



Sharon Geva, *Women in the State of Israel: The Early Years* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Publishing House, 2020), 304 pp. Paperback, \$20.00. eBook, \$13.00.

In the beginning was the broom. On the cover of her fascinating book, devoted to the social construction of gender in the Israeli press of the 1950s, Sharon Geva, a historian of gender at Tel Aviv University, displays a desperate housewife holding a mop in one arm and in the other a screaming baby. A toddler is aggressively pulling her skirt. She looks utterly despondent. In the background one sees a kettle and a boiling pot.

This was the common view of young, married Israeli women in the 1950s. A calendar on the wall ironically records the date—May Day. The date universally celebrating the working class skips the housewife. Her work must be done regardless of the day’s festivities and does not count as ‘work’. One feels she is on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Why the broom? It has had some symbolic, if hidden, meaning in the history of Israeli women. When young Golda Myerson (later Meir) came to the headquarters of Poalei Zion in New York City to offer her services as a volunteer, the comrade at the desk tilted his head toward the corner. She might as well take the broom standing there and sweep the premises. She did. In the 1930s, married women members of the Histadrut demanded individual membership cards instead of being registered under their husband’s card. The Histadrut insisted that they pay for the privilege. Payment required a new stamp that would be placed on the new card. That stamp featured a woman holding a broom (the story is told by Ada Fishman Maimon). The popular Israeli (or Jewish?) imagination connected the woman to housecleaning and brooms.

In this engaging book, Geva reviews the Israeli press of the 1950s and shows how women’s sections in major dailies and magazines constructed the woman as a member of the second and subordinate sex, destined to be a wife and mother, doing household chores, and expected to suppress dreams of self-fulfillment and meaningful work. The book is yet another refutation of the well-known myth that Israel is a society built upon gender equality.

Geva writes well, and her methodology is sound and appealing. She relies on primary sources, mining in particular the women’s section in the popular daily *Davar* (Mapai’s newspaper when it was the hegemonic party in Israeli politics). The section called “The Woman: What Says She” (Ha-Isha Ma Omeret) is also the title of her book in Hebrew. Geva offers a dynamic discussion of the foundations of the status of women in Israel as we know it today. She enriches her discussion with portraits of the women

journalists who recorded the lives of women, as well as details about the women who were the subjects of the columns.

For example, she highlights Esther Ribak, who was expelled from a combat pilots' training course because of her gender. Women, the air force reasoned, would likely marry and bear children, and the cost of their training would go to waste. Ribak offered a commitment to avoid marriage and children and devote all of her being to flying, but the military remained deaf to her pleas. Ribak's story records her frustration but also reveals the unchallenged expectation of the military command. These married men, with families, evidently did not expect to share the gendered tasks—cooking, caring for children or, God forbid, holding a broom. Their consciousness was also gendered and constructed, and they embraced it as sacred truth.

Geva divides her book into three chapters. The first, "The Woman in the State," presents women who participated in the project of nation-building during the first decade of statehood. The second, entitled "Women and Mothers," addresses the Israeli mother as she was imagined in the women's press. In this section Geva offers a fascinating discussion of the developing Israeli attitude toward abortion (lenient and tolerant) and also covers the still festering wound of the missing Yemenite children—children taken away from their mothers during *aliya* in 1948–1954, whose whereabouts are still a mystery.

The third chapter is devoted to the gender-based stereotypes of the ideal woman as they were developed and amplified in these columns. Geva shows how the press coverage did indeed highlight the heart of the woman's predicament—her need to juggle work and family—but also urged the female readers to exercise deference. Women were steered away from 'masculine' professions that were more remunerative and prestigious, and were encouraged instead to 'sacrifice' self-fulfillment. That sacrifice was rationalized as patriotic (good for the nation) and necessary (the famous slogan of 'there is no choice' raising its head again.) The women's press steered their readers into feminized professions such as teaching and encouraged women to think of themselves as primarily homemakers and wives. This to my mind is the most riveting chapter, as it documents, step by step, how the stereotype of women as members of the second sex was constructed and perpetuated across the political spectrum. It is a must read for every person interested in women's social and legal status.

Geva's conclusions, however, pose more questions than answers. Israeli women, she writes, accepted their subordinate status and did not rebel. She attributes this colossal failure of agency to the imperatives of nation-building. Women's hands, she says, were busily "rocking the cradle of the just-born Israeli society" (p. 266). This explanation itself deploys the stereotypes

Geva was documenting earlier: women are indeed (by nature?) maternal (rocking the cradle), and women have a great (inherent?) capacity to sacrifice. Thus, Israeli women ended up sacrificing their own equality. One is tempted to ask, sacrifice for what? For keeping the patriarchal order intact?

At this point, one would have wanted to see Geva reflect on the concept of agency. We know that throughout the Zionist century women tried to rebel. Ada Fishman Maimon emphasized the idea of women's power ('we are fifty percent of the population'). Tehilla Matmon also urged women to act. There were female Knesset members who advocated change but were crushed against a wall-to-wall male consensus that women 'should be put in their place'. Geva tries to avoid the conclusion that this was the 'women's fault', but she should have been more careful to warn the reader against such a conclusion, as it is exactly what the true believers of patriarchal values are looking for. One might fall into the same old trap that blames women for violence or even rape ('she asked for it!') practiced against them.

To explore agency, Geva could have examined in greater detail the story of the struggle to integrate women pilots into the air force. She tells us how women were rejected from the force. But how were they ultimately integrated? The answer is that women organized and challenged the system. In 1984, they established the Israeli Women's Network (IWN), took cases to court, and shook the foundations of the military patriarchy. A generation of brave women—Shulamit Aloni, Marcia Freedman, Yael Dayan, Naomi Chazan, Frances Radai, Alice Shalvi, and that great sociologist Hanna Herzog—rose in indignation and demanded redress. Why did it not happen in the 1950s? Because women were 'patriotic'? Because women were willing to sacrifice?

More probing of this matter is called for. We must understand what happened then so that it is not repeated. It would have been better if Geva had concluded her fine book with a reminder that the power of women is real, that it has historical roots in Israel, and that in fact it has been and is being deployed—with great pain but also sagacity and energy—to achieve gender equality. Hopefully, Geva will follow with another book that documents this ongoing struggle—one that shows how false consciousness has been challenged by women exercising agency to make the world better for all.

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