing feminism as a critical stance (Herzog, 2009).

Indeed, the treatment of the feminist movement as consisting of successive “waves” or “stages” has been broadly criticized in feminist scholarship and even in the feminist “territory.” Among other things, it has been argued that the wave narrative implies that only one type of feminism is possible at any given period and that theories and practices created in the past necessarily grow obsolete over time. The wave narrative thus gives rise to a closed and fixed approach to the past, preventing us from grasping the possibilities offered by earlier periods of feminism. As a result, the wave metaphor creates intergenerational gaps, sets up false dichotomies between generations of feminists (Gillis & Munford, 2004), and emphasizes periods of apparent inactivity. This despite the existence of in-depth processes that may remain hidden from view (Evans & Chamberlain, 2015) as well as common goals and issues that traverse the waves (Graff, 2003). Moreover, the hegemonic model of feminist waves places at its center processes that originate in Western European and North American feminism, implying that this is a hegemonic and appropriate model dictating in what light feminisms arising in other locales or at other times should expect to be evaluated or dictating even the processes and patterns that other forms of feminisms should be expected to undergo. In this way, the waves narrative perpetuates the notion that some feminisms are more “advanced” than others (Browne, 2014; Dean & Aune, 2015), preventing us from identifying points of difference between the various movements that develop over time in various locales, including precisely when and why these types of movements and ideas have arisen in these particular places, while at the same time ignoring non-white feminists (Springer, 2002). It would be more fruitful to delve into the conditions and social structures under which different ideas develop, who and what influenced them, and why exactly it is these ideas, and not others, that gained momentum and attracted adherents (Mackay, 2015). The difficulty individuals and collectives have in clearly identifying with a specific wave is also considered an obstacle and as grounds for a crisis for the subject of feminism (Kinser, 2004).

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Despite the extensive critiques directed at it, the “waves” metaphor retains a significant place in feminist discourse and imagination. Thus, Evans and Chamberlain (2015) suggest viewing the wave narrative as an opportunity for feminist debate on issues of continuity, inclusivity, and multiplicity—three critical issues in feminism that should form an important part of critical engagement with this narrative. They argue that analysis of the wave metaphor through an exploration of feminist identity, discourse, and practices enables us to see how the simultaneity of feminist trends and waves (for them, the second, third, and fourth waves are essentially concomitant) reveals the persistence of certain ideas and the waning of others. This creates continuity and connection between generations of feminists. Essentially, organizing feminist knowledge into waves and stages reveals a narrative for classifying and constructing this knowledge. By taking a reflective position toward the narrative and its uses, we can examine and make use of its contributions as well as its barriers.

**A New Player Shakes Up the Field: On the Emergence of Haredi Feminism**

In the Israeli context, in the early days of the state and just prior to its establishment, there was an initial feminist agenda promoting working mothers and women’s right to vote (Kamir, 2006; Safran, 2006). Feminists of Mizrahi origins advanced arguments regarding intersectionality and intra-feminist exclusion, exposing the class and ethnic privileges of mainstream liberals (Dahan-Kalev, 1999). Religious-Zionist feminism, addressing questions of religion and state and challenging the marginality of women in religious spaces (the author; Rosenberg-Friedman, 2018),[[2]](#footnote-2) added to the diversity of feminist representation. As Arab civil society began flourishing in the 1990s, Palestinian feminism in Israel also evolved considerably (Daoud, 2009), with a focus on personal status and the struggle against violence. Added to these is the thriving of online feminism today (REF). However, even in the Israeli context, there has been criticism of the wave narrative. Orit Kamir (2006) has argued that the main problem with the wave metaphor has been its adoption by Israeli feminists without regard to the disparities between feminism in the United States, on which the narrative is based, and the developments particular to Israeli feminism. Kamir’s main argument is that Israeli feminism should be examined according to the theory of respect that had developed (Kamir, 2004). In this sense, Kamir is criticizing the narrative’s content but not its form—for her, too, the concept of qualitative development advancing in leaps within the Israeli feminist movement is accurate, fitting, and well-suited to our social and historical understanding in relation to the feminist movement.

Haredi feminism is, ostensibly, another identity-based feminism that creates a new current arising out of identity politics. However, as I demonstrate here, in practice, Haredi feminism actually expresses and incorporates a multiplicity of characteristics from various feminisms, and challenges the accepted divisions between them. To understand this, we need first to address a number of points regarding the nature of Haredi society in Israel, and the broader context of the changes out of which that society developed. Haredism (ultra-Orthodoxy) is an ultra-conservative movement within the Jewish faith, characterized by gender segregation, clear rabbinical authority, strict observance of religious precepts, and seclusion from liberal values and Western culture and technology. Historically, Haredism is a relatively modern development that originally arose as a counter-reaction to the Enlightenment, Zionism, and secularism. However, from an intellectual and ideological perspective, Haredism sees itself as being faithful to tradition and representing authentic Judaism.

**“Two Centuries in One Year”: Playing Catch-Up or Redefining the Game?**

Haredi feminism is perceived—from both within and without—as a deviation from the status quo, or as a belated awakening. One activist described the movement as a newborn infant that already needed to learn how to run:

Haredi feminists seem to be fighting 200-year battles—in the space of a single year. There’s no other choice, since there’s nothing to do about it; the world has already arrived […] it’s like you’re trying to catch a train […] it’s really tough.

These images are testimony to the strength of both the Haredi feminist movement, and its unique challenges. Haredi women are not in sync with the world; they have been left behind and have not “progressed,” and must accelerate to “catch up,” cramming two centuries of activity into a single year. There is also a spatial incongruence between Haredi feminists and others, and they must transform themselves so they can fit into a world that has “already arrived.”

That is, although it is a nascent, still-crystallizing movement with few resources, Haredi feminism has a responsibility to act simultaneously across a wide range of areas in order to bridge the many gaps it faces. Haredi feminists have no time to plan or prioritize, since all their struggles are urgent and essential for survival (“there is no other choice”), a phenomenon that fits with what I term “survival feminism” (REF). However, Haredi feminism does not simply follow a familiar (even if accelerated) path. Indeed, its ostensible lack of synchronicity makes it difficult to categorize. For example, the emergence of critical voices, and the growth of Haredi women’s collectives, are linked to the technological revolution that has broken through the boundaries of Haredi public discourse, notably shifting them.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this sense, Haredi feminism resembles the fourth wave of feminism that emerged in the 21st century with the rise of social networks and globalization (Chamberlain, 2016). At the same time, however, the areas of praxis of Haredi feminism are reminiscent of much earlier waves—indeed, in some ways, Haredi feminism appears to be mired in the struggles of first wave feminism. Thus, attempts to categorize Haredi feminism under one wave or another are problematic, because its sequence and rhythm do not match the dominant feminist narrative, and because Haredi feminism is a “mosaic” of so many elements:

Haredi feminism has less to do with questions of religious feminism that tackle the complex links between religion and feminism, and religious identity. [Haredi feminism] is more concerned with questions about the place of women in society, in the public sphere […], the feminism of the Knesset [Israeli parliament] and not the synagogue [even though] there are Haredi women right now who are engaged with areas of religious feminism. If it is an issue of *Gemara* [Talmud] classes for Haredi women […] and on the other hand, the division is [that] you’ve got liberal feminism that’s about political rights, you’ve got radical feminism, the issue of […] sexual violence and anything to do with women victims of violence or divorced women, you’ve got Marxist feminism that’s about promoting economic capital among women; […] basically this patchwork […] is really diverse, and in all honesty, I have to say that I don’t have a clue what it’s going to be like in two years time (*smiles*) I don’t have a clue what direction it’s developing in or […] where it will go and what’s going to be emphasized.

The attempt to define Haredi feminism is complex, both because its practices are diverse and because, at the same time, the movement is still taking shape, and no one can know how it will evolve. One activist described the movement as rich in potential, but deceptive. “Haredi feminism” is something under construction: “I don’t know what Haredi feminism is, I don’t have a clue [how] to put it into words. There’s a sense that we are expressing it right now.” Yet, at the same time the term “Haredi feminism” already forms the basis of political action and “boundary work”:

It’s reached some sort of Haredi mainstream, this notion that there’s Haredi feminism, I was approached by Haredi newspapers who wanted to interview me about it […] the experience was very, very confusing. No one accepts that I am a feminist on the liberal side, you’re not a feminist at all, you aren’t even a religious feminist who says “OK, I’m going to study Torah explicitly.” […] On the other hand, [among] Haredi feminists […] there was a bit of a question about what I actually said there. And from another, brighter, perspective, suddenly there was this notion of Haredi feminism.

The meaning of the term Haredi itself is also up for debate:

I’m deep within a community, […] it’s like, the biggest problem with Haredi feminism is that “Haredi” is a very one-dimensional definition […] and we are trying to expand it, and many women have fallen here; it’s like the community has shot them down, [saying] that they aren’t Haredi, it’s that simple. So, like, yeah, let’s expand this place, because I’m going to stay here, at least that’s how I see things right now.

Therefore, Haredi feminism is not simply a phenomenon that can either correlate with, or deviate from, the usual categories of feminism or Haredism—it also challenges both these categories, and the definitions and criteria embedded within them. For example, the question of who is seen as a “radical feminist” is not unequivocal; nor is the question of what “radical feminism” actually is:

The funny thing is [that in the Haredi community] liberal feminism is considered radical [*smiles*]. Because it [directly] threatens social power relations […] The whole issue of dealing with sexual violence, it’s not [seen as] feminism at all. Definitely not as radical feminism. It’s the opposite; they think that we [activists for political representation] are radical feminists […] the reality is very, very different.

The definitions are different because Haredi social order is different. Issues such as the right to vote and stand for office, adequate representation, and equal opportunities, which are identified with the first and second waves of Western liberal feminism, are undoubtedly key—and controversial—struggles at the heart of Haredi feminism. However, the Haredi agenda does not really include the distinction between liberal/reformist feminism that strives for equality based on similarity, and radical feminism that demands systemic change and focuses on questions of control over the body and sexuality. The preoccupation of Haredi feminism with issues of sexual violence in the community in general, and by those in positions of religious authority in particular, is perceived as challenging, because of the taboo on sexuality within Haredi society, and the problems surrounding about public exposure and cooperation with law enforcement agencies.

Despite this, according to the activist, such struggles are more commonplace in Haredi circles (not necessarily within the establishment) than is the struggle to integrate women into Haredi political parties. The latter struggle is perceived as reflecting radical feminism, since challenging Haredi political parties is seen as a revolutionary and treacherous act, violating Haredi social rules. According to the activist, the strength of opposition to this struggle reveals that it is seen as a threat to deep-rooted hierarches, as well as a challenge to Haredi loyalty to rabbinical authorities, to institutions that symbolize Haredi collective identity, and also to the Haredi community’s sources of livelihood and power. Thus, rather than seeing Haredi feminism merely as an attempt to play catch-up, activists may need to create their own playing field; a move that may also produce different categories and ways of thinking about the types of feminism that they are creating.

**Survivalist Feminism: Intersectionality and Interfaces**

The Israeli space is saturated with different and diverse feminisms, including (mostly Ashkenazi) liberal secular feminism, religious-Zionist Orthodox feminism, Mizrahi feminism, Palestinian feminism, radical, Marxist, queer feminism, and more. Haredi feminists, as noted, do not want to merge with any of these feminisms. On the contrary, while they seek to lean on, and cooperate with, these existing movements, they want to demand an autonomous, separate, and independent space. Haredi feminists admit that the definition of “Haredi feminism” is still fluid and dynamic, and that they do not know what the movement will look like in the future. However, they do recognize that Haredi feminism is a social movement with unique characteristics. They report attempts to impose any number of existing categories on them, and make it clear that they have no intention either of leaving Orthodoxy, or of serving as a fifth column for liberal secularism. Most do not see themselves as a product of the religious feminism that has won hearts and minds in religious Zionism; a form of feminism apparently now also seeping into the Haredi community. That they reject this category is very intriguing. No less intriguing is that beyond the two binary options (i.e., either integrate into an existing category of feminism, in the sense of “just add Haredi women and stir,” or reject previous categories and create something new), their relationship to other feminisms is ambivalent and complex. They need the help of hegemonic groups and a connection to existing traditions in order to accumulate knowledge, capital, resources, and status, and claim relevance to the field. This in addition to imagining a possible collective existence and creating an identity that does not just appear out of thin air, despite its anomalies. On the other hand, Haredi feminists are critical of the obvious privilege of their non-Haredi counterparts, of their own exclusion from existing spaces, and of the lack of recognition of their needs in the existing system—both within the state and within feminism. They challenge existing political divisions and produce collaborations with various actors in ways that blur and cross symbolic and social boundaries.

**Both Rejecting and Relying on Others’ Privilege**

The basic position of Haredi feminists is that theirs is a necessary and urgent struggle for the right to live with dignity, to thrive rather than merely survive, to have their existence recognized, rather than being erased. Most of the activists emphasize that their activism is an unexpected and unintended product of their lives, and their motivation is almost always framed as part of a struggle for survival. One activist became publicly active following a “shocking” conversation with a female relative which revealed “hopeless poverty, really hopeless, no opportunities, when life’s burdens push you down, crush you.” She realized this was not merely economic. Haredi society “glorifies poverty. How can one compare material wealth to spiritual worth? [...] This clearly ran much deeper than money [...] it was a lack of capacities, survivalism.” Beyond a paucity of material resources, Haredi women's stress and sense of being overwhelmed derives from a cultural, religious, gendered ideology that justifies this lifestyle and silences critique. “We are educated,” explained one activist, to idealize self-sacrifice, deny doubts and cracks, and present an illusion of perfection that can be “marketed as an aesthetically pleasing victorious image.” Keeping up with this gendered ideal produces women on the verge of economic, physical, emotional, and mental collapse: “My friends [talk…] of collapse in their lives, truly, and survival.”

One Haredi activist described the public she represents as follows:

The place I come from, it’s one of the most difficult in Israel, there aren’t many people who emerge from it to talk. […] We are not represented, we don’t have any power either. The poverty is outrageous, it’s hard, you can’t even lift your head up […] this feeling […] that doors don’t open, that they are stuck all the time, that everything is a struggle. It’s not a feeling, it’s actually reality.

Haredi feminist activists are women who have begun to interpret their experiences as not a personal failure, but as a wider systemic problem. Haredi feminism grows out of a survivalist reality, and is made possible through the development of critical knowledge and consciousness that argues that, until now, Haredi women have been exterritorial to Israeli politics, subjects lacking any visibility or agency:

Haredi women are […] the most silenced public in the country today, who have no representation of a single person in any power center […] what they all have in common is that they are Haredi […] with all that this implies, all the silence and enforced social pathways and submission. And these women need solutions.

Survival is both a stimulus for activist action and, apparently, an obstacle to it. The practice of feminism can be understood as a process that opposes acceptance of a life of survival; alternatively, as one activist explained, the very practice of activism may be perceived as privilege:

I feel that engaging with these things at all, feminism, unfortunately, that’s for women who have the spare time for it […] women have no leisure time at all, and Haredi women even more so […] And that’s the reality in all feminist fields; it’s always those who already somehow have an education, they have a certain status.

Indeed, some of the activists did speak of the relative power that enables a particular woman’s voice to be heard. In some cases, familial or social capital confers a certain status and legitimacy to a woman’s anomalous behavior. Sometimes, it is personal achievements in a professional or occupational field, in academia, or in connection with secular centers of knowledge and power—resources that have enabled certain activists to escape poverty, to become a little less dependent on intra-Haredi power structures, or at least to have been given a different perspective than others. Still, these “privileged” women are familiar with the daily struggles of Haredi women. They act out of a sense of mission and necessity toward the Haredi mainstream, and in interviews, they often referred to the women around them, both as points of identification and a target audience to whom their activities are directed. They work for the rights of Haredi women to be who they want to be, as women and as Haredi Jews.

The struggle for voice and representation is therefore perceived first and foremost as a struggle for a basic right, as one activist explained:

In my view, representation is not a privilege at all; to me we are at the same point as women were in at the turn of the century, and it’s like they forgot about it, there is one group of women [Haredi women] who have been left imprisoned in a time capsule while everything has changed, and really, [everyone] has progressed far, far, ahead.

Among Haredi feminists, the feeling of being left far behind evokes criticism of their secular feminist sisters, who have not only abandoned Haredi women to their fates, but who have also criticized Haredi women for their apparent lack of progress:

People just don’t get that we’re not in 2018 now, we’re in 1918, Haredi women have just gotten started. So how many women are going to be in the election? How many women will run in 2018? Zero. You’ve got 13% secular women in local authorities after 200 years of feminism, 70 years of statehood, and I don’t know how many years of WIZO [Women’s International Zionist Organization] and Naamat [an international women’s organization with links to the Labor Zionist Movement] and the like. Yesterday, Haredi women [woke up for the first time, today] there are like five women running [as candidates in the election], so how many women are going to be in the local authorities? There won’t be any, but there might be fewer women who think that it’s abominable that Haredi women are [taking part] and that’s really, really amazing progress.

While the Haredi feminist struggle of today corresponds to the liberal feminist struggle of more than a century ago, at the same time, it criticizes those who perceive themselves as continuing on the liberal feminist path. The activist attaches great importance to the struggle for adequate representation and is proud of what has been achieved—breaking the glass ceiling of the mind is in itself revolutionary progress. But the Haredi feminist does not blindly view secular feminism through rose-tinted spectacles, and refuses to measure her success according to the secular yardstick. Secular feminists also have not been able to change reality, and their achievements remain marginal and symbolic even after a century of struggle. Despite mutual criticism, Haredi activists must still turn to their secular feminist sisters for help, mainly to obtain funding for their activism. The Haredi activist complained that secular feminists try to subordinate the Haredi struggle for their own agendas, and mobilize it for their own needs. Secular feminism situates the Haredi activist as a dependent guest and forces her to struggle against her secular counterparts for autonomy and control. The Haredi activist must wage a double battle—against the feminist mainstream and the Haredi patriarchy. However, the Haredi activist insists that she is not a lone fig leaf; rather, Haredi feminists experience themselves as leaders of a unique public, whose role is to open doors for those who will come after them. The movement they represent is unique, and is not supposed to be assimilated into the conventional feminist order. “Universal representation” in the name of “all women” ignores the unique needs of Haredi women, and erases their autonomy and agency. By accepting secular feminist authority, Haredi feminists not only become subordinate once more to the patriarchal Haredi power holders, but also harm their own interests. Consequently, the activist feels that secular feminism betrays her twice—first when her voice is erased and deemed unworthy of self-representation, and then when her needs are erased as a result of a political alliance between secular liberals and Haredi men.

As a result, her attitude towards liberal feminism is ambivalent:

[*Laughing*] Look, I have a love-hate relationship with them. Really, I’m telling you this in all honesty […] the white feminist scene […] lives in a very, very disconnected place […] it’s not aware of what is happening to Haredi women, and between ourselves, it’s not really that interested in them either. They’ve gotten along just fine without Haredi women so far, they don’t feel like they’re missing anything. They’ll find one with a *shavis* [Haredi head covering] to sit on the panel and they’ll feel good about themselves […] There is a lot of stressful language in this discourse, a lot. And the hierarches are terribly clear, of course.

The secular feminists’ attitude towards Haredism is mired in political correctness and focuses on symbolic cooperation rather than anything substantial. Despite their mutual criticism, Haredi feminists continue to collaborate with feminist or secular liberal organizations, and to operate under their auspice; positioning themselves both operating within while challenging, the liberal feminist arena.

**Both Critique and Connection**

While it is relatively easy to understand the obvious separation between secular and Haredi feminism, the situation is rather different regarding Orthodox religious feminism. As religious women in Israel, Haredi women are expected to connect with religiosity. From the secular perspective, there is no significant difference between religious Orthodox and Haredi women—members of both groups are labeled as submissive, oppressed women who insist on clinging to an old, traditional world, and who, to all appearances, act contrary to their interests as women. However, most Haredi feminists regard the feminism that has developed among the national-religious public as a process that is irrelevant and unsuited to their needs, at least for the time being. The Haredi activists stress that they are not concerned with religious feminism (that is, with gender criticism of the status of women in Judaism) and distinguish themselves from religious-Zionist feminists (i.e., the social movement in Israel).

Haredi feminists perceive religious Zionist feminism, which focuses on the status of women within the spheres of knowledge, ritual, and religious leadership (the author), as representing a privileged stance, associated with upper middle class, academically-educated women who are well-integrated into modern Israeli society in terms of their values and habits. One activist described it as follows:

To me, all religious feminism alienates women and harms us, and we are really not there […] Religious feminism is satiated feminism […] I think it’s a step in the wrong direction.

This activist makes a distinction between religious and Haredi feminism—that is, between “satiated feminism” and survival feminism, which has experienced an economic and political famine—and creates a hierarchy between them. The activist does not completely rule out a discussion about the role of women in religion, but postpones it to a later date. In the human hierarchy of needs, engaging in discussions of spiritual matters would constitute a “step in the wrong direction.” In fact, the activist adopts the wave narrative in terms of temporality and linear progress, and assumes that non-gradual development could harm progress, because of a the field is not mature in certain areas. Politically, complaining about *halakha* (Jewish law) and rabbinical authority would be perceived within the Haredi community as a betrayal, and would send Haredi feminists “backwards,” causing their delicate, nascent feminist project to collapse. Haredi feminist priorities are not the same as those of national-religious feminists:

I feel that today, the national-religious public has gotten to a place where it can ask itself these questions, because it in a place where equality has by and large been achieved in the public space; I mean, after you’ve got national-religious women in Knesset, after you’ve got women mayors, local authority leaders, councilors, judges […] everything is possible [so it’s possible] to address the question of “what we do with this wretched *mechitzah* [the partition used to separate men and women in the synagogue]” with all that thing implies. [But] Haredi women aren’t in the same place. They need to fight for real world stuff. Sorry that I’m calling it the real world, because to me, the synagogue, that ritual stuff, is the “peeps.”

Hence, the preoccupation of religious feminism with the woman’s place in the synagogue is perceived as less relevant compared to other, more pressing, needs that Haredi women have. Some Haredi activists accept the idea that the time is not yet ripe for the struggle of religious feminism, but seek to use it as a marker of a possible future, admitting that they personally do wish to engage in Torah study. Some describe certain isolated, clandestine actions that they themselves perform in religious spaces, as symbolic acts of resistance that express their desire to connect, and claim belonging as, a religious subject in public spaces. They hope that, one day, they too will engage in religious feminism as a collective, even if right now this is an unrealistic step for all Haredi women. Religious feminism is thus like a “big sister,” a definition of a specific activity signifying an imagined future. On the other hand, expectations of kinship and solidarity provoke a critical debate regarding the responsibilities and affinity between the two movements:

I also look at religious feminists, and I am afraid that they will break away; like Orthodoxy, I am afraid that one day it will break away. I mean that one day […] we won’t be the same group. Even now, in many ways in shared matters of [religious gender] it’s not getting through to me. And I’m afraid that, you know, they are forging their own path, and rightly so, and they are looking out for themselves, [and they] aren’t taking me with them, because they’re going too fast.

This activist is afraid that the older sister will abandon the young girl, and cut hers off from the Orthodox family. The thinking is that the religious-Zionist sister will not take any responsibility for her younger sibling, will not take her along, or even look back and pave the way for her. Another fear is that the older sister will go too fast and too far, thereby justifying the “slippery slope” claim (author) and close the door on her younger sister even before she starts to take her first steps.

In this sense, the ability to talk about various feminist waves in the context of Jewish feminism in Israel (both religious-Zionist and Haredi) produces some important distinctions, including the voicing of criticism by a marginalized group in relation to a more hegemonic group. However, instead of creating distance between the groups, or disconnects between different generations of feminists, this situation signals—via the family metaphor—the possibility of mentorship and cross-generational cooperation. For this cooperation to bear fruit, both groups must recognize and remain committed to their reciprocal relationship, including by not “progressing” too far and creating chasms that cannot be bridged.

In contrast to these positions, which are based on assumptions of development over time, and include a dimension of relativity (whether by claiming that each category of the feminist struggle has a natural stage and occurs at an appropriate time, or by claiming that a particular current has a responsibility toward those following it), other Haredi feminists have largely rejected any comparison between themselves and religious Zionist feminism. They argue that there is no common ground whatsoever between Haredi and religious feminists, and that as Haredi women, they have no interest in struggling against religious mechanisms and spaces. This is because, in their view, religion is pre-structured as a patriarchal, hierarchical, unequal mechanism, and so there is simply no point in striving for gender equality, or any other sort of equality, within it:

I don’t see the prayer ritual as an egalitarian ritual in the first place. From the start, f from the moment someone enters the synagogue, they are placed in a certain sort of class […] that doesn’t play a role [….] in the modern age. This ritual doesn’t play a particularly significant role in what is going on outside. […] Like, as soon as you leave the synagogue space you are back in what they call the real world [….] I feel that this isn’t an arena that’s particularly significant.

This scathing criticism echoes secular critiques that reject attempts to mediate between feminism and religion. But, unlike secular feminists, Haredi feminists do not seek to abandon religion in order to realize their feminism. Instead, they strive to distinguish between areas that can and should change, and those that can and should not. In this way, some Haredi feminists can be seen to have drawn a clear line in the sand between themselves and religious-Zionist feminism, aligning instead with the liberal secular critique, which views religion as a source of women’s oppression, such that the gaps between religion and gender equality cannot be bridged. As one activist remarked, “religion is not the issue here.” She added, “The rabbis […] I get on with them, that doesn’t bother me. What does bother me is the craziness of the state’s systems. In my view, [the problems of] Haredi society, like I said, the state is to blame here.”

**Both Shared and Differentiated Marginalization**

Their position on the frontlines of the struggle against the state has produced a reality where Haredi feminists have found themselves standing in solidarity with other marginalized groups in Israel, experiencing a similar vision (relatively rare in the Israeli political landscape) of a shared future. Hannah Herzog (REF) describes how the dominance of the ethnonational paradigm and the primacy of the security agenda in Israel serves to separate Jews and Arabs, and marginalize civic issues and struggles for gender equality. Yet when Haredi feminists speak of their encounters with Israeli society, they emphasize their similarities with Arab women, and talk of a variety of specific collaborations with Palestinian women in Israel. In this sense, Haredi feminism serves up a complex process of solidarity and intersectionality that does not dovetail with the polarized political discourse in Israel. One activist explained the causes and the practical consequences of this phenomenon:

Today I explicitly say that I’m a Haredi woman, but I am also other things as well. Like, I can be a leftist too […] I am a Mizrahi […] I am in favor of peace with the Palestinians [….] I associate more with that from my “Arab place” […] If someone comes along and tells me “you’re getting money from the New Israel Fund,” I say, “Why not?? […] do you have a right-wing organization that can donate to me instead? I’d be really, really happy…” […] These definitions aren’t that relevant. We’re talking here about a Haredi public, about Haredi women, who are completely outside this whole right-left discourse. [They are not represented at all….] So, now I’m gonna start being picky, right-wing, left-wing? It’s not that relevant. […] These women need solutions.

Since the central tenet of Haredi feminism is survivalism, Haredi feminists’ need to act urgently and with a minimum of resources outweighs any narrow nationalist ideological considerations. The activist clarifies that the Israeli political landscape—with its boundaries and binary polarization—neither includes, serves, or represents her needs, and therefore she is not loyal to it, and does not challenge it.

This approach was highlighted at the founding conference of the Lobby for Haredi Women in Knesset (March 2018), an event chaired by Aida Touma-Suleiman, a veteran Palestinian feminist activist, and by then-MK Merav Michaeli. The lobby was established with support from Haredi feminist activists, as part of their struggle against the exclusion of women from the political system. The conference was also attended by veteran Haredi activist Adina Bar-Shalom, founder of the first academic college for Haredi women, and daughter of the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Israel’s former Sephardi Chief Rabbi and the spiritual leader of the Shas political party. In her opening speech, Bar-Shalom addressed MK Touma-Suleiman:

Thanks to Aida, who constantly promotes [Haredi women], I was at two conferences that you organized for Haredi women, the conference hall was so full, you couldn’t fit a pin in it, they all came, so it’s not because you’re an Arab woman that Haredi women are scared [of], absolutely not [emphasis in the original], you’re one of us.

Bar-Shalom recognizes the hegemonic Israeli discourse that assumes an “Arab woman” might provoke fear (whether due to a security threat and personal danger, or as a threat to the legitimacy and success of the activism). However, the partnership with the secular Michaeli, and the Palestinian Touma-Suleiman exists on the basis of gender solidarity. Bar-Shalom challenges the Zionist hegemonic discourse by declaring to Touma-Suleiman that she is “one of us.” When secular feminism cooperates with Palestinian feminism in Israel, the phenomenon is labelled as obviously left-wing, and there is often an overt or covert assumption that power relations will tend to favor Jewish women. Religious Zionist feminism, for its part, rarely cooperates with Muslim or Palestinian feminism, at least not overtly, because of the centrality of nationalism to the identity of religious Zionism. Yet in this case of Haredi women, there is public cooperation, which goes beyond the boundaries of nationalism. Moreover, it is the Palestinian women who have relative power, and who have gained status, a voice, and knowledge—and who are exploiting these gains to promote Haredi Jewish women, who are perceived as more vulnerable in this context.

The connection between Haredi and Arab women is rooted in their shared belonging to marginalized, minority groups on the edges of Israeli society. The activists addressed the similarities in the adversities Haredi and Arab women face as a result of their socioeconomic status. The category “Arabs and Haredim” is very common in Israeli economic and public policy discourse, with particular reference to women as a catalyst for change (Kahner, 2020). The state invests valuable resources in combining these two populations in terms of higher education and employment, so it can promote Israel as an OECD country (Malach, 2019). Therefore, the common denominator between Haredi and Palestinian women in Israel is not something inherent, but rather a product of the state’s discriminatory treatment of its citizens. Sometimes, shared economic marginalization and class identity is emphasized, and at other times, the focus is on their religious-gender identity as women from conservative, traditional, and relatively closed communities, which are different from the Israeli mainstream. As one of the activists said of her Arab friend:

We are seen as *dossiot* (a derogatory Hebrew/Yiddish term for religious female Jews) [in the secular Jewish space], we both… go around in long skirts and a headscarf and actually this is the biggest thing we’ve got in common […] if it’s a “blessed family” [a family with children], if it’s hospitality, cooking, exchanging recipes, this intense hospitality she has on holidays as well.

Similarly, there is a group of Mizrahi Haredi women and Arab women who meet regularly to talk about their lives as traditional women. The assumption that Arab and Haredi women share a “crazy common denominator” stems from their joint identification as people living in a “closed society,” or with “those on the margins” of Israeli society, as one activist described the situation. The experience of marginalization and detachment from the Israeli center weakens but also strengthens these women, since it is this very distance from the center that creates possibilities for mutual solidarity and closeness. One Haredi activist, a resident of the geographical and social periphery, stressed that the shared characteristic for people at the extreme edges of society has a distinct color:

This oppression, this underside, its all around me, [and] it has got to change. It cannot be that we are so small [quietly, almost whispering], we are a tiny country, how can we have a periphery, it doesn’t make sense. And it simply can’t be that we’re all the same color. […] Arabs, Bedouin, Haredim, Mizrahis, this and that. It makes no sense that they’re all black.

The common denominator between these two groups is not something inherent, but is a product of the Israeli state’s discrimination against its citizens. One activist claimed that there is a “complete resemblance” between her own struggles around Haredi education, and the educational challenges that Arabs in Israel face. She met an Arab activist, who was torn between his social duty to fix the neglected public school system and his parental duty to provide his children with a safe and appropriate educational space:

He was talking [….] and I started crying there. Because […] it’s exactly the same as our dilemmas […] I told him “listen, you are speaking and I’m not…like…there’s a lump in my throat.” This is exactly the same, and everyone sits there and doesn’t understand what you’re on about […] they hear it [but] someone who hasn’t gone through this for himself doesn’t get it.

This is not merely a strategic or self-interested partnership. The connection is deep and visceral, because the life experiences of Haredi women and Palestinian citizens of Israel as social activists, parents, and citizens resonate with each other in a space where their pain is not understood. The Haredi woman and the Arab feel that the state, and its citizens from hegemonic groups do not see their needs; as a result, they have to fight for the basic conditions of recognition and existence. However, it is important to avoid romanticizing this situation, as national and religious diversity is still felt and remains a significant factor. It may well be that their belonging to the Jewish hegemony will work in favor of the Haredi group. One of the activists recognized these discrepancies, and expressed concern for the publics that are weaker than herself, in particular Bedouin women:

None of [the Bedouin] are employed. They don’t have a public representative. They are like the Haredim were 50 years ago […] or like any country 50 years ago. They can’t keep up with the pace. And that create a lot of frustration there. […] and the women are very quiet there. Most of them very much so.

As a Haredi woman, the activist identifies with Bedouin women who lack a voice, but also recognizes her relative advantage attributable to the significant political power that Haredim have accumulated in recent decades. Haredi society is a strong minority relative to its size in the Israeli population, both in terms of leveraging electoral power to influence budget allocation and of the wealth of knowledge it has gained in operating political mechanisms. Although Haredi women have yet to be represented in centers of power and influence, the activist claims, the Haredi public is nevertheless bridging the gap between it and mainstream Israel, while Israeli Arabs and especially Bedouins—and Bedouin women all the more so—have been left far behind. Like Arabs, Haredi civil citizenship (Shafir & Peled, 2002) is not conferred through military conscription, and their integration into the labor market is limited. But unlike Palestinian citizens of Israel, Haredi belonging is anchored in the ethnonational citizenship model. Their contribution to the nation is reflected in the high fertility levels of Haredi women, and in the preservation of the state’s Jewish identity, since Orthodoxy is the hegemonic, official, and preferred version of Judaism in Israel. With national identity the dominant paradigm in Israel, the activist concludes that “Haredim, relative to other minorities, have it easier than Arabs.” In other words, the marginal existence of Haredim vis-à-vis Israeli hegemony creates a resemblance between Haredi feminism and that of Palestinian women in Israel at this current point in time. On the other hand, on the timeline, each of them is operating at a different pace, due to the intersection with ethnonational identity; thus, it is possible that the two movements do not share the same glass ceiling. In fact, Haredi feminists understand that their intersection and relative position vis-à-vis ethnonational belonging is a dynamic component that enables them to establish political solidarity and pave their way as a collective, while also learning from previous feminist waves, studying other feminist movements, and creating interfaces with other feminisms.

1. The waves narrative has been extensively criticized for privileging Western feminism, assuming linear development, presenting a singular, dominant feminism throughout time, producing disconnects between different feminist streams and generations of feminists, and creating the misrepresentation that theories and practices become obsolete while keeping deep processes that occur “in between” the waves remain hidden from view. See Evans & Chamberlain, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sasson-Levy and Misgav (2017) claim that this is “the most significant feminist movement in Israel today” (ibid., p. 175), even though it appeals mainly to educated, middle-class Ashkenazi women, and refrains from addressing issues around security and war (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The internet is making knowledge and non-Haredi discourse accessible to ever-expanding sections of the Haredi public, while the hegemonic Haredi media has lost some of its power with the growth of alternative media that allows other voices be heard (Ben Shahar & Lev-On, 2013). Specifically, social networks are a catalyst and platform for the growth of Haredi feminism, including open and closed WhatsApp and Facebook groups, where there is heated discourse among Haredi activists on various issues, along with the development of critical gender consciousness. These groups bring together women from a variety of streams and locations in Haredi society, and provide them with a unique “safe space” for gathering knowledge, shaping collective identity, and building social capital—a vital infrastructure for social activism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)