

On the battlefield of gender segregation

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By Rachel Azaria

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Every area pertaining to religion and state has been defined in recent years as a battle between secular and Haredi Jews. That has been the accepted view in Israeli society: Ultra-Orthodox and secular are the two camps, and they fight. Shabbat, kashrut, the so-called hametz and pork laws: All the battles have been portrayed in black and white, with everything seen as clear-cut.

But Israeli society is more complex than that. There are a lot more shades of gray, and many more people who define themselves in a more nuanced manner, whether they affiliate themselves with religious Zionism, are traditionally observant or formerly Orthodox, or identify with one of the other Jewish streams - Conservatism or Reform, among others. This complexity began to find expression in the last municipal elections in Jerusalem, when essentially all of the non-Haredim found themselves aligned in one camp, opposite the ultra-Orthodox. We called ourselves "pluralists."

This past month, the main front in relations between religion and state in Israel has centered around the exclusion of women from the public domain. In recent years women have all but disappeared from public spaces in Jerusalem. I personally experienced this for the first time during the 2008 election campaign for the city council, when I asked, as is customary in political campaigns, to post pictures of the electoral list I headed on Jerusalem buses. We approached the bus company, agreed with them on a price and finalized the details - before they thought to mention that it was forbidden for buses to carry pictures of women. When we argued that we were an electoral list for the city council, that any photograph would be modest, and that I myself am an Orthodox woman and mother, the people at the advertising agency were not interested. As they put it: "No pictures of girls on buses in Jerusalem. Not a 3-year-old and not an 80-year-old."

That's when my eyes were opened, and I began to be aware of the matter and to look for the absent women on posters in Jerusalem. Thus the issue of women's exclusion from public space became part of my daily work, whether in the fight against buses on which women are required to sit in the back, the campaign for women's rights at the Kotel (Western Wall), or in the legal petition to the High Court against the segregation of men and women on the streets of Mea She'arim during the interim days of Sukkot, as well as on many other fronts. I have paid a price for this activism, most recently when Mayor Nir Barkat relieved me of my municipal portfolio in the city council.

Such exclusion and segregation is contrary to Israel's Basic Law on Human Dignity and Freedom, and is contrary to our aspiration to be a democratic, permissive and tolerant society. This new phenomenon, and the system's willingness to capitulate to it, fills me with great fear for the position of women in the State of Israel. No less significant, I am convinced that this type of segregation raises the walls even higher between those who are Haredi and those who are not. It makes it difficult for the ultra-Orthodox to integrate into the workforce and to be drafted into the military, since both are places where men and women are not separated, and it retards the welcome process that was under way, in which the Haredi public was finally beginning to feel a shared fate with the rest of Israeli society.

There are extremist Haredim who want this to happen, who feel threatened by the integration of members of their community into the Israeli public space. Indeed, this may well be the reason for the modesty and segregation revolution that is taking place in Haredi society.

And so, in a battle that is the spearhead of religion and state relations today, the rules have changed, and we find ourselves in a campaign being led mainly by Orthodox women and a Conservative rabbi (Rabbi Uri Ayalon). Moreover, the public that supports

this campaign is especially diverse: secular, Orthodox, formerly Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and traditionally observant. Also - and now for the big news: Haredi women have joined the frontline of the battle. Because ultimately we are talking about an alliance of a large public that is interested in leading a good, sane and pleasant life in the State of Israel, as opposed to a few extremists who insist on making sure that it will be very hard for us to live together.

This alliance of the conciliatory public, a public that wants to live together with other groups in society, must grow stronger and act as a counterweight to the small, radical and loud group. And that is what is beginning to happen. Everyone who wants to live together in Jerusalem is uniting to wage this battle, and this is allowing us to see Israel's true colors. Because the world is not black and white.

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