

# *Becoming Post-Communist*

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of Russia and Eastern Europe

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Sharon Geva, *Haishah mah omeret? Nashim beyisrael bishnot hamedinah harishonot* (Women in the State of Israel: The Early Years). Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2020. 293 pp.

Written from the perspective of a contemporary feminist, Sharon Geva's engaging book offers a critical review of women's status and rights in Israel of the 1950s, through the lens of women's magazines and newspaper columns. Geva provides ample empirical proof for the justified criticism voiced by Israeli feminists as early as the 1970s—namely, women's equality in Israel was nothing but a myth. Geva's book covers significant topics pertaining to gender inequality and women's everyday lives. She validates previous studies, and therefore this book is not a revisionist history.

Geva dedicates the first chapter to women as citizens, describing Israel's few female Knesset members and their parliamentary work as well as that of the single female cabinet member, Golda Meyerson (Meir); local council members (and one mayor); and their female constituencies. Women who were elected to office, argues Geva, were loyal to the national cause more than to the advancement of women's rights and status. Moreover, those who wished to promote women's rights needed to convince their own party members, as they were unable to collaborate with women across party lines.

In the following chapter, Geva examines women's role as mothers, criticizing Israeli women for adhering to the dictate that a woman's main role in life is motherhood. She opens the chapter with the depiction of a small minority of subversive women who supported peace and vehemently condemned any kind of violence, whether that

of Palestinian “infiltrators” killing Jewish women and children, or violence on the part of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Most of these women were Communists. In what follows, Geva criticizes the majority of Jewish Israeli mothers for their deep devotion to their nation and for raising their children to become loyal soldiers. The chapter covers additional issues, ranging from the physical conditions in maternity wards (dreadful) to those in schools (poor) to public campaigns aimed at increasing the Jewish birthrate (for Geva, an unfathomable infringement of women’s control over their bodies, though most Jewish women of that time did not complain). She also discusses the legal status of abortions (illegal, though the law was not enforced). Geva traces the hierarchy of motherhood constructed by the hegemonic veteran Ashkenazi society in the 1950s. Mizrahi mothers (and fathers, for that matter) were at the bottom of the ladder, considered unfit to fulfill their roles without guidance.

Chapter 3 presents women’s role both as housewives and in the labor market. During the early 1950s, most Jewish women felt that a woman’s role was to keep house. Only 25 percent of married women held paid jobs, most of them in “feminine” occupations such as nursing or teaching. Men were considered to be the main providers, whereas women’s work was perceived merely as a complimentary source of income. Even women who developed a career were expected to take care of household chores, since performing such tasks was felt to detract from a man’s masculinity.

Most columnists, Geva finds, guarded the wall separating women from men. “Without a woman there is no home,” wrote Sara Tsur in *Laishah* magazine (quoted on p. 187), while a columnist for *Al hamishmar* warned against the lack of domestic training for girls: “How do girls make their way in the business of keeping a home, when for 12 years, they have been trained for different things entirely?” (p. 199). At times, however, criticism over the lack of equality was voiced: “It would a good thing if a boy learned to lend a helping hand and perform some household chores. He should learn how to sew a button or prepare a light meal by himself. He should not be raised as a parasite . . .” (p. 202). Rachel Galek voiced her grievances more explicitly: “I hate myself for being so compulsive toward myself; for the emotional weakness that stems the rebellious fire burning within me. I hate myself for not having enough courage to allow myself just once to escape the daily cycle” (pp. 224–225). Geva presents these lone voices with much enthusiasm. In her book’s conclusion, she argues that Israeli women played the role they were assigned by men, with only a few of them rebelling against the hegemonic patriarchal order.

Geva’s book offers a first-of-its-kind feminist history of Israeli women in the 1950s. It has, however, a few weaknesses, the main one being its judgmental tone. Historians, as Marc Bloch argued, should attempt to understand the society they are studying rather than judging it.<sup>1</sup> Blaming women (who are clearly victims of patriarchy) for their own marginalization is akin to blaming the poor for being poor. The role of the historian is to offer cultural, psychological, or economic explanations, not to cast blame. Geva’s methodological strategy—relying almost solely on the press for her sources—is also problematic, as it yields a black and white picture. Had she chosen to rely on archival sources, or at least more broadly on previous research, a more nuanced picture would have emerged.<sup>2</sup>

When discussing her methodology, Geva acknowledges the fact that only veteran Ashkenazi women held paid jobs as journalists, and therefore only their point of view

was actually heard. We learn much less about immigrants from Muslim countries. The latter are mostly presented in this book as victims of the oppressive and racist Ashkenazi hegemony. Tracing the voices of immigrants from Muslim countries is indeed a difficult task.<sup>3</sup> Yet even when an opportunity presents itself, Geva misses out. While she focuses on the oppressors, she disregards the message conveyed by Mizrahi women. One such striking example is brought in a survey among female veterans in *Haaretz*. Geva writes: “New immigrants saw their military service as a major contribution to their nation and an empowering experience,” and adds a quote by a young woman from Morocco: “Moving from a makeshift housing unit [*badon*] to the IDF is like immigrating from a Moroccan village to Tel Aviv” (p. 77). Like most scholars, Geva argues that female soldiers in the 1950s were marginalized in the Israeli army. Notwithstanding, a more complex approach would have been able to accommodate the voices of immigrant women who felt differently, and thus grant them agency. As some scholars have already shown, the myth of gender equality itself enabled some women, Mizrahi included, to improve their status and sense of control over their lives.<sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1. Mark Bloch, *Apologie Pour L'Histoire*; in Hebrew version, *Apologiyah 'al hahistoriyah o miktzo' o shel hahistoriyon*, trans. Zvia Zmiri (Jerusalem: 2002), 156–160.

2. See, for example: Dana Olmert, *Keḥomah 'amodnah: imahot leloḥimim basifrot ha'ivrit* (Tel Aviv: 2018); Tagrid Kaedan, “Teguvot hatzibur hamuslemi kelapei haḥok leshivuy zekhu-yot haishah” (master’s thesis, The Hebrew University, 2013); Yael Broude-Bahat, *Me'oravutam shel irgunei hanashim beḥakikat ḥok yaḥasei mamon bein benei zug bashanim 1948–1973, Mishpat umimshal* 16 (2013), 27–89.

3. For a discussion of sources and the use of oral history, see, for example, Hila Shalem Baharad, “‘Ḥitukh beḥom namukh’: safah, dat, ḥinuch veyahaḥsim bein-'adatayim bemaḥanot uma'abarot ha'olim” (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University, 2019), 47–50; Rachel Sharaby and Na'ama Hadad-Kedem, “Haḥalutzot mimoshavei ha'olim: sipuran shel 'olot mizraḥiyot bemoshavei perozdor yerushalayim,” in *Bein haperati letziburi: nashim bakibutz uvemoshav*, ed. Sylvie Fogiel-Bijaoui and Rachel Sharaby (Jerusalem: 2013), 251–283.

4. See, for example, Inbal-Esther Sicurel, “Temurot behavnayat yaḥasei migdar: ḥevrah, dat, va'avodah bekerev nashim bemoshav karai,” in *ibid.*, 284–300.