

A Religious Women's Revolution – The Case of "Kolech"

(1998 – 2005)

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A. The Plight of Religious Women in Modern Society

The well-known verse “All glorious is the princess within” (Psalms: 45, 14) notwithstanding, systematic observation will demonstrate that in Jewish society from time immemorial, it was exactly those women who “came out”—such as the prophetesses Miriam and Deborah, and Queen Salome Alexandra—who earned the greatest renown and esteem. Nevertheless, as a rule, Jewish women were traditionally excluded from the power bases of society: institutions of Torah study, public service, and active participation in communal religious services. In traditional Jewish society, women were regarded as a “people unto themselves,” credited mainly with enabling their men-folk to achieve greatness (Grossman 2001: 51 - 62).

In the twentieth century, with the establishment of new societal norms throughout the world, in Israel too many new opportunities became available to women—religious women included. The possibility of obtaining higher secular education in all disciplines, coupled with the almost unlimited prospects of advance in one's profession, only emphasized the limitations and barriers still barring religious women's progress in religious society, which is typically patriarchal. In synagogues and religious leadership, as well as institutions of Torah study *yeshivas*, doors have been closed to women throughout history, and they remained closed in the modern age. Religious women's desire to continue to observe religious tradition and frameworks has brought them face to face with a dissonant reality:

impressive progress in secular society, as against submission and self-effacement in religious society.

Is this paradoxical situation a ticking time bomb? On the one hand, religious women regard themselves as obligated to observe religious law and adhere to the framework dictated by patriarchal institutions. On the other, they also strive to reexamine the attitude of Halakhah (Jewish law) toward women; some have even gone so far as to attempt to penetrate this patriarchal system and challenge its masculine character. Characteristic of the religious women's revolution, or, put differently, the goal of creating a new social order consonant with the feminist revolution as a whole, is, I believe, a desire to avoid a total break with religious society as a whole, while at the same time reshaping that society (Kamir 2002:21).¹ In other words, they would like to continue to maintain uncompromising loyalty to the overall framework (family, congregation, community), while at the same time making exhaustive efforts to modify that framework and invest it with new, egalitarian content. One might say that the feminine revolution is epitomized by the desire to have the best of both possible worlds.

I would like to examine the underlying causes of the revolution—that is to say, the desire to create a new social order—its goals, and the best strategy for its success.

B. First Steps Toward a Religious Women's Revolution

¹ Orit Kamir, *Feminism, Rights, and Law*, On-Air University, 2002, p. 21 (Hebrew). Ruth Abrams does not believe that discrimination against women in Judaism was the cause of the particularly intensive activity of Jewish women in the struggle for suffrage; see Ruth Abrams, *Jewish Women in the International Woman Suffrage Alliance 1899–1926*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2000, p. 10.

Over the last thirty years, religious society in the Land of Israel has witnessed several innovations that potentially challenged the male hierarchy of the system (Ross 2004:1-45). These innovations have been of major importance in empowering religious women, heightening their sense of empowerment and stimulating their desire to organize for the achievement of their goals (Atun 1999).

1. The establishment of Women's Study Centers *midrashot* for high-level study of Oral Law for women and girls, sometimes including regular Talmud study, has spread like wildfire throughout the religious Zionist camp (El-Or 1998). Although young boys are offered Talmud study beginning in elementary school, *midrashot* for girls (they are not called yeshivas!) are post-high school. The argument they aroused as to whether Halakhah permits girls to study the Talmud died down quite quickly. It has become clear that, although throughout the ages Jewish women were excluded from higher Torah study, there are no solid halakhic grounds for such exclusion.²
2. The training of women as rabbinical advocates. Rabbinical advocates aim to help women appearing before rabbinical courts. The need for this springs first and foremost from the awareness that rabbinical courts not infrequently treat women in a humiliating manner. Remember that matters relating to matrimony are dealt with in Israel in the rabbinical courts. The initiators of the concept of female rabbinical advocates had a twofold agenda: (i) to reinforce the female voice of women who

² Moshe Meiselman, *Jewish Woman in Jewish Law*, New York, 1978, pp. 34 – 42.

- felt that they were being silenced and discriminated against in the rabbinical courts, (ii) to support them in halakhic negotiations and heighten their awareness of their rights according to Halakhah. So far about seventy women have been trained as rabbinical advocates.³
3. Halakhic advice with regard to *niddah* impurity [the ritually “impure” state of a woman during and after menstruation]. This specifically female and delicate topic has received new attention owing to the training of women with Torah knowledge on the laws of *niddah*. Up to now women in need of a halakhic ruling on such matters have had to resort to consulting male rabbis, a matter of considerable discomfort and embarrassment. There is now a clear understanding that in this intimate area women will more readily seek advice from other women, and that women can provide authoritative halakhic answers to such questions.
 4. The appointment of a religious woman to the religious council in Yeroham. Religious councils are charged with providing religious services to the community, such as ritual baths, *Kashrut* supervision, [burial facilities], etc. Until 1988, all members of religious councils were men, and the religious establishment tried to maintain this position as an exclusively male prerogative. However, thanks to the struggle of one religious woman, Leah Shakdiel, to break into the hierarchy of this religious framework, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in favor of female membership in religious councils. This was the

³ Information given by Nurit Fried, the founder and head of the female Rabbinical program.

first venture of a woman into a civic institution in charge of religious affairs.⁴

These measures have resulted from cooperation between Torah-educated women and a small number of rabbis who favor an egalitarian approach. They have aroused harsh opposition in the rabbinical establishment, but they have nevertheless become operational. The success of these initiatives has proved not only that they are possible, but that they answer a real need. It has also demonstrated to at least some of the religious community that they do not represent any infringement of the halakhic system.⁵

C. The Background for the Founding of “Kolech”

The formation of women’s organizations, as distinct from co-opting of women to men’s organizations, is perceived as an extremely effective strategy for the achievement of women’s goals.⁶ In that way women strengthen their own self-awareness and refrain from adopting masculine norms. As it happens, the initiative taken by religious women, toward the end of the twentieth century, to organize with a view to ameliorating their second-class legal status in Halakhah, was not the first of its kind. Last summer, examining archival material in England, I learned about a precursor to Kolech: In 1922, a group of religious women in England, which quickly branched out to the Continent and even to the United States, Canada and Australia, got together to fight for deserted wives (*agunot*), women denied a

⁴ H.C. 153/87 Shakdiel v. Minister of Religions, P.D. 42(2) 21.

⁵ On Rabbis cooperation see, for example, Rabbis participation in: Margalit Shilo, ed. *ToBe a Jewish Woman*, vol. 1 – 2, Jerusalem, 2001, 2003.

⁶ Estelle Freedman, *Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870 – 1930*, *Feminist Studies*, V 1979, 514 – 524.

get (halakhic divorce), and those needing release (*halitzah*) from Levirate marriage.⁷ As far back as eighty years ago, religious women demanded that Jewish law (Halakhah) should keep in step with the times, that modern Jewish society should find new halakhic solutions or activate solutions that had been proposed in the past.

Religious women in Israel were encouraged to organize by developments in New York. The example of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), founded in 1996 in America, inspired a few dozen religious women from Israel who were seeking a platform for a new initiative. One of the most important assets of the Israeli organization from its inception was its leader, Chana Kehat. Kehat, in her late thirties, raised in a distinguished family of *haredi* [fervently orthodox / ultra-orthodox] Torah scholars, who later became a “religious Zionist,” proved to possess extraordinary leadership qualities. Over and above her intellectual capabilities and her knowledge of Halakhah and Jewish thought, she demonstrated tremendous sensitivity, perseverance, and dedication to the organization and its goals. A fluent speaker and mother of a large family, her personality captivated all those who met her. Representatives of the press frequently interviewed her, seeking and airing her views on a wide variety of topics affecting women and Halakhah. The organization was virtually identified with her persona.⁸

D. The Overall Goals of Kolech

The name of the organization, “Kolech: Religious Women’s Forum,” was chosen with the express intention of bringing the female voice to center stage, inspired by a famous verse from the Song of Songs: “Let me hear your

⁷ Margalit Shilo, Can Feminism and Orthodoxy go hand in hand? The Council for the Amelioration of the Legal Position of the Jewess (in print).

⁸ Chana Kehat, Opening Address, (Hebrew), in: Margalit Shilo, ed. To Be A Jewish Woman, *Proceedings of the First International Conference: Woman and Her Judaism, 1999*, Jerusalem, 2001 (hereafter: *Jewish Woman*) pp. 13 – 16.

voice, for your voice is sweet.” The address of the lover to his beloved “may be interpreted... as the unique promise of the Almighty, throughout human history, to listen to the female voice.”⁹ The female voice must be restored to its proper place in history—this basic demand is being repeated again and again by women throughout the world, who have been silenced in patriarchal societies for centuries.

Kolech was not created with a clear-cut, well-defined agenda. The founders entertained the somewhat messianic hope that, in keeping with the religious belief in *tikun olam*—improvement of the world—and the centrality of Torah values, women too wish to be part of this process through their spiritual contribution.¹⁰ In a lecture delivered at the First International Kolech Conference (1999), the philosopher Yehuda Gelman cogently expressed the concept, implying that equality of women “brings us toward the future realization of an absolute morality.”¹¹ The religious ideas advocated by Kolech, he argued, not only do not pose a threat to modern Orthodoxy—they may be seen as an aspect of *tikun olam*. Gelman convincingly conveyed the sensation that Kolech was not an organization whose sole purpose is to improve the lot of women in religious society; rather, its mission was to purify Judaism, to transform it from a situation of “temporary morality” (i.e., a deficient world) to a situation of absolute morality (a perfect world).

E. Kolech—From Theory to Practice

The organization first attracted public attention with a pamphlet discussing the weekly portion of the Torah reading, appearing under the header “Kolech,” which became the name of the organization. The novelty of these

⁹, p. 13. Ibid,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

¹¹ Yehuda Gelman, “Religious Feminism and the Theological Challenge” (Hebrew), *Jewish Woman*, p. 41.

pamphlets, which owing to budgetary limitations consisted of only a few pages in small print, was that they were for the most part written and edited by women, voicing their thoughts on the weekly Torah portion, halakhic issues, homiletics, and various Torah subjects, which till then had not been within the purview of religious women. It is true that the celebrated Bible teacher Nechama Leibowitz had published a weekly page on the Torah portion many decades earlier;¹² but in contrast with Leibowitz's creative Torah interpretations, which were "gender blind," the articles published in "Kolech" placed the emphasis on the feminine interest. These pamphlets brought women's Torah learning and thought to every concerned home. The innovative element of these pages was so obvious clear that it aroused antagonism both on the part of a Yeshiva teacher who attacked them as "not objective,"¹³ and of the former Sephardi Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu, who actually ruled that it was forbidden to read them.

Kolech achieved its most impressive public presence in three international conferences, held in Jerusalem in 1999, 2001, and 2003 and attended by more than 1000 active participants. They received media attention in the general and religious press, as well as in the electronic media. The question which absorbed all those following the progress of the new phenomenon was: Would it be possible to carry out a revolution without creating a total break with the religious establishment? To put it differently: Would women be able to modify the male-hierarchical character of religious thinking? Would they be able to change the patriarchal character of religious society and still remain an integral part of Orthodoxy?

¹² Haim Hamiel, Introduction, Nechama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1969, pp. vii – viii.

¹³ Rabbi Gigi, in a public debate held in January 2004 under the auspices of the Zalman Shazar Center and the Israel Historical Society.

At the first conference, lectures were given on the subject of Torah learning for women, pointing out the possibilities and inherent dangers,¹⁴ and presenting the question of how to relate to women's creative thought on Torah subjects and how it could be integrated with men's writings.¹⁵ Two years later, at the second conference, there was no repetition of questions of this nature. The first conference had convincingly demonstrated both the impressive halakhic knowledge of many members of the new organization, as well as the existence of firmly established contacts with several well-known rabbis of a liberal-religious mind-set.

Over the years, there have been positive developments in several of the areas dealt with by the organization. The fear that the feminist initiative would undermine the religious framework has in some measure died down. The plenary sessions dealt prominently with women's societal concerns and difficulties, such as *agunot* and women denied divorce, as well as sexual abuse and the attitude of religious society to abusers. These questions were deliberated on both theoretical and practical levels. The Third Conference hosted a battered wife who told her life story. Another woman, a victim of long-standing sexual abuse, related how she came to grips with the situation. This presentation of problems from a personal, emotional viewpoint, as well as on a theoretical level, was a most powerful demonstration of Kolech's role not just as an organization for academic deliberations, but also as a supporting arm for religious women who on the one hand refuse to be silenced but, on the other, refuse to abandon their religious way of life.

¹⁴ Yuval Cherlow, "Women's Torah Learning—Prospects and Dangers" (Hebrew), *Jewish Woman*, pp. 67–72.

¹⁵ Rachel Keren, "Scholarly Women—Where From and Where To?" (Hebrew), *ibid.*, pp. 77–82.

When an abused woman who approached Kehat not only received a sympathetic ear but had her story widely publicized, the religious establishment responded with a veritable flood of condemnation of Kolech. Nevertheless, the incident had a catalytic effect on attitudes to the problem. Kolech joined a colloquium of rabbis, including some not identified with its goals, and religious women from several women's organizations, which together drew up a "code of ethics"—a guide to rabbis and communal workers on how to act when approached by women for advice on intimate and other matters. The mere convening of this colloquium was an open admission that the relations between women and those in authority in religious society is no longer under wraps; they must be fully open and subject to critical scrutiny. In parallel with the code of ethics, guidelines were drawn up on the treatment of sexual abuse in religious institutions. These guidelines were formulated by a Kolech attorney along the lines of a law enacted by the Knesset [the Israeli parliament] in 1998 on the prevention of sexual abuse.¹⁶

Along with concern for the legal aspect, an educational team was established to draw up curricula for different age groups, to teach girls and boys egalitarian concepts. The members of the organization have realized that the only way to equalize relations between the sexes is through education. Likewise, many other problems plaguing the religious community, such as the large number of women who remain unmarried or marry late, point to the need for innovative education, to help young men and women to maintain relationships in the new egalitarian society.¹⁷

¹⁶ Riki Shapira-Rosenberg, On the Ethical Code and Sexual Harassment, Kolech (Monthly) no. 89, pp. 5 – 6.

¹⁷ Liat Peled Bitan, Gevanim, Our Educational Program (Hebrew), Kolech (Monthly) no. 93, p- 5.

D. Is the Religious Revolution Possible? What is the Preferred Strategy?

Is the aspiration to create a new social order, that is, to alter women's image and their status in religious society, a "mission impossible"? Perhaps the opponents of Kolech are correct in their claim that one cannot change the religious framework and at the same time preserve it? Opposition to Kolech in the religious community has not died down, and the expression "hold back your voice" [an out-of-context quotation from the prophet Jeremiah] is heard more loudly than the verse "Let me hear your voice." Orit Kamir has pointed out that the women's revolution as a whole suffers from a split personality, as it challenges patriarchal notions but at the same time does not call for war against men.¹⁸ This, she believes, explains the slow pace of the revolution. Indeed, while the preliminary achievements of Kolech are promising, they are also disappointing. The most serious problems, such as relief for *agunot* and women denied divorces, are still, to our disgrace, awaiting solutions. One wonders whether the slowness of the campaign is not an indication of an immanent defect.

An analysis of the radical changes that have taken place in the I.D.F. [Israel Defense Forces] over the past decade reveals that they were conditioned by several factors: (i) a handful of women who untiringly demanded reform of the military system and were even ready to lead the way; (ii) cooperation with part of the male sector (in this case, the judicial system); and (iii) current social perceptions elsewhere (for example, in the U.S. Army) as to the priority of egalitarian considerations even in the military framework. A similar analysis of the efforts of religious women reveals that the religious women's revolution is clearly dependent on three conditions: a) Women's

¹⁸Orit Kamir, *Feminism. Rights and the Law*, Tel Aviv, 2002, p. 21

accomplishments in Torah learning and their consequent demand for real equality; b) close cooperation with at least some part of the male sector¹⁹; c) acceptance throughout the western world of the principle of an egalitarian society.²⁰ As I have endeavored to show, the religious women's revolution did not grow out of a vacuum; it is distinctly influenced by the achievements of women in society at large. The various "glass ceilings" that still block women's progress must be smashed; only then will it be possible to similarly smash the male-rabbinical hierarchical system.

What is the correct strategy? Will organization, loud protests, and publicity promote the desired goal, or should one opt for intensive, non-threatening, behind-the-scenes activities? (The question of the proper way to wage the struggle arose specifically in connection with the violent nature of the struggle for women's suffrage in England in the first half of the twentieth century.²¹) At first glance, the success of the Torah Study Centers for Women (*midrashot*) might indicate that underplaying their importance is effective; inroads are being made slowly but surely. However, the status of women in the rabbinical courts is perhaps a counter-indication. Cooperation with the system has brought only slight and slow results. Can conclusions be drawn from other struggles of women? Esther Yeivin, one of the active members in the Federation of Women for Equal Rights, founded in Eretz Israel in 1919, whose motto was "one law and one constitution for men and women in Israel," wrote in no uncertain terms: "In this battle [for voting rights for women in Eretz Israel] women have learned an important lesson,

¹⁹ On the need for at least some assistance from the authorities see Jean H. Baker, Introduction, in idem, ed., *Votes for Women. The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited*, New York 2002, pp. 3–20.

²⁰ The situation with regard to universal suffrage was similar—it was dependent on an overall societal transformation; see Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860–1914*, Princeton, RI, 1987, p. 195.

²¹ Harold L. Smith, *The British Women's Suffrage Campaign 1866–1928*, Seminar Studies in History, London 1998, pp. 15–20.

namely, that the solution of important problems cannot be postponed, and that one cannot depend on others, always remembering [the saying], ‘If I am not for myself who will be for me? and if not now, when?’²² In the struggle for women’s suffrage, the “winning strategy” consisted of elitist women’s activity focused solely on that issue and identified with it exclusively, avoidance of radical feminism, and faith in one’s ability to bring about an overall change in the social order.²³ Moreover, besides appreciating the leadership, one must also take into consideration the “foot-soldiers,” as well as the connection between the specific struggle in which one is interested and other social changes.²⁴

A wide-ranging review of history reveals that various significant revolutions occurred in Jewish religion—such as the abolition of slavery. May we hope that, in our time too, it will be possible to replace the religious hierarchical system with an egalitarian one, or is this merely a messianic, utopian hope? We may assume that the three conditions mentioned previously—women’s achievements in the field of Torah, cooperation with the male establishment, and society’s general acceptance of egalitarianism—will facilitate this longed-for revolution. The Koleh organization can work, together with the Orthodox establishment, for fulfillment of the first two conditions; the third is beyond our control. Although the struggle has focused on several specific matters, its significance lies in the general revolt against the gendered hierarchy. This revolt, which is the core of the struggle, is also the root

²² Esther Yeivin, “Twenty-Five Years of the Federation for Equal Rights in Eretz Israel” (Hebrew), in *The Federation of Jewish Women for Equal Rights in Eretz Israel. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Volume*, December 1944, p. 10.

²³ Robert Booth Fowler and Spencer Jones, “Carrie Chapman Catt and the Last Years of the Struggle for Woman Suffrage: ‘The Winning Plan’,” in Baker, ed., *Votes for Women*, pp. 130–142.

²⁴ Baker, Introduction, in *Votes for Women*, pp. 3–20.

What is Kolech's current impact on Israeli society?

The fourth international conference of Kolech which took place in June 2005 gives a good opportunity to try to evaluate its impact on Israeli society. The conference which was held in Jerusalem and attracted nearly two thousand women and a small number of men and got coverage in Israeli media, is already a household name in Israeli society. Feminist circles agree that Kolech, is the most active group among Israeli feminists. The reason for this assumption is twofold: 1. The special case of Orthodox Zionist women, their deep feeling of oppression which derives from the discrepancy between their status in the general society and their low status in their religious community gives them a unique force and energy. 2. Kolech holds the banner for one of the most urging issues of Israeli society – Agunoth and women denied divorce. Religious women who act as religious advocates in the religious courts and religious lawyers are usually more active in these courts and therefore feel a profound urge to wipe out this disgrace and to bring an end to this human tragedy.

This view is usually the one seen from the secular segment of society. Alas, from the other angle of society, from the religious Zionist segment the picture is completely different. Women from Kolech are mostly seen by the religious Zionist crowd as a threat to the fragile fabric of their existence. Confronting the seculars on the one hand and the Haredim on the other puts the religious Zionists in a unique place in the Israeli society. They feel insecure and threatened by everyone surrounding them. Kolech's agenda, to change the religious patriarchal society into an egalitarian one, seems to them as a change which may undermine their very existence.

Yet, among others mainly among the young generation of the religious Zionists and even among a small group of Rabbis there is a deep urge to adopt the new egalitarian ways of modern society. Kolech's existence gives important moral and practical support to those who believe in combining the new modern concepts with the old tradition. Kolech empowers religious men and women who believe that they are able to conduct new democratic ways of life while adhering to the tradition they cherish.

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