# WOMEN AND JUDAISM:

# DIVERSE REALITIES BETWEEN THE 19$^{\text{TH}}$ AND 20$^{\text{TH}}$ CENTURIES

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# ABSTRACT

Traditional Jewish communities can be described as androcentric: males have occupied a central position and they have been the ones to decide women's place in society. The women archetype in traditional Judaism describes females as recruited, silent and obedient agents whose main aspirations is to become a mother and a housekeeper. Despite the patriarchal conception of women's roles and gender relations, these conceptions were reinterpreted in each period and place in which Jews lived.

The present work aims to approach Jewish women's diverse realities between the 19th and 20th centuries. Different historical contexts -from the assimilation of the Jewish minority to the larger society in Western Europe and America to the attempt of establishing a Jewish society in Palestine and the later State of Israel- led to different realities. In each one, gender roles and gender relationships will be analysed. Different models of Jewish females will be presented, however, despite the differences, what all have in common is discrimination based on a gender basis. Jewish women, aware of their subordinated position, have tried to find and fight for their place in society and the recognition as equal members.

# INDEX

# 1. **<u>INTRODUCTION: WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL JUDAISM</u>**

Judaism is one of the three religions of the Book, but unlike Christianity and Islam, it has not vocation for universality. Jews, except in Antiquity with the creation of the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah, have usually lived as a minority within other societies. Therefore, Jewish women have faced a double discrimination: as Jews and as women (Cano, 1998, 275).

Jewish men start their daily prayer thanking God for not being a woman, which note the clear position of women in Judaism (Green, 1991, 236). Another significant element that allows analysing women's treatment in Jewish community is terminology: the term *isha*, in plural *nashim* is used interchangeably to designate a woman and a wife. However, different terms are used to designate a man *ish*, in plural *anashim* and a husband *baal*, term which also means master, lord or owner (Cano, 1998, 275).

In the Hebrew world, women occupied a subordinated position. Gender differences are presented in the Jewish Bible as natural and each sex is assigned with different but complementary functions. In traditional Judaism women are relegated to domestic and family live, which means serve the husband, raise children and deal with house work. Men are entrusted with production, public life and religious education (Cano, 1998, 276-278 and Salvatierra, 2010, 43). Marriage is a central element in women's life. It is the nuclear institution in their lives and it determines their religious, social and economic position (Salvatierra, 2010, 42). Women have a "dependent status" as they are identified in relation with a man and under his authority; first the father and then the husband or sons (Cano, 1998, 281 and Salvatierra, 2010, 39). Regarding the legal status of Jewish women, during most time of their history, they have been under two legislations: the legislation of the country in which they lived and the legislation of Jewish community (Cano, 1998, 280). Focusing on Jewish legislation, the *Torah*[1] includes several rules which released women's inferior status, from the prohibition of women to dress like a man to marriage laws, which have been promulgated according to men (Cano, 1998, 280). In respect of ritual purity laws, while it is true that affect both men and women, they are more restrictive with women's purity. Another example of women's discrimination in the Jewish religious and legal area is the *minyan* –in Hebrew

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[1]"The Law", name given in Hebrew to the first five books of the Bible.

"number"-, in which only adult men count to establish the necessary *quorum* - minimum number of ten males- required for liturgical purposes. Women's presence in public religious acts is not necessary and not even recommended (Green, 1991, 236 and Cano, 1998, 281).

Despite the traditional ideal religious female model above mentioned, it is impossible to talk about a unique model of Jewish women. Very different traditions exist within Judaism, from *Ashkenazim* (Jews of Western origins, who are the largest group), to others such as *Mizrahim* (in Hebrew "Eastern", term used to designate Jews from Arab or Muslim countries) and *Sephardim* (descendants of the Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal before the expulsion of 1492, mainly Jews in North Africa, Italy, the Middle East and the Balkans), and other minority groups. Thereby, daily life and gender relations were reinterpreted in each period and place where the Jews lived.

In the present work, we will focus on Ashkenazi Jewish women's diverse realities between the 19th and 20th century in Europe, United States and Palestine –the later State of Israel and the Arab territories occupied by it- in the Middle East. Different national contexts with different educational possibilities and social considerations led to new models for Jewish women as will be analyzed: from the exceptionality of the Salon Jewesses in Berlin at the beginning of the 19th century to the "queen of the house" characteristic of Western and Central European middle-class Jewish women; secularized Eastern European women active in public sphere; the *Yidishe Mamma*, who was also born in Eastern Europe *Shtetl*[2] and moved to United States at the end of the same century; the New Hebrew Women at the beginning of the 20th century in the *Yishuv*[3]*;* and the Jewish women of the State of Israel.

For this purpose we have gathered information from bibliographical sources published by different experts in the field of study and information from official websites. Accomplishing this task has been extremely difficult under the circumstances imposed by the Covid-19. In light of the limited resources I have access to at the very beginning. I would like to thank close friends who have shared with me the online bibliographical resources of the universities in which they study or work. Also to my tutor, Xabier Zabaltza, who has guided me in this work and got me in touch with his personal contact in Israel, Tamar Baranov. Their inestimable collaboration has made this work possible.

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[2]Yiddish diminutive for *shtot* meaning "town" or "city," to imply a relatively small community in Eastern Europe.

[3]Jewish community—including the pre-Zionist Jewish community known as the Old *Yishuv*—living in Palestine before the proclamation of the State of Israel in 1948.

## 2. <u>GENDER AND ASSIMILATION IN JEWISH SOCIETIES</u>

According to Hyman, Jewish assimilation is the process "of accommodation of the Jews to the norms of the non-Jewish society in which they have lived" (Hyman, 1995, 11-12).Thus, assimilation is a sociological process as well as a project. As a sociological process it was based on two components: acculturation -where the minority, in this case the Jews, adopt the main characteristics of the larger society- and social integration. As a project, Jewish assimilation was the desire of male Jewish communal leaders to emancipation and elimination of social prejudice against Jews. Through assimilation, they wanted to take advantage of the new economic, social and cultural opportunities but to remain as a recognizable group in the larger society (Hyman, 1995, 13-17).

In Europe two different models of gender and assimilation can be distinguished: western and eastern model, both conditioned by the historical context. In Western Europe Jews, most of whom only spoke the language of their respective territory, were considered a religious minority, while in Eastern Europe they formed a national minority, with their own language, Yiddish[4]. Both groups maintained Hebrew as a liturgical language.

In western nations, Jewish population achieved some degree of civil equality and due to assimilation and the quick upward social mobility they became part of the middle classes. As a consequence, by the last third of 19th century, they developed middle-class gender roles and characteristics. At the same time, most eastern European Jewish communities living in multi-ethnic states remained non-middle class and more religiously traditional, thus the pace of assimilation did not occur as rapidly as in western and central Europe. Many of these east European Jews driven by economic difficulties and the rise of Anti-Semitism, moved to the new land: America, where they faced a different process of assimilation. Different social, economic and political context led to the development of diverse Jewish identities (Hyman, 1995, 7-8).

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[4] Yiddish is a Germanic language, very close to German, though written in the Hebrew alphabet. It is heavily influenced by Hebrew, Aramaic and Slavic. It was the main language of the Jews in Central and Eastern Europe until the Holocaust.

## 2.1. WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE

By the end of 19th century, assimilation was a fact for the majority of western Jews and caused a break with traditional Jewish mentality. Jews adopted the language, dress and mores of the Gentile middle classes, participated in capitalist economy, took advantage of education and consumed high culture (Hyman, 1995, 17-18).

Jewish assimilation in the West cannot be separated from the middle-class phenomenon. The process affected both men and women, but had different implications for each sex. Jewish women seemed to be less assimilated than men as they had, initially, less contact with non-Jews and they were less exposed to external changes. Nevertheless, as they were also involved in the process, by the middle of the 19th century western Jewish women adopted and assumed middle bourgeois model of female domesticity (Hyman, 1995, 18-19).

The "cult of domesticity" promoted the house as women's domain. Assimilation caused men's abandon of traditional pattern of Jewish practice and reinforced women's responsibility for inculcating moral and religious consciousness to their children and at home, as bourgeois culture expected females to be more religious than males. They were the primary factor in the formation of their children's Jewish identity, thus, Jewish communal leaders began to give importance to girls' Jewish education to enable them to carry their maternal responsibilities (Hyman, 1995, 25-29). An exceptional case in the western process of assimilation was the "salon Jewesses": a new model of Jewish women that emerged at the beginning of the 19th century. The salon Jewesses were members of accommodated families and closed to the Reform Judaism[5] movement, who frequented the cult circles of Berlin. These women received a painstaking secular education, the same education which led them to refuse from Judaism as they considered that it was the cause of their unrest (Cano, 1998, 285).

During this period, women focused their efforts in domestic sphere and charity work. Influenced by women of the Gentile society, Jewish women founded social institutions which focused on philanthropic and educational work among the Jewish community. Volunteers of

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[5] One of the three most important branches of modern Judaism, together with Orthodox and Conservative. It tries to reconcile religious heritage with the economic, political, and cultural changes caused by Emancipation. It is especially strong in the United States.

charitable associations defined their activity in moral and religious terms. Their activism reshaped the boundaries between private and public spheres as allowed women to enjoyed sociability and to demonstrate their maternal skills in public and not only in the domestic sphere (Hyman, 1995, 29-31). In short, by the turning of the century, acculturated middle and upper-class Jewish women living in western societies had internalised their religious and social influence in domestic and public spheres (Hyman, 1995, 36-37).

However, "the adoption of Western bourgeois concepts of female religiosity also had negative consequences for the depiction of Jewish women, at least in the Jewish press" (Hyman, 1995, 44).The signs of radical assimilation were presented as a failure of women's duty in transmitting the Jewish knowledge and loyalty to the younger members. As suggested by Hyman, blaming women for the decline of Jewish knowledge and religious practice, enabled men to continue with the process and project of assimilation (Hyman, 1995, 45-48).

## 2.2. EASTERN EUROPE

At the beginning of the 20th century, the vast and diverse Eastern European Jewish population was immersed in a transformation process. The Jewish largest population of the world was settled in the Russian Pale of Settlement[6], whose economic foundations were undermined by the industrial development and a restrictive government policy which excluded Jews from key economic sectors. Despite these measures, the government established politics in order to assimilate the Jews into Russian society and erase their traditional religion, culture and language. One of these measures was to create schools for Jewish children and to accept Jews in general governmental schools (Hyman, 1995, 51).

Assimilation to secular European culture was promoted in Eastern Europe by the *maskilim*, the members of the Jewish *Haskalah*[7], also known as Jewish Enlightenment. However, on the contrary to what happened on the West, the vast majority of Jews in Eastern

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[6] Russian territory where the residence of Jews was legally authorized, mostly in the Western part of the Empire.

[7] A late 18th- and 19th-century intellectual movement among the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe that attempted to acquaint Jews with the European and Hebrew languages and with secular education and culture as supplements to traditional Talmudic studies. Though the *Haskalah* owed much of its inspiration and values to the European Enlightenment, its roots, character, and development were distinctly Jewish.

Europe remained traditionally educated and religiously observant, thus, "the roles and representation of women diverged from the western model" (Hyman, 1995,51-52).

According to the Jewish law, women were exempt from the study of *Torah*. This exemption became social exclusion for women. Traditional east European Jewish families provided classical *Torah* education to their sons while they sent their daughters to public primary schools where they were introduced to secular culture. Most of these families considered that elementary instruction in reading Yiddish and sufficient Hebrew to follow prayers in the *siddur* -prayer book- was enough education for their daughters. Therefore, some Jewish women found secular culture and politics as a way to escape from gender division and thereby educational restrictions in traditional Jewish society (Hyman, 1995, 54). At the beginning of the 20th century, secular nationalists but also Orthodox Jews expressed their concern about the increasing assimilation of Jewish women. They argued that the reason of this undesirable situation was the negative to girls' education in the community (Hyman, 1995, 60).

The gender division of education was not the only factor which aroused women's secularization. Most Jewish women in 19th and the early 20th century Eastern Europe grew up in a society where there was not a clear and defined division between public and domestic spheres, an aspect which is essential among middle-class women. Jewish women took part on secular public life due to economic necessities. Although they were excluded from voting, assuming leadership positions or achieving public roles in the synagogue they contributed to the support of the household. Their presence in the marketplace was legitimated by the cultural idea of female support of the *Torah* scholar's family. Eastern women were seen as strong capable working women as opposed to the western "queen of the home". Only in wealthy families where acculturation occurred earlier, women adopted conservative western values (Hyman, 1995, 66-72).

At the beginning of the 20th century, "women took advantage of political movements that offered them opportunities for activism and leadership" (Hyman, 1995, 77), such as the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, Zionist movement or the Bund[8]. In this last one they participated as organizers, writers of the cause, fundraisers, speakers in street meetings,

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[8] Jewish socialist political movement founded in Vilnius in 1897 by a small group of workers and intellectuals from the Jewish Pale of tsarist Russia. The Bund called for the abolition of discrimination against Jews and the reconstitution of Russia along federal lines. It defended the idea that Jews formed a nation with a language, Yiddish, but without a defined territory.

they distributed illegal literature and transmitted political messages among others. In the theory, the Bund and the Zionist movement defended equality between sexes and it would be achieved as a consequence of the socialist revolution. After the First World War, some Jewish women joined the feminist movement in order to achieve economic, social and political equality (Hyman, 1995, 77-79).

Despite the changes that occurred at the late 19th century, "the majority of the Jewish population remained at the first stages of the process of acculturation until the interwar years" and "even secularized Jew retained a strong ethnic Jewish identity" (Hyman, 1995, 91). Communal leaders were focused in securing economic and political equality for the Jews and to solve the "Jewish question" through nationalism, socialist revolution or emigration. As assimilation was a secondary issue, the question of women in this process remained marginal. In Eastern Europe, women were not considered the key element in cultural transmission as they were in Western Europe so it was not until their migration westwards when a debate about their role in the construction and maintenance in modern Jewish society emerged (Hyman, 1995, 91-92).

## 2.3. AMERICA

America was "the promised land" for Jewish immigrants and it allowed women to rethink the boundaries between domestic and public sphere. Between 1880 and 1914, almost two million Jews from Eastern Europe -mainly Russia, Romania and Galitzia- arrived in America escaping from poverty and Anti-Semitism.

During this period, America was facing and struggling against the impact of mass migration and the repercussion in the definition of American identity. Jews paid little attention to the debate of different models of Americanization and assumed assimilation as a consequence of their decision to emigrate. The values of East European Jewish culture were transplanted to America, thus, women played a complex role in their family accommodation to the new society (Hyman, 1995, 93-97).

Americanization of men and women occurred through consumption, work and leisure-time: new clothing styles, mixed recreation and the sense of freedom given by wages facilitated the assertion of American identity and the separation from their old country (Hyman, 1995, 98-99). However, the main exponent of American freedom for women was the educational possibilities. In Eastern Europe, female education was restricted due to two factors, as they were excluded from traditional Jewish education because of gender discrimination and from public education due to ethnical discrimination. In America, they enjoyed free public schools and many young women attended school after long working day in free adult education evening classes, where they learnt English and expanded their secular education (Hyman, 1995, 101-102).

Jewish reformers and social workers -generally middle and upper class descendants of central European Jews of an earlier migration- tried to diminish that freedom through philanthropic assistance to the needy Jewish immigrants and through the organization of leisure-time activities (Hyman, 1995, 106). They tried to spread American middle-class gendered norms and values among poor Jewish immigrants. However, the influence of their activities was limited and wage labour had the greatest impact in most immigrant Jewish women (Hyman, 1995, 109).

East European Jewish women who had previous experience on work and politics in the secular public sphere continued being involved in these fields in the new society – for example, active women in the Bund in Russia continued their socialist commitment in America (Hyman, 1995, 111). However, despite the approval of women's public roles, most immigrant Jewish leaders also recognized that women's primary influence was within the home and middle-class social behaviour was promoted by advice literature. Although women were assigned domestic roles and to ensure the morality of the home, Jewish cultural transmission to children was not considered a maternal responsibility (Hyman, 1995, 121). Communal leaders and reformers considered that "by learning good manners, Jewish immigrants would become good Americans and would earn the respect of Gentile society" (Hyman, 1995, 115).

The first immigrant generation that arrived in America at the end of the 19$^{th}$ century had two main concerns: economic survival in the new land and accommodation into American life. In these tasks, men and women had different but complementary roles. All Jews recognised acculturation as a necessity for immigrants to achieve social position in the

new land. For this first immigrant generation, Jewish education for children of either sex was low on the parental agenda. Children attended public schools, which was the primary instrument of Americanisation and it was opened to both sexes. The issue of gender in the process of assimilation attracted little attention. It was not until the 1920s when the second immigrant generation of the Jewish community adopted the gender middle-class roles and with it the figure of the *baleboste:* the capable efficient housewife devoted to maintain a well-run house (Hyman, 1995, 132-133).

## 3. PALESTINE/ ERETZ YISRA'EL[9]: THE OLD-NEW JEWISH HOMELAND

At the end of the 19th century Zionism emerged influenced by the general movement of nationalism and the increase of anti-Semitism. Zionism was a political movement which prompted the creation of a homeland for the Jewish people as they believed that only a Jewish State could ensure their safety. Although other places were suggested for this purpose, the chosen place was Palestine, the historical Jewish homeland and the granted land. Zionists in the late 1800's and early 1900's were highly influenced by socialist ideas. They saw Zionism as the opportunity "to build an ideal society, a religious community founded on the principles of socialism" (Blackwell, 2008, 1123-1125).

The first settlers arrived in Palestine at the end of the 19th century -at this moment part of the Ottoman Empire- and established small settlements. Zionism became more popular after the creation of the British Mandate in Palestine in 1922, thus, an increasing number of Jews moved to Palestine. By this time, Arab Palestinian nationalism started rising as they saw their land and livelihood threatened by Jewish newcomers. In the 1930's, the tension between the two communities increased and violent armed confrontations took place in the region. After World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, Jews moved in mass to Palestine. In 1947, 600,000 Jews and more than a million of Arabs lived in the region. The situation became untenable and the United Nations purpose in 1947 a partition plan in which the

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[9] In Hebrew "Land of Israel". It is a Biblical expression used to designate the same territory which was called "Palestine" in Greek and Latin (and Arabic). The term was given by Revisionist Zionist the meaning of "Greater Israel", that is to say, the area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean.

territory would be divided in two states -one Jewish and one Arab- with Jerusalem as a shared possession. Despite Jews accepted the plan, it was rejected by the Arabs. The same day, the 14th of May 1948, the Jewish leaders in Palestine declared the independent State of Israel. Immediately, the Arab neighbours invaded the territory and the war began. The recently established Jewish state emerged victorious and took over all the Palestinian territory except East Jerusalem, West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the region has been involved in successive wars which confront the Jews and the Arabs. An open dispute known as the Arab Israeli conflict which has determined Israel's society and gender relations.

## 3.1. THE PRE-STATE ERA

### 3.1.1. The workers society

- The New Hebrew man and the New Hebrew woman

Zionism was seen as the project of social change, "an attempt at transforming the Jewish people from a persecuted minority in the Diaspora to a sovereign majority in the old-new Jewish homeland" (Bernstein, 1992, 15). Its main goal was to create a new society of workers with social and sex equality. Thus, new male and female images were settled according to the socialist-Zionist values.

The New Hebrew man was the antithesis of the Diaspora Jew, described as strength and ethically perfect, based on the myth of the biblical man who works the land and with a clear mission: to build the new nation. At the beginning of the 20th century, a new female image arose too: the liberated women (Shilo, 1998, 78). Young unmarried Jewish women of the labour movement arrived in Palestine with nationalist and socialist aspirations expecting to be full and equal partners in the new Jewish society. These young single pioneers became agricultural workers. Due to the faced difficulties they established communes, collectives (*kibbutz* and *moshav*), political parties and workers associations among others (Bernstein, 1992, 89-92).

- Women in the kibbutz and the urban areas

The *kibbutz* -the most radical innovation of the labour movement- was considered the best possible realization of the Zionist utopia. It was based on the principle of complete equality of all its members so it was seen as "the most natural, efficient framework for the realization of gender equality" (Shilo, 1998, 82). However, the new women faced a reality far away from the expected.

Agricultural villages such as the *moshavot* and the *kibbutzim* exalted masculinity and organized the production and childcare according to traditional sexual roles. The division of labour in the *kibbutz* was based on the principles of productivity and profitability. "Physical strength became one of the first criteria for the distribution of social roles" (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1992, 215). Men were assigned agricultural work as they were seen as more capable for hard physical labour. Moreover, agricultural work was considered more productive, thus, more prestigious. Women were defined as less productive than men and were assigned more "suitable" work for them, that is to say, household staff and secondary agricultural branches such as the vegetable garden, the barn or the hen house. In this way two spheres of economic activity were developed in the kibbutz: "the productive branch" occupied by men and the "collective household chores" of which women were in charge (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1992, 215). The concept of maternity continued to undermine women's position in the kibbutz. Child care was considered women's duty due to their innate motherhood and the principle of profitability that dominated the stage. It was considered that women, less productive than men in manual work, would better accomplish this task. The result was a vicious circle in which economic organization and parental roles lead women in a subordinated position (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1992, 215-218).

All in all, labour distribution in the kibbutz was based on purely gender specific criteria (Shilo, 1998, 84). As appointed by Fogiel-Bijaoui (1992, 211), even in the *kibbutz*, a framework which stressed sexual equality, sexual inequality persisted.

Around 75-80% of the Jewish population who arrived in the *Yishuv* lived in cities (Bernstein, 1992, 240). Although the intention to create a "workers' society", there was little change in the urban social structure and the urban private economy continued to dominate the scene (Bernstein, 1992, 245). Women had a marginal status in the urban workforce. Urban

economy was based on construction, an area which very few women were employed. Moreover, women were employed in marginal sectors, especially in service work -as house cleaners, cooks, waitresses and laundresses. They also participated in industrial work -mainly textiles, clothing, food and cardboard- where they occupied unskilled positions and were subjected to seasonal fluctuation and lower salaries. Other activities occupied by women were clerical work and health and educational professions (Bernstein, 1992, 247-248). In other words, women in the urban areas worked in traditional low paying feminine occupations.

Just as the first nuclear urban working class families were established traditional division of labour and hierarchy between spouses re-emerged. Most married women left the labour force in order to fulfil household work. They were devoted to family and became economically dependent on its husband, as labour and public activity remained men's domain (Bernstein, 1992, 244-245). As Bernstein (1992, 248-249) suggested, men continued seeing women as different from themselves and they "found it difficult to change firmly rooted outlooks on sexual identity".

Although the Zionist movement granted women's equality, inequalities prevailed. Women encountered severe difficulties: high rates of unemployment, wage inequality between men and women and the lack of support for their aspirations. The incomprehension these pioneering women faced, led them to organise and highlight the importance of the women's question (Bernstein, 1992, 240).

3.1.2. Women's movements

The scene was dominated by two women's associations: the Women Worker's Movement (WWM) and the Women's International Zionist Organization (WIZO) (Yishai, 1997, 58).

The WWM, created in 1911, was "developed within the Labour Zionist movement as a reaction to the disappointment of a small group of women within the limited role they were assigned in the emerging society" (Izraeli, 1992, 183). As they realized they could not achieve their objectives through the existing structures of the Labour Zionist movement, they created a separated organization. Women who took part in the WWM were aware of the

collective needs but they were also aware of their particular needs as women. The objective of the movement was to expand the boundaries of the Jewish women's role in pre-State Israel and reclaimed full and equal participation of women in the national construction process (Izraeli, 1992, 183). For this purpose the organization created new institutions such as women's agricultural training schools, all-female agricultural communes, trade unions and construction work collectives among others (Safir, Nevo, Swirski, 1994, 116).

Although the WWM emerged as a political grass-root association, in the 1930's turned into a social service organization and changed its name to "Organization of Working Mothers" (OWM). This transformation legitimated the gendered division of labour and power. As women, once again, were in charge of welfare needs of women and children in the urban centres while the political and economic decisions remained in male's hands (Izraeli, 1994, 205).

The WIZO was the second largest women's association. It was established in 1920 under the title "Federation of Hebrew Women" and in 1933 it joined the Women's International Zionist Organization. It was basically a charitable organization, composed by upper-middle class women and its main objective was to improve women's and children's lives in the *Yishuv* and promoted traditional roles for women as mothers and wives. They focused on health, education and mutual aid so they established baby clinics, day-care institutions, training courses for sewing and homemaking, playgrounds for poor children, agricultural schools and youth centres (Yishai, 1997, 61).

Another important movement in the pre-State era was the suffragist movement. Women mobilized against their political status and aimed political reforms. In 1917 a Women's Society was created in order to achieve the right to vote. In this struggle we should highlight the importance of the "Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights in Eretz Yisra'el". This association and the WWM unified forces to achieve legal suffrage, which was obtained in 1925 in the Assembly of Representatives (*Asefat HaNivharim*), the precedent of the *Knesset* in Mandatory Palestine. By the end of the 1930 the struggles of the Union subsided and became a philanthropic association and amalgamated with the WIZO (Yishai, 1997, 62).

Women's associations which emerged in the pre-State Era -even if they emerged as political associations- became by the 1930s philanthropic groups and perpetuated the traditional roles assigned as women. The achievement of suffrage did not bring significant changes in the position of women in the *Yishuv*. Nevertheless, the existence of associations focused on women's interests "helped to perpetuate the myth of equality and to discourage the emergence of alternative definitions around which women could organize" (Izraeli, 1992, 206).

### 3.1.3. Women in the Defence Forces

In the mid 1930's the conflict between Zionist settlers and the Arab population relegated the problem of gender equality to a secondary status. Paramilitary organizations were created in order to protect Jewish settlements in which men and women participated. However women were usually relegated to auxiliary roles (Sharoni, 1995, 94-95). Even if the number of girls in the military organizations never exceeded the 20% their mere participation in the defence forces created the myth of the fighting Hebrew women and at the same time enhanced the myth of the new egalitarian society (Shilo, 1998, 88).

## 3.2. THE STATE ERA

### 3.2.1. Women's status in Israel

*"The State of Israel (...) will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex."* The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel (1948).

Israel's Declaration of independence made an allusion to gender equality. However, the granted equality between sexes remained a legal promise on the paper. As in the *Yishuv*, women occupied a secondary and subordinated position on the recently established State of Israel. Their position has been determined by a range of key factors of the Israeli society, such as the militarization of society, the centrality of family in Israel and the State-religion nexus.

The war context with their Arab neighbours let to the militarization of society. The military became a central institution in defining and reproducing the social and political structures of the Israeli society (Sharoni, 1995, 95). National security became the State's top priority, thus, women issues were practically forgotten from the political agenda until 1970's.

Abovementioned, Zionism exalted masculinity and created the image of the new Jew. This model was enhanced with the establishment of the State of Israel. After Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, Jews needed to reaffirm the image of the Israeli man as extremely masculine, pragmatic, protective, assertive and emotionally thought, in opposition to the representation Diaspora Jew as helpless and powerless. This idea is exemplified with the metaphor of calling those born in Israel *sabra*: an indigenous cactus fruit, tough and prickly on the outside and soft and sweet in the inside (Sharoni, 1995, 40-41). As emphasized by Sharoni: "The exaltation of masculinity was reinforced with the escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict and became linked not to profitability like it was during the pre-State period but rather to national survival and national identity" (Sharoni, 1995, 96).

The army reinforces the image of the new Israeli Jew as it "became the basis of a positive male self-image and a source of national pride which emphasized independence, protection and security" (Deutsch, 1994, 86). In the national project men were assigned the role of safeguards of the existence of the state, thus, being a man in Israel means being a soldier -Israeli Jewish men have to complete three years of mandatory military service (Sharoni, 1995, 41-44).

This image is contrasted with the one of the Israeli woman, who is educated to remain the guardian of the "home front" and in need of protection. In the Israeli national project motherhood was women's main contribution and they were presented as male-supporters and mothers. This way, women's contribution to the national project is expected to be conducted by their traditional roles (Sharoni, 1995, 96). Although they are also recruited to serve in the army for two years due to National Recruitment Law, they are usually kept non-combatant and relegated to "more suitable" positions for women such as secretaries, clerks, telephonists, nurses, teachers and social workers of the IDF. This law has contributed to reinforce the myth of gender equality in Israel (Herzog, 1998, 67 and Yishai, 1997, 9).

According to Sharoni, "the Israeli army has played a chief role in upholding the centrality of national security in Israel and a gendered division of power and labour" (1995, 47). The service in high-ranking military positions is the major possibility in Israel for economic and political mobility. As women are not obliged to take part in combat positions, they are practically excluded too from high-ranking positions in the defence forces. Thus, women do not have the same possibilities in the larger society which reinforce their secondary status (Yishai, 2009).

Despite women have joined the economic sphere, occupational segregation prevailed. Women are usually employed in "feminine" occupations such as clerical work, service work, nursing, teaching and social work. Income differentials between men and women are another characteristic of the economic constraints. Moreover, women are underrepresented in Israel's politics (Yishai, 2009).

The influence of religion in Israel had legal and social consequences. It was in 1947, with the agreement signed between Israel's first premier, David Ben-Gurion, and the leaders of religious parties when the legal basis of the state-religion nexus was set up. This agreement postulated religious jurisdiction over personal status law (marriage and divorce), what causes disadvantage for women as they were judged by laws which perpetuate gender inequalities and by male-courts. Besides, Jewish tradition, which assigned domestic roles to women, is rooted in Israel's society (Yishai, 2009).

The present work is focused on Jewish women, however, in the context of the State of Israel, we consider important no to obviate the position of the Arab citizens of Israel in general and of the Arab women in particular, as part of an ethnic and national minority of Israel's population which constitute approximately the 20% (Daoud, 2012, 79). The *Nakba* - Arabic term meaning "catastrophe" used by Palestinians to designate the 1948 war- and the creation of the State of Israel had serious implications for the Arabs who remained in Israel after the war (Daoud, 2012, 81). As appointed by Abdo-Zubi (2011, 39), Arabs living in Israel hold a contradictory position: they are citizens of the state but they are not members of the nation. Although theoretically they enjoy all civil rights they also suffer many forms of discrimination such as land dispossessions, economic deprivation, social inferiority and political underrepresentation.

Regarding Arab women, they "are located at the edge of the most marginalized collectivities/groups in Israel" (Abdo-Zubi, 2011, 43). Three interrelated factors must be considered to explain Arab women's marginalization: politics, traditional values and socioeconomic status. First, the policies and practices imposed by the Israeli government have marginalized Arabs, including women; second, social status and values of a traditional Arab society which reinforce women's role as housekeepers and mothers and the exclusion from public activities and, third, the socioeconomic status of Arab women which are marginalized on class basis (Daoud, 2012, 81 and Abdo-Zubi, 2011, 44). In sum, despite the fact that all women in Israel suffer from discrimination based on a gender basis not all women are equally marginalized and oppressed (Abdo-Zubi, 2011, 11).

### 3.2.2. Women's movement

Israeli women's organizations continued working in the public sphere. Their structure and activity was influenced by the religious, ideological, political and economic characteristics of the recently established State (Yishai, 2009). The OWM (named Na'amat in 1976) and the WIZO continued to dominate the scene. These groups continued working with a social-service orientation and supported the State's needs (Yishai, 1997, 62-63).

Immigration had a major importance in the national building process. People from different origins arrived to the recently established Jewish state. However, due to the economic difficulties faced by the State of Israel after its consolidation, it was incapable of absorbing the immigrants and ensuring security. In this context, women's organizations were assigned the task of absorbing "the influx of immigrants and to sustain the vulnerable Jewish homeland in its first steps" (Yishai, 1997, 65).

During the formative period of the State, women's associations focused on traditional women's activities and remained as social-service groups. However, in the 1970's, the emergence of the Feminist Movement was an inflection point in the women's movement. Different women's groups emerged, whose main objective was to present "a radical analysis of the causes and practices of the oppression of women in general and the male-dominant Israeli society in particular" (Sharoni, 1995, 102). These new associations were composed by middle-class educated women from western origins and they struggled for an equal place in the Israeli society and economy. They established feminist centres, shelters for battered

women and rape crisis centres in the big cities, they were involved in educational and consciousness raising acts and they hold demonstrations against the implications of religious laws in divorce and marriage and in favour of the liberalization of abortion law among others (Sharoni, 1995, 103 and Yishai, 1997, 64).

In 1984, the Israel Women's Network (WN) was established. It was a voluntary association which differs from previous organizations in several aspects. The WN focused in legal aspects of women's equality rather than in charitable service. They saw in politics the real change for women's status. As pointed out by Yishai (2009): "the Network was a multi-partisan and nonpartisan association, it served as a forum for women of all political parties or non, providing a coherent, coordinated framework for the female voice in Israeli politics and society". The veteran women's organizations soak of the feminist movement and introduced new issues to their agendas such as equality in the workplace, equal representation in all public bodies and violence against women (Yishai, 2009).

During the 1980's the Feminist Movement opened a debate between feminist politics and peace and security, which articulated for the first time linkages between gender inequalities in Israel and the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Sharoni, 1995, 104). A reduced but sonorous women's peace movement was settled in the Israeli society. Female peace groups emerged with the main purpose of mobilizing public opinion in Israel and abroad against the occupation and to create encounter spaces and conduct join activities between Israel-Jewish, Arab citizens of Israel and Palestinian women from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Some of the most outstanding women-only peace organizations were Women in Black, Women's Organization for Women Political Prisoners (WOFFP), Shani-Israeli Women Against the Occupation or The Israel Women's Peace Net (Reshet). These organizations organized demonstrations, letter campaigns, local and international peace conferences and carried out solidarity visits to the Occupied Territories among others (Sharoni, 1995, 110).

Not only have women in Israel reclaimed and fought for their rights in the secular but also in the religious field. Women of the Wall (WOW), is a group of religious activist and feminist women who have challenged the Orthodox, male, hegemonic *statu quo* at Judaism's holiest site: the Western Wall (Reiter, 2016, 79).

In 1967, when Israel gained control over the Western Wall, its management was given to Orthodox religious governmental authorities. As Reiter (2016, 82) has pointed out, "the religious establishment managing the Western Wall believes that local custom should reflect the historical continuity of the Jews praying at the Wall, which according to Orthodox opinion included separation between men and women and did not include women's prayer except for personal pleas to God". A partition was placed at the site to segregate men and women and new rules were imposed regarding women's prayer –women have to pray in complete silence, with no group prayer, no *tallitot*[10], and no Torah scrolls (https://www.womenofthewall.org.il/).

The Women of the Wall group was established in 1988 as a result of a formative event. On December 1988, the first international congress of Jewish feminist was held in Jerusalem. On the last day of the conference a group of women decided to pray at the Western Wall, a prayer conducted according to Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law. The prayer elapsed without problems until the moment of Torah reading when ultra-Orthodox men and women tried to disrupt the reading of the Torah by attacking verbally and physically those women. Against the imposition of praying freely at the Western Wall and the violence and rejection they suffered, a group of Jerusalemite women established the WOW – a group committed to the custom of praying publicly as women's prayers group at the Western Wall every Rosh Chodesh[11]- and the parallel development of an American organization called the International Committee for Women of the Wall (ICWOW) (https://www.womenofthewall.org.il/).

Since its configuration, as explained on its website, the WOW's central mission is "to attain social and legal recognition of our right as women to wear prayer shawls, pray and read from the Torah, collectively and out loud at the Western Wall" (https://www.womenofthewall.org.il/). They demanded an egalitarian use of the women's section based on the principle of equality for women in Israel's Declaration of Independence (Reiter, 2016, 85). For this purpose the WOW have been involved in a legal struggle for more than thirty years. Among these years the WOW have achieved some recognition to their right to pray freely on their custom, however, the pressure imposed by ultra-Orthodox sectors have blocked the attempts to achieve a solution to the conflict. As appointed by the member of the

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[10] Plural of *tallit*. Prayer shawl.
[11]"Head of the Month" in Hebrew. Jewish festival which marks the start of the Hebrew month.

WOW, "the Western Wall has become the greatest symbol for the exclusion of women in the public sphere in Israel, grabbing national and international attention" (https://www.womenofthewall.org.il/).

## 4. <u>CONCLUSIONS</u>

The traditional Jewish ideal female model assigned a subordinated position to women. This condition was expressed from terminology to communal laws and social consideration, where Jewish women were relegated to domestic and family life. The traditional model represented an archetype established according to Jewish male considerations of what a woman should be. The main idea defended and exposed in this work is that it is impossible to talk about a unique female Jewish model. Different socio-economic and cultural contexts in which Jewish communities lived shaped gender roles and gender relationships.

In 19th and 20th centuries with the processes and projects of assimilation to Gentile secular society we can distinguish three main models of Jewish women and gender relations. First, the western model influenced by the middle-class phenomenon. The bourgeois culture and values -with its clear division between the public and the domestic sphere- extolled women as housekeepers, wives and mothers and the transmitters of Jewish knowledge. However, Jewish women's involvement in philanthropic activity allowed them to enjoy sociability and to participate in the public sphere. The western model of gender roles and gender relationship became the role model for the rest of Jewish societies. Secondly, the model experienced by Eastern European Jews. The different context in which Eastern Jewish women grew up and lived allowed them to take part in the secular public life in the economic sphere, were exposed to secular education and took part in political and feminist movements. As assimilation remained on its first stages gender relations received little attention and it was not until the interwar years when Eastern Jews adopted middle-class values predominant in the West. Finally, assimilation of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe to American society -promoted through consumption, work and leisure time- caused the rise of new male and female models and gender relationships. Educational possibilities and waged-labour were the main exponent of American freedom for Jewish women. The first immigrant generation was focused in the adaptation to American life and economic survival, thus, despite the fact

that American middle-class values and norms were spread among the poor Jewish immigrants it was not until the second generation when these values were integrated.

Zionism supposed a new chapter in Jewish history. It tried to solve the problem of anti-Semitism in the Diaspora and prompted the creation of a Jewish state in their ancient homeland, Palestine. The establishment of a new society needed a new model of Jewish men and women. The new Hebrew woman reclaimed their full and equal right to participate in the national building. However, they soon realized the reality was far from their expectations. Different groups of women emerged and struggled in different ways to achieve their expectations of equality. Although their efforts -which were not scarce-, traditional gender role division and relationships were imposed on new society. It was during the pre-State era when the myth of an egalitarian society in the *Yishuv* emerged, myth which allowed the maintenance of the *statu quo*.

Israel, with the principle of equality of its Declaration of Independence, was presented as the best scenario for Jewish women. However, as in the pre-State era, women remained in a subordinated position in the recently established State. Women's inferior condition was, and still is, determined by the militarization of society, the centrality of family and the State-religion nexus. The emergence of the feminist movement in the 1970's supposed an inflexion point in the Israeli society. New groups presented a radical analysis of women's oppression and created and established the necessary mechanisms to fight for women's rights in the secular and religious field. Because feminism questioned the established system, it was perceived as an extreme movement that threatened social stability.

The analyzed contexts reveal how Jewish women have occupied diverse but always secondary positions in the different Jewish societies between the 19th and 20th centuries. Despite women's marginalization and discrimination, they must be considered as agents of change and not as mere and simple victims of oppression. Jewish women have constantly been -and still are- rethinking and reshaping their position, consideration and participation in the different societies in which they have lived and continue living.

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