

# In between neo-liberalism and religious fundamentalism: some reflections on contemporary Israel and some of its women<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article provides a framework to understand the ways in which the Israeli state, Jewishness, neo-liberalisation and religionization of the Zionist project have been interwoven historically. This interweaving, however, has deepened since the beginning of Israeli religionization after the 1967 war and especially with Israel's embrace of neoliberalisation during the 1980s. It examines the effects these have had on gender relations in Israel, focusing on the incorporation of ultra-orthodox Israeli Jewish women into the labour market and higher education as an illustrative case study.*

**Peer review:** This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



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**Key words:** Israel, Zionism, Jewishness, religionization, Jewish fundamentalism, neo-liberalisation, ultra-orthodox women.

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## Introduction

This paper is a work in progress, and I welcome all comments and feedback. I have taken upon myself an ambitious task, to outline in inevitably wide brush strokes, the ways in which the Israeli state, neo-liberalisation and religionization of the Zionist project have been interwoven and the effects these have had on gender relations in Israel. In order to do so I have to, inevitably, examine such questions as the nature of the Zionist project and the Israeli state as they developed, and their relationships to Judaism and Jewishness. While the emphasis in this article

is on the period from the 1980s when neo-liberalism starts to transform Israeli state and society, these developments have to be seen in their historical context. Although there is no space in this article for a full intersectional analysis, no valid description of Israeli state and society can ignore the very different positionings different national, ethnic, religious, class and political intersected groupings are occupying in it and the gendered nature of these intersections. In the last part of the paper I focus on one of these groupings--ultra-orthodox Jewish women--and use some of the issues relating to their employment and access to higher education as an illustrative case study to show the effects of the interweaving of the Zionist project, neo-liberalisation and religionization of the Israeli state have had on them.

Before turning to a more historical description of the neo-liberalisation and religionization of Israel, I should briefly define what I mean when I use in this paper terms like religionization and Jewish fundamentalism and the very specific ways Jewishness is constructed in Israel.

### **Religionisation**

The term 'religionization' is widely used among Israeli social scientists (see Peled and Peled, 2018). Throughout much of the twentieth century, social sciences were occupied with the 'secularisation' thesis (Turner, B.S., 2011) which assumed as inevitable the de-religionization of societies as part of the process of modernization. Secularisation in this literature was meant as an individual phenomenon, when people lost their faith, stopped going to religious places of worship on a regular basis and ceased to explicitly adhere to religion as the basis of their moral conduct. It was also meant as a collective phenomenon, in which states developed legal codes not based on religion, introduced separation between religion and the state and recognised the right of the citizens and residents in the country to worship different religions and none.

This process of secularisation was never as complete as the authors of the secularisation thesis would have liked us to believe but towards the end of the twentieth century, with the rise of post-colonialism, post-modernism and neo-liberalism, many scholars started to define our age as 'post secular' (see Habermas, J., 2008; Asad & al, 2013). They observed a new surge of religious movements, mainly but not only in the global South and among racialised groupings of Southern people in the global North. As Gita Sahgal & I have commented in our introduction to our book *Refusing Holy Orders* (1992), that rise has been linked to the crisis of modernity - of social orders based on the belief in the principles of enlightenment, rationalism and progress. Both capitalism and communism have proved unable to fulfil people's material, emotional and spiritual needs and in the post colonial global South both nationalist and socialist movements failed to bring about successful liberation from oppression, exploitation and poverty. A general sense of despair and disorientation has opened people to religion as a source of solace. Religion has provided to such people a compass and an anchor; it gives people a sense of stability and meaning, as well as a coherent identity and fundamentalist political movements in all major religions have used this for their purposes.

Fundamentalist movements in all religions are far from homogenous. However, beyond all the differences among them, there are two features which are common: one, that they claim their version of religion to be the only true one, and feel threatened by pluralist systems of thought; two, that they use political means to impose their version of the truth on all members of their religion. Fundamentalist movements are not merely a traditional form of religious orthodoxy, nor are they anti-modernist in spite of much of their rhetoric. It is significant, as well as typical, that the original Christian fundamentalist movement arose in the USA in early twentieth century as a response to the rise of liberalism in general and the 'Social Gospel' movement

within the Church in particular, which liberalized religion and had strong progressive elements.

Fundamentalist movements, all over the world, are basically political movements which have a religious imperative and seek in various ways, in widely differing circumstances, to harness modern state and media powers to the service of their gospel. This gospel is presented as the only valid form of religion. It can rely heavily on sacred religious texts, but it can also be more experiential and linked to specific charismatic leadership. Fundamentalism can align itself with different political trends in different countries and manifest itself in many forms. It can appear as a form of orthodoxy - a maintenance of 'traditional values' - or as a revivalist radical phenomenon, dismissing impure and corrupt forms of religion to 'return to original sources'. In Israel, as will be discussed below, the process of religionization started on a national scale after the 1967 war and has been affected by both local specific factors as well as the more general global ones.

### **Jewish fundamentalism**

In relation to Zionism and Israel, one should differentiate roughly between two main kinds of Jewish fundamentalist movements, although they are each internally divided and especially these days quite fragmented, while continuing to be political rivals. However, in terms of lifestyle and mode of religious observance, the followers of these two streams of Jewish fundamentalist movements are more similar to each other these days than they were in the pre-1967 period.

One main stream of Jewish fundamentalism includes the *Kharedim* (or, in Yiddish – the language they often speak – *Frumim* (Ettinger, 2019) - ultra-Orthodox Jews who keep to strict religious way of life which crystallised (as can often be seen in their mode of dress) in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Eastern

Europe (although, by now, in Israel, there are also many kharedim who are of Middle Eastern origin, as discussed later). The kharedim follow different rabbis as their religious leaders but are largely divided between the more populist *Khassidim*, who put emphasis on experiential worship and charismatic leadership, and *Mitnagdim*, who oppose this mode of worship and put emphasis on religious scholarship and strict adherence to the religious laws, *mitzvot*, which are supposed to guide Jewish men and women in the right code of behaviour in all aspects of life with the guidance and interpretation of their learned rabbis.

The other kind of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel consists of the political religious movements which grew out of religious nationalists (see Ravitzky & Raviṣqi, 1996). Unlike the kharedim they constituted (originally a small) part of the Zionist movement from the early stages of Zionist settlement in Palestine and saw in Jewish settlement of the country an important religious mission. While the kharedim are deeply suspicious of fake Messiahs which appeared periodically throughout Jewish history (arguably including Jesus) there is a strong Messianic element in this stream of Jewish fundamentalism. They joined the Zionist movement, believing like their leader Harav Cook, that the secular Zionists are like ‘the donkey of the Messiah’ which carries the Messiah to Jerusalem but does not know what it is doing.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, unknowingly, the secular Zionists help to hasten the coming of the Messiah, as one of the conditions of his coming is the ingathering of all the Jews to the Land of Israel from all over the world and they actively supported Jewish settlement of the ‘Promised Land’. This is very similar to the Christian Evangelicals’ belief regarding the resurrection of Jesus and thus their massive funding of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and support of the Israeli state (Clark, 2007).

Although politically very significant, it is important to remember that most contemporary Jews, even today, adhere to other modes of Jewishness, both in Israel and in the Jewish diaspora – from liberals, conservative and

reform oriented who follow revised forms of Jewish worship (which are not formally recognized in Israel for reasons discussed below) to traditionalists to atheists - both Zionist and non Zionist – to those who, as Isaac Deutscher defined himself in his ‘Non-Jewish Jew’ essay (2017), identify themselves as Jews as part of collective Jewish history of persecution and moral duty to defend all persecuted people that arises from that. It is important to remember all this when we contemplate the very specific national and religious constructions of Jewishness in Zionism and Israel.

### **Nationalism and religion in the Zionist movement and the state of Israel**

The relationship between the Zionist movement and Jewishness has been somewhat paradoxical since its inception. The Zionist movement attempted to solve ‘the Jewish problem’ – i.e. discrimination and persecution of the Jews, especially in Eastern Europe. It also intervened in the more basic question of Jewish membership in the national collectivities in the countries where they were living and their status as citizens of those post-Jewish emancipation states in central and western Europe (see Laqueur, 2009). Significantly, the first leader and visionary of the Zionist movement, Theodore Herzl, was not an East European Jew, from where most of the Zionist membership came at the time, but an assimilated Jewish Austrian journalist who was deeply affected by the French ‘Dreyfus Affair’ in which antisemitism was directed toward the secular and assimilated Dreyfus who was an officer in the French military (see Kornberg, 1993).

While in emancipated Europe the Jews were formally treated as members of another religion but of the same nationality as their citizenship, the Zionist movement wanted to ‘modernize’ and ‘normalize’ the Jews, transforming them from members of ethno-religious communities – the way they lived in the times of pre-emancipation in the West and continued

to live until the Communist Revolution in the East of Europe -- into members of a separate modern (European) nation, which, like other nations, would have its own state and territory.

Although originally Herzl and other Zionist leaders tried to acquire other territories from various colonial powers for the Jewish Zionist project to exercise its 'right for self-determination' – from Uganda to Argentina -- it focused pretty quickly on Palestine where Jewish, or, rather Israelite polities existed in biblical times according to Jewish religious tradition. In this way, Zionism, a largely secular movement, has come to rely on the Jewish religion for its legitimisation in two major ways. First, it legitimised Jewish settlement and the claim of the country being 'the promised land' which Jehovah promised to Abraham, the mythical father of the Israelites, who was the first to settle in the land then known as Kena'an, and his descendants.

Secondly, although constructing the Jewish people as 'a nation' rather than as heterogenous, diverse and transnational communities following different versions of the Jewish religion and ethnic cultures (Sand, 2010), Zionism in its formative period relied on the Jewish religion to determine who is a member of this nation. Unlike the other Jewish national movement which arose at the same time in Eastern Europe, the Bund, it did not confine itself to East European or even all European Jews but claimed to represent the Jews from all over the world. This proved very important in a later stage of the Zionist settler project, when especially 'Mizrachi' (Eastern) Jews, as they came to be known collectively in Israel, were brought from Middle Eastern and North African countries to populate the country and largely replaced the Palestinian labour power after the Palestinian Nakba (Catastrophe), when more than half of the Palestinians were forced out of the country during the 1948 war. The Israeli state was established in a territory in which, before the 1948 war, only around 6% of the lands belonged officially to Jews and Jewish

organisations and the Jewish population amounted to about a third of the total population (Pappe, 2007; Masalha, 2012).

Jewish Kharedi communities lived in Palestine during the time of the Zionist settlement *Yishuv* but did not see themselves as part of it. Although there have been continuous Jewish communities living in Palestine throughout its history, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century they did not amount to more than a few families. However, especially with the growing persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, there was a growing number of Orthodox Jews who came to settle in Palestine, to establish *yeshivot* and to die and be buried in the holy land (Reinharz, 1993). Around 1948 they were less than a quarter of the number of Jews who settled in Palestine. The Kharedim, however, did not believe in a Jewish polity, as according to their belief such a polity should – and would – be re-established only after the coming of the Messiah. However, the Zionist movement needed their cooperation in order to gain legitimacy of their claim to represent all Jews.

Thus, in order to bring the leaders of these communities to co-sign the Israeli ‘Independence Scroll’ declaration in 1947, David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Labour party and the first Prime Minister of Israel, reached the ‘status quo’ agreement with the Kharedi leaders (Barak-Erez, 2008). That agreement basically left the public sphere and services in the territory controlled by the Israeli state largely the same way they existed in the pre-state time. In localities where there was a majority of Orthodox Jews, for instance in Jerusalem, there would not be public transport on the Sabbath, while in secular Haifa there would continue to be. More importantly, however, the status quo agreement meant that overall the relationship between religion and the state in Israel continued to be constructed according to the Ottoman Millet system that the British Mandatory authorities, after they took control over Palestine after the first world war, left undisturbed. This meant that the Zionist movement actually gave up its aspiration to establish a western style modern nation state with a

secular public space. All citizens are constructed as part of religious communities and all personal legislation, from birth, through marriage (and divorce) to death, would be controlled by the separate communal authorities which are paid as functionaries of the state. This also included inspectors of *Kashrut* (and for Muslims Halal) regulations of food supplies. Part of the agreement with the Kharedi communities has also been the release of women and men from the duty of serving in the national military on the grounds of 'religion and conscience' (although conscientious objection on the basis of pacifism, for instance, is not accepted as valid especially for men).

This agreement has had a fundamental effect on all Israeli citizens, Jews and non-Jews, but especially on the position of women. It is not only that there is no secular public sphere (which can arguably be said of many western nation-states heavily affected by Christianity) and that no civil marriages, for instance, are formally allowed. As a result of this, Jewish women are not recognized as witnesses in religious courts (in Muslim courts the value of their evidence amounts to half of that of the men) or allowed to be religious judges (although in recent years, as a result of religious women's activism there are some women *dayanim* (junior religious judges). In cases of divorce, a double court system of religious and secular courts has been established and women's organisations have made it a priority to convince women to first open a file in the secular courts because the religious courts are so much more discriminatory against women (Yuval-Davis, 1980).

It is also the case that as a result of that agreement with the Kharedi communities in 1947, no other version of Judaism, except the Orthodox ones (although the state created and paid for two chief rabbis, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, to reconcile the different Jewish orthodox traditions in different Jewish communities), are seen as legitimate. In the case of American and other Western Jews, it meant that no Reform or

Conservative Rabbi has the authority, formally, to marry or divorce anyone in Israel. In the case of Ethiopian and Indian Jews, however, it manifested itself in much more extreme ways, including originally forced conversion (including re-circumcision) to mainstream Orthodox Judaism (Ribner and Schindler, 1996).

This abnormality is a result of the inherent tension that has existed in Israel throughout its existence between two legal (and ideological) definitions of who is a Jew, which has affected different aspects of Israeli legislation and has caused repetitive crises in Israeli governments throughout its existence. On the one hand there is the definition based on the religious Orthodox law in which a Jew who is anyone born to Jewish mother or converted to Judaism by a (Orthodox) Rabbi. This definition operates in Israeli personal laws, determining who is allowed to marry whom, who is defined as a Jew in Israeli IDs and who could be buried in Jewish cemeteries.

However, the definition of who is a Jew is different in the Israeli Law of Return which determines who is automatically allowed to immigrate and settle in Israel and get full citizenship rights. The Israeli state did not only want to get legitimation as representing Jews all over the world but also to fulfil the Zionist dream of the Jewish state as a potential refuge from persecutions and antisemitism for all Jews. World Jewry were to be encouraged to immigrate or at least identify with Israel and support it financially and politically. For that purpose, the boundaries of who is a Jew in the Israeli citizenship and immigration legislation is based on the Nazi definition of who is a Jew – anyone who has at least one Jewish grandparent. Therefore this law allowed Jews who were converted to Judaism not via Orthodox rabbis to immigrate to Israel as well as those who came from Jewish communities which never accepted European (including Sephardi/Spanish Jewish modifications of worship in Medieval Europe), such as, as mentioned above, Jewish communities in

Ethiopia and India, but also those who are defined as Jews according to this definition, but who consider themselves of other faiths, as has been the case among many in the large Russian Jewish wave of immigration after the fall of the USSR who define themselves as devout Christian Orthodox (Racionzer, L.M., 2005).

The tensions around the question of ‘Who is a Jew’ has caused several major political crises in Israel’s history and brought down several governments. A related endemic question throughout the history of the Israeli state has been around the question of whether Israel can be a state which is simultaneously democratic and Jewish, something which both the extreme right and left in Israel have always denied the possibility of, but which has been the corner stone of the Israeli Jewish consensus during the hegemonic control of the Israeli state and society by the Zionist Labour movement at least until the late 1970s.

The principle of the simultaneous nature of Israel as both Jewish and democratic was stated in Israel’s 1947 declaration of Independence Scroll (Rubinstein, 1998), the Israeli foundational document. The Independence Scroll played symbolically, but not legally, the place of an Israeli constitution which was never written so as not to upset the delicate balance of the different contesting camps within the wide Zionist consensus. In its place it was decided that over time a series of separate Foundation/Basic laws would be passed by the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, for which a two third majority vote would be required. It was not till a couple of years ago that Netanyahu’s government felt that public opinion has moved sufficiently to the right that they could propose and pass a foundation law which would clearly prioritise Israel as a Jewish state rather than as a democratic state in which all its inhabitants are ensured complete equality of social and political rights irrespective of religion, race or sex.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Palestinian citizens of Israel, let alone all those inhabitants who have been under Israeli occupation since 1967, have never had equal rights. The Israeli Law of Return has given any Jew an automatic right to immigrate and settle in Israel but denied this possibility to all Palestinian refugees. But beyond this basic discrimination, Palestinian citizens of Israel have had to deal with a whole range of discriminatory policies concerning allocations of resources, political organizational rights and racist hate crimes. Moreover, from 1948 to 1965 they were ruled directly under military governance which limited their movements and controlled their lives (Jiris, 1976). The emergency regulations which authorized the military governance until 1965 were not abolished when the military governance was suspended and were applied after 1967 to the Palestinians in the Occupied territories and on a regular basis on Palestinians in Israel, in recent years often the nomad Bedouins (Abu-Saad, 2008) These regulations were widely used in order to confiscate Palestinian lands in Israel as well as the Occupied Territories as part of the 'Judaization' of the country. State lands were given to the Jewish Agency and the Jewish National Fund according to their constitution, non-Jews are not allowed to lease, let alone buy, any of these lands. As a result, since 1948, no new Palestinian settlement was officially allowed in Israel, in a largely growing population which now constitutes 20% of Israeli citizenry (Davis & Lehn, 1978).

No proper understanding of the processes of neoliberalisation – and religionization - in Israel, therefore, is possible without examining the continuous character of Israeli colonisation and securitisation process.

### **Colonisation and securitisation in post 1967 Israel**

It is important to emphasise that the process of settler colonialism did not stop with the establishment of the Israeli state. A census was carried out in the midst of the 1948 war and the properties of all those who were not

at home on that census day, even Palestinians who remained within the borders of the Israeli state, had them declared vacant, under the so called ‘Guardianship’ of the Israeli state. Their properties, like other vacant Palestinian refugees’ properties when these houses and villages were not actually destroyed and built over, were used to mostly resettle new immigrants in them. As a result, in addition to the Palestinians citizens of Israel and the Palestinian refugees outside its boundaries, there also developed a whole group of ‘present-absentees’--Palestinians living in Israel but with no citizenship or entitlement to their properties. However, the process of colonizing new Palestinian lands did not stop there. Sabri Jiris (1976) in his book describes the variety of quasi legal tricks used by the Israeli state to confiscate further Palestinian lands during that period. For example, the state declared particular territories as security zones, which made them inaccessible to their Palestinian owners who could not cultivate their land; then, after 3 years, the land could be confiscated according to an old Ottoman law which declared lands not cultivated for 3 years to be the property of the state. Under the title of ‘the Judaisation of the Galilee’ a major confiscation of this kind took place during the early 1960s, generating a big – both Palestinian and Jewish - protest movement for the first time. Later confiscations during the 1970s brought the declaration of the annual ‘Day of the Land’ since 1976 by a strengthening Palestinian Israeli protest movement.

After the 1967 war, these tools of continuous land confiscation were applied in the occupied territories, accompanied by a growing wave of settlements by messianic religious nationalists near the traditional Jewish Holy sites. Although initially declared illegal, rather than being expelled, these settlements were protected by the Israeli military, even when the Israeli government was still controlled by the Labour party. Other settlements of both rural and urban character spread along the Jordan valley and near the Israeli borders.

There is no space here to go into detail of the post 1967 colonisation and how it spread with the years, and especially after the so-called Oslo Accords (1993 and 1995) surrounded and divided Palestinian areas of dense population. What is important for the purpose of this paper is to state that today, about half a million Israeli Jews live in more than 130 settlements, both rural and urban, in the West Bank, heavily defended by the Israeli military, while the territories which are densely inhabited by the Palestinians and are supposedly self-ruled by the Palestinian authority are segmented and isolated from each other. Heavily subsidised housing in the Jewish settlements were offered so that many poor Israeli Jews, especially Kharedi with larger families, settled there and their high fertility rate has been in recent years the major factor in the Jewish population growth in the territories and has had a major demographic effect (Cohen and Gordon, 2018).

The growth of the kharedi communities among the Israeli population has not been the only important demographic change in post-67 Israel. Probably the most significant has been the immigration of about a million Jews from the ex-Soviet bloc after the fall of the USSR in 1989. The majority of that population was highly educated in the former Soviet Union and was mostly secular but with a strong right-wing nationalist ideology. Other important – sometimes more symbolically than demographically – have been immigration waves of Jews from Ethiopia after the famine during the 1980s and of ultra-orthodox Jews from different Western countries, notably the USA and France. It is important to emphasize, however, that with the neo-liberalisation of the Israeli, as well as the global economy, many of the new immigrants, as well as many Israeli born Jews, have become more transnational, moving both personally and in their business endeavours between Israel and other countries, including their countries of origin. This has contributed to a blurring of the definition of Jews as either ‘Israeli’ or ‘diasporic’.

Before turning to examine the effects of neo-liberalisation on Israel, it is important to emphasize another element which is centrally important to understand. This is the fact that Israel has not only been a continuous colonizing society, but also a continuous warfare society. If the war of 1967 was its third major war since the state's establishment (after the 1948 and 1956 Suez wars), the occupation and the Palestinian resistance to it has transformed Israel into a permanent occupation army, in addition to its taking part in other more major military confrontations with Egypt and Syria (1973), Lebanon (1982 & 2006) and Gaza (before and after its withdrawal in 2005). Moreover, this has had profound effects on the social and personal lives of Israelis, as well as on its economy. If in the 1950s and 60s Israel's main exports had been oranges and diamonds, the occupation and military operations – as Jeff Halpern (2015) and others have illustrated – has given Israel a 'living lab conditions' to test its hi tech military and surveillance industries which have become one of the most important exports of Israeli economy. The neo-liberal Israeli economy would not have become so successful if the occupation of the Palestinian territories had not taken place and been exploited in these ways.

It is important to emphasize that Israeli Jewish women, both religious and secular, have been active participants in these post-67 processes of colonisation and securitisation. The settler religious woman who is prepared to sacrifice her children for the sake of the sacred national-religious task of inhabiting all corners of the 'Promised Land' has become an important symbolic icon (El-Or and Aran, 1995) and today there are quite a few women who play public and leading roles in the religious nationalist camp. Further, as a result of changes within the Israeli military which expanded the range of tasks women are allowed to carry out in the military, Israeli women soldiers have become a regular part of the military roadblocks, combat units and as controllers of military drones and other hi tech military equipment (Sasson-Levy, 2003).

### Neo-liberalisation in Israel

The Zionist yishuv (settler community) and the Israeli state post-1948 have been a mixture of urban and rural settlement, private capitalist and cooperative and public ownership. However, since Labour Zionism took control of the Zionist movement in the 1930s, the symbolic mission has become to transform 'the diasporic Jew' into the new Jew – the Sabre (the local prickly pear), strong, attached to the land and with a militarized masculinity, whose main task would be the conquest of the land, the conquest of the labour (market) and the conquest of the products market (Abdo & Yuval-Davis, 1995) as main ideological as well as economic and fiscal strategies (Grinberg, 1991). Women were required not only to be the national biological and cultural reproducers but also, in the Jewish tradition of being the man's helpmate, to undertake all the civil and military roles the men could not fulfil because of their dedication to the national cause (Yuval-Davis, 1986).

During the period of 1948-1967, the status-quo agreement seemed to be a stable cornerstone of the Israeli political and social system. The Labour Zionist parties continued to be hegemonic, including a decisive secular majority, not least because although the majority of the Mizrahi Jewish new immigrants who amounted to about half of the Israeli population during this period came from a traditional religious background. Many of them were incorporated into the secular education system as part of their overall controlled 'absorption' into Israeli society in which they became largely dependent for their livelihoods and housing on the Jewish Agency, the *Histadrut* (General Union) and the state which were controlled by the secular Labour parties.

Although the tight grip of the Labour party over Israeli politics started to weaken in the early 1970s and in 1977 for the first time the right wing Likud party won the Israeli elections, neo-liberal reform in Israeli policy

was orchestrated in 1985 under a Labour government headed by Shimon Peres, originally as a condition for a further American aid pack of a billion and a half dollars. This was maybe an inevitable result of the closer relationships between the USA and Israel after the 1967 war and the neo-liberalisation which started to take place at the time in the USA and globally. Since then, much of Israeli state and economy became less regulated, sub-contracted with less aid to and protection for the poor (Benjamin and Jones, 2008).

However, given its specific geo-political situation and the continuing occupation, the reconfiguration of the state in Israel has worked somewhat differently in Israel than in other neo-liberal states. The government subsidies given to settlers in the occupied territories, for instance, cushioned many poor families, and the religious parties continued as part of their price of being coalition partners to extract other means of support and subsidies to ultra-orthodox families and educational institutions. At the same time, the growing number of Palestinian citizens of Israel, with gradually higher levels of education and occupations came to enjoy what Amalia Sa'ar calls 'economic citizenship' (Sa'ar, 2016) which integrates them into the labour market but excludes them in other ways from national participation.

The continuous growth of the ultra-orthodox sector (about 4% a year) as the result of the large number of children in each family has taken place while their men are excluded from serving in the Israeli military in favour of studying in the Yeshivot. At the same time, only about half of these men enter the formal labour market (in comparison to 76% of their women), which means that about half of the children of the ultra-orthodox families live under the poverty line. This has created two major conflict foci between neo-liberal Israel and the ultra-orthodox. One has been the disproportionate state welfare and subsidies given to the ultra-orthodox sector in a neo-liberal state that is motivated to reduce state expenditure,

but which is nationally and politically committed to continue and subsidise this sector. The second is a growing resentment of secular Israelis for the disproportionate time and resources they are made to give to the Israeli military, rather than pursuing their individual and business endeavours, while the ultra-orthodox are not required to do so. This has brought down the previous Netanyahu government and caused the political deadlock and repeat elections that have gripped Israel in the last few years.

### **The religionization of Israel**

As discussed earlier in the paper, the inherent connection between Zionism and the Jewish religion has been there from the beginning of the Zionist movement and has affected the public sphere and personal relations in Israel since its establishment. However, as Peled and Peled (2018) claim, what they call the religionization of Israel started only after the 1967 war and the occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank where most of the traditional holy sites of Jewish tradition are located. This religionization has been accelerating since 2000 and is manifested in contemporary Israel in a number of key social fields. They also point out that in recent times, under the influence of the younger Rav Kook, the two political tendencies among the ultra-orthodox which they call “principled accommodationism” and “pragmatic rejectionism” have increasingly converged, with some Religious Zionists becoming more orthodox in their religious behaviour and kharedim (with the exception of the “principled rejectionists”) becoming more nationalist in their political outlook.

Peled and Peled also argue that a new type of response to the Israeli state – “counter-nationalism” – which accepts Zionism but seeks to redefine it in an exclusively ethno-religious way, has been developed since the mid-1980s. Unlike the extreme right wing national religious project that started shortly after the 1967 war, with ‘Gush Emunim’, the religious settlers in the occupied territories since shortly after the 1967 war leading it

ideologically (Don-Yehiya, 1987), this counter nationalism is being led by Mizrakhi and not Ashkenazi Israeli Jews. This political project has been developing by the Mizrahi kharedi political party, Shas. Shas seceded from the kharedi Agudat Yisrael party because of the anti-Mizrahi discrimination that prevails in that party, especially in admissions to its educational institutions. Shas has played a major role in the religionization of a sector of the Mizrahi community, transforming it from a mainly “traditionalist” outlook in religious terms to being increasingly kharedi, although many of them continue to support Netanyahu’s Likud party as well as other parties and not Shas. And, as has come up in recent debates in the Israeli press by social scientists, being a Mizrakhi these days in Israel covers diverse political identities, from different classes and politics, although the majority of them have combined religious and nationalist identity politics, which is anti-Ashkenazi but is also very much anti-Arab.

The large wave of Russian immigrants, who are mostly non-religious, after the fall of the Soviet empire transformed the demographics of the Jewish population in Israel, which meant that the tensions between the religious and the non-religious sectors became exacerbated, in addition to the racist tensions between Askenazi and Mizrakhi Jews. This, plus the lifestyle effects of the neo-liberalisation of Israel which took place at the same time, resulted in a certain erosion of the status quo as an institutional arrangement in which the Orthodox rabbinical establishment controlled many aspects of Israeli public life. Non-kosher restaurants, cinemas and other businesses opening during the Shabbat, for instance, started to spread and private civil marriages and secular burials in kibbutzim and other places also increased during the 1990s (Ben-Porat 2013).

The rise of Israeli feminism and the spread of gay pride celebrations (the latter especially being used by Israeli propaganda to enhance its international image as a progressive society - what has been described as ‘the pinkwashing’ of Israel (Ritchie, 2015)), have also contributed to the

growing sense among the Israeli religious sector that the status-quo agreement has been undermined.

However, at the same time, neither the formal status quo arrangements nor the status of religion in political life and its importance as vital government coalition partners have really changed. Thus, as Uri Ram (2008) has argued, what has been seen as the secularization of Israel in the 1990s was a superficial process, and the ground was ready for the religious upsurge, beginning in the following decade, which saw a retreat of liberalism in all areas of social life, except in the economy (Ram, 2008). Moreover, the reconfiguration of state, society and economy under neoliberalism has created new autonomous religious, social and political spaces for alternative political cultures to grow, especially in the yeshivot and the settlements.

Peled and Peled (2018) argue that the war of 1967 was a crucial turning point as it generated a 'legitimacy crisis' among Israeli Jews. The crisis was due to two ethical-political dilemmas that had confronted Zionism in Palestine/Israel all along but were heightened by the results of the war: the Jews' right to the Land of Israel, when exercising that right meant displacing or oppressing the Palestinians; and the justification for the sacrifices demanded of Israeli Jews themselves in order to preserve and defend the Zionist project. They argue that paradoxically, both Israel's success in 1967 and the trauma it experienced in the 1973 Yom Kippur war, made statist answers to these dilemmas unpersuasive, especially for the younger generation.

As discussed earlier in the paper, the tension between universalism and particularism has been present in the definition of the Israeli state as both Jewish and democratic since the 1947 Declaration of Independence. Whereas the dominant citizenship discourse of statism, as well as of socialist Zionism, was what Shafir and Peled (2002) defined as a republican

discourse of pioneering civic virtue, the main citizenship discourse was an ethno-national discourse of primordial belonging, in which the religious Zionist discourse has gained a new hegemony, culminating in the Israeli nationality law of 2019 which defines Israel as an exclusively Jewish state, deleting the universal democratic from its definition.

There have been several major factors which facilitated the religionisation of Israel. First is the sheer demographic growth of the Jewish religious sector which enlarged its proportion in the overall Israeli Jewish population. The growing influence of the religious parties on school curricula in so called secular schools has also been an important factor. But probably the cumulative effect of what I and others like Barukh Kimmerling (2001) have called the existential anxiety of the Israeli Jews, as a result of the indefinite continuity of the conflict with the Palestinians and the crush of the rising expectations after the Oslo agreement, has added to the more generic precarity which neo-liberalisation has brought with it to people in many societies (Neilson, 2015). *Khazara bitshuva*, the Jewish ‘born again’ movement has been strong among Israeli celebrities as well as among Jews in other western countries, especially the USA. Contributions from both Jewish but especially Christian evangelists and other neo-conservatives have reinforced this trend and has made Netanyahu gradually rely more and more upon the religious sector. As a result, we see the effect of Israeli religionization in many public organisations, the Knesset (Israeli parliament), government ministries (including education and other culture), the media and the military.

As mentioned above, religious men in Israel can ask for an indefinite postponement of military service as long as they are studying in a *yeshiva*. Israel now has a huge number of *yeshiva* students – more than a 125,000 -- and the question of the non-military service of the Ultra-Orthodox has become a major political debate in Israel. At the same time, the growing participation of religious Zionist men, many of them settlers in the

occupied territories, in the military (for example via the specific kind of *Yeshivot Hesder*) has brought its own controversies.<sup>4</sup>

According to Peled and Peled (2018), today national-religious officers comprise about 40% of the junior officer ranks (up to company commander) in infantry units of the Israeli army and about 50% of the cadets graduating from the combat branches of the officers' school. Their presence in the upper echelon is no less significant: already in 2010 six out of the eight most senior commanders in the crack infantry brigade, Golani, were national-religious officers, as were half of the senior commanders in the Kfir brigade, stationed permanently in the West Bank, and three in the Givati brigade. This is in stark contrast to the earlier period in Israel in which the military elite was all secular and many of them were children of the *kibbutzim*.

This has had major implications regarding the normative and moral conduct of the Israeli army. During Israel's military operation in Gaza in the summer of 2014, the commanding officer of the Givati infantry brigade, Colonel Ofer Vinter, called upon his troops to fight 'the terrorists who defame the God of Israel.' This unprecedented call for religious war (rather than for national security) by a senior commander caused an uproar, but it was just one symptom of a profound process of religionization in Israeli society in general and the Israeli military in particular. It is not incidental that the press reported that defying a 2018 High Court ruling, the Israeli military is still pressing Israeli soldiers who are not recognized as Jews according to Rabbinical law (but according to the Law of Return Law) to convert to Judaism.<sup>5</sup>

These developments have had profound effects on the position of women in the Israeli army. For example, Elyakim Levanon, the rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Elon Moreh, was quoted as saying that IDF soldiers should rather choose death than remain at events which include women's

singing.<sup>6</sup> Levanon's comments came as a reaction to a possible military ruling to forbid religious soldiers from leaving events where women sang, signalling death was preferable to complying with such an order.

As Orna Sasson-Levi (2014) points out, the religionization of the Israeli military has nurtured a growing phenomenon of gender separation, or of women's exclusion, which is at the heart of a broader ongoing controversy in Israel. In order to examine the implications of such gender segregation, she quotes from the discussion of the ministerial Committee on the Status of Women on December 27, 2011. In the discussion, Knesset member Rachel Adato asked about a case in which three women soldiers in the Artillery Corps were transferred to other roles because religious soldiers had arrived in their unit. The adviser to the Chief of Staff, Colonel Gila Kalifi-Amir, replied:

We are referring to three women soldiers, two of whom are combat commanders and the third—a combat soldier. We should understand [...] in this unit there were [religious] soldiers from the "Yeshivot Hesder" who finished their primary training and then were expected to arrive at the cannon batteries. We knew that one of the women combat soldiers was about to be discharged and the other two could not function as direct commanders of the Hesder soldiers. Even I, who do not come from the religious world, understand what it means that a woman is the direct commander of men. Instead of insisting that [the women] should take the religious soldiers, they were transferred to train in basic training, and everything is in order (The Committee on the Status of Women, 2011).

Whatever we think about the Israeli military and its pivotal role in Israeli public and national life, this incident is illustrative of the ways in which secular women's rights are being marginalized as a result of the

religionization of Israeli society, both civil and military. However, in order to examine more fully the ways in which the religionization of the Israeli society interacts and interweaves with its neo-liberalisation, I shall now turn to examine some of the issues relating to *kharedi* women.

### **Illustrative case study: *Kharedi* women, employment and Israeli High Education**

Among the Israeli population sectors, the ultra-orthodox are the poorest, even more so than the Israeli Palestinians, despite their important political and cultural role in Israeli society and the benefits the kharedi sector receives from the state which I discussed above.

Of course, the kharedi community in Israel is not homogeneous. On the contrary, as described early in the paper, it is markedly segregationist and hierarchical, not only in relation to non-orthodox Jews but also within, between Hassids and *mitnagdim* (those who followed charismatic Rabbis and those who opposed them and focused on a systematic studies of the religious texts), as well as among followers of different rabbis within each tendency. The difference between Ashkenazim (Israeli Jews from European and other Western countries origins) and Mizrahim (Israeli Jews from Middle Eastern and North African origins) is also highly salient and Ashkenazim claim moral superiority and self-confidence which is lacking among the Mizrahim who are excluded from local kharedi elites. Nevertheless, the issue of poverty, although not equal, cuts across these differences.

One major cause of this poverty is the very high birth rate among their families which causes the whole sector to grow about 4% a year. Although, as a whole, the sector enjoys many benefits, as Amalya Sa'ar (2016) points out, this has not fully compensated for the loss of generic welfare benefits which disappeared with the neo-liberalisation of the Israeli state. The high

rate of national and international charity donations which is normative in the kharedi communities is not sufficient either.

Another major factor affecting the poverty of the kharedi community is that 60-70% of the ultra-orthodox men voluntarily retreat from official workforce to study the Torah (bible), in yeshivot and *Kollels* (advanced Judaic studies programs), both for religious and social status reasons but also in order to get exemption from the Israeli military. At the same time, unlike in some other extremely religious societies elsewhere, outside employment for women is the norm. Although they are responsible for domestic and childcare work, about 80% of them take part in the formal labour market as well. Many of them work as teachers but others are seamstresses, wig makers, accountants, clerical workers and care takers. Until recently, however, these women worked mostly inside their communities, but this has been changing as this labour market has become more saturated.

Indeed, increasingly, ultra-orthodox women have started to develop home businesses and micro-entrepreneurships, much of which requires training and studying outside their communities. In this, they are strongly encouraged and subsidised by the state. Given the high degree of gender segregation dictated by the kharedi community, which aims to keep women both family oriented and modest, this change has produced new tensions in the wider Israeli society, such as the controversy around the demand for gender segregation on Israeli buses in lines serving larger kharedi communities.

One major scandal which reached all the way to the Israeli High Court relates to the introduction of sex segregated courses in Israeli high education. Sex segregated courses were originally introduced in Israeli universities for men, hoping to attract them into the labour market and stop their families needing state support. Apparently, these courses were

a complete failure, because the kharedi men, for the reasons mentioned above, did not want to come and train for the labour market. Following that, courses for women only were introduced, with much better success. The Israeli universities, with their budgets cut under neo-liberal state policies, were eager to host these courses for extra income, as they have been eager to accept courses specific to soldiers which involve high securitisation of staff and students, including the army's authority to decide which lectures would be allowed to teach particular academic courses.

Yofi Tirosh, a known Israeli feminist and the Head of the Faculty of Law in Tel-Aviv university, headed the application to the Supreme Court against the existence of such courses, claiming that:

Everything starts with micro-interaction: in mutual recognition, in listening to a different point of view and a different life experience in the discussion in the classroom. A healthy society must educate its members on the norm that institutions, organizations, physical and symbolic spaces should be heterogeneous. It is unacceptable for us to tolerate values according to which the person who differs from me is so contemptible that I cannot sit next to him in the same room, or refuse her entry into the institution through the same door as I do.<sup>7</sup>

This sexual segregation breaks the long tradition of mixed education in higher education in Israel, aimed at achieving sex equality, which applied even to Bar-Ilan, the Israeli Jewish religious university and to Israeli Palestinian colleges, such as Al Quasemi in both of which religious students share the same classrooms. The introduction of sex segregated courses in Israeli higher education institutions, in addition to constituting a significant addition to the religionization of the Israeli public sphere, is also making it less and less possible for girls from religious families who have been

studying in mixed high education institutions to normatively be allowed to do so, as this would now be seen as immodest.

In terms of actual mixed work places, Michal Frenkel (2018) carried out an interesting study, observing the career trajectories and specific negotiations kharedi women carried out in hi-tech workplaces which were subsidised by the government as an incentive to give kharedi women employment and engage them as cheap labour since most of them have sub-academic training. Because of their domestic tasks, special arrangements are made for these women to work less hours in a day, but they still earn more money than in their previous jobs inside their community. Frenkel also shows the ways in which different women interpreted their primary obligation to their families differently, particularly in terms of working overtime or not, using the internet or travelling for work purposes. However, these different interpretations are made not only within the context of their husbands' agreement but even more importantly of that of their Rabbis and leaders of the community. Frenkel shows the ways in which the leaders of the community continue to exercise tight control over these women, as well as using their political influence to impose particular conditions on the employers via the intervention of the state in addition to special representations within the workplaces.

Frenkel argues that her most important findings relate to the ways in which

religiosity, power relations, and intersecting ideologies at the institutional level have constructed an inequality regime within which UO (ultra-orthodox) women must negotiate their intersecting identities and working conditions. At the core of this institutional intersectionality is the triangular relationship between a) the centralist, neo-liberal Israeli state and its welfare policy, b) the high-tech industry and its standard employment practices, and

c) the organized UO community. Critically, the latter enjoys political power at the state level due to the coalitional structure of the Israeli government which often depends on UO parties. Thanks to this political leverage, the UO community to which these women belong can influence how (and if) its members are integrated into the labour market (*ibid:10*).

To quote Orna Sasson-Levy (2003), ‘the strategy of gender separation, as a way to gain equality, corresponds to the Aristotelian rule of treating “like cases alike and unlike cases differently” and derives its progressive power from the fact that it is initiated by the oppressed groups themselves... the issue of the initiating party is critical for the understanding of the impact of gender separation.’ And, of course, while it might be argued that kharedi women want gender segregation, the overall social, economic and political powers which lead to growing gender segregation in wider sectors of the Israeli society which is undergoing religionization, in both collusion and conflict with neo-liberalism, reinforced by the growing mutual assimilation of kharedi and nationalist-religious camps in Israeli society, cannot be seen in any shape and form as equivalent to feminists wanting to have their own spaces.

## Conclusion

This article examined the relationships between state, religion and neoliberalism in Israeli society. The Zionist colonial project sought to establish an Israeli Jewish nation-state as a modern alternative to the construction of Jewishness as diasporic ethno-religious communities. It was an attempt to resolve ‘the Jewish question’ with the history of antisemitism. Although most religious Jews were not Zionists, Zionism needed the Jewish religion to get legitimation to its imaginary of all Jews as one nation and of Palestine, the ‘Holy Land’ of the three monotheistic world religions, as its homeland. After the establishment of the Israeli

state in 1948, Orthodox Jewish religious mainstream were incorporated into the Zionist project and became habitual government coalition partners in exchange for continuing the status quo of the construction of Israeli Jewish society along the Ottoman Millet system, in which religious courts and inspections became part of the state bureaucracy and no secular public spaces, especially in the realm of personal law, but also in other areas such as food and transport industries, were allowed.

My article discusses how after the 1967 war and the occupation of the Palestinian territories which were not included in the Israeli state after 1948, religious Zionists, who until then saw themselves as 'second rate' Zionist and religious, found their own project of settling in the occupied territories, especially near the traditional Jewish holy sites, a means to hasten the coming of the Messiah. The growing hegemony of the settler movement, among both non-religious and non-Zionist religious Jews, encouraged and funded by the state as well as by international Jewish and evangelical Christian movements, without any effective opposition from any other states and international organisations, has gradually brought about a growing religionization of the Israeli state and the Zionist colonising project.

This relationship between state and religion has been deeply affected by the gradual neo-liberalisation of the Israeli state and society since the mid-1980s. As an ideology, neoliberalism can be seen as the opposite of the Jewish ethnocratic collectivist religious ideology. It cares about individuals' rights, freedom and pursuit of happiness and profit; it aspires for globalisation which would enable access to global markets and it gradually eviscerates the state from a wide range of public sector services which have developed in social democratic welfare states. However, while doing so, it gradually brings about what I called elsewhere (Yuval-Davis, 2012; Yuval-Davis & al, 2019) 'the double crisis of governability and governmentality'. In this crisis, states stop representing the interests of

the citizens and become subservient to the interests of multinationals and other supranational forces. Citizens, as a result of this and the growing precarity and inequality in people's everyday lives under neoliberal policies, lose trust in their governments and look elsewhere for reassurance and empowerment, such as in religious or secular nationalist racist populist movements and authoritarian charismatic leaders. This, even when they are known liars and criminals. Governments often respond to these pressures by incorporating securitisation, racialised 'everyday bordering' and populist racist nationalist discourse in attempts to demonstrate their legitimacy (Yuval-Davis et al, 2019).

In Israel, these global processes have been enhanced by several factors. The neo-liberalisation of Israeli economy has been closely tied up with its construction as a permanent colonising and warfare state, thus focusing on security and surveillance industries which colluded with rather than acted against Israeli nationalist projects. At the same time, the growing religionization of Israeli nationalism after the '67 war has strengthened the overall rightward turn of Israeli hegemonic nationalist ideology which since the 1947 Independence Declaration has been ambiguously trying to be both 'Jewish and democratic'. The realities of the continuous post-67 occupation in which, given Israeli national service, the majority of the Israelis have been personally involved, have added into this racialised turn. Given the growing Palestinian resistance to the Occupation, and the tightly balanced demographic relationship between Jews and Palestinians in the areas under the control of the Israeli state, the existential anxiety of Israeli Jews is probably higher than in many other neoliberal societies.

This process, which Benjamin Netanyahu, the longest serving Israeli Prime Minister, has done his most to encourage has involved solidifying the Israeli religious parties, both the Zionist and the others, into his coalition bloc. Although this has not gone uncontested, the traditional Labour Zionist movement has dwindled to almost political insignificance. There

have also been sectors of the Israeli population, especially but not only the young middle-class Ashkenazim, who have adopted universalist secular neoliberal values. A minority of them have come to care for human – and Palestinian - rights; others are focused more on the materialist benefits of transnational neoliberal economy. In both cases, however, the taking for granted of the collectivist orientation of national service in the army has been weakened and the resentment towards the religious people who were released from this national task as a result of government policy has grown, interwoven with racialised contempt towards the ‘primitive’ ultra-orthodox and Mizrahi Jews. This contestation has been enhanced by the resentment about the fact that while much of the Israeli welfare state has been privatised, members of the religious sector continued to enjoy relatively higher level of benefits. Their leaders’ political pressures combine with the fact that a large number of them live under the poverty line as well as populate the settlements on the West Bank which are subsidised by the government.

However, beyond this contestation the co-adaptation and collusion between the Israeli state, the ultra-orthodox and the neoliberal economy has continued to grow. The case study at the end of the article has illustrated some of the gendered effects of this collusion. It illustrates not only the collusion between the religious leaders, the Israeli government and the neoliberal employers but also suggests that women are not passive objects in these processes. They both adopt and find a variety of strategies of how to survive and benefit from their employment without rebelling against the overall strict patriarchal religious control in their communities. This is happening at the same time when in other Israeli public spaces, civil and military, women’s rights are taking second place to those of the patriarchal religious ones.

Scholars like Saba Mahmood (2011) would probably have applauded these ultra-orthodox women workers and seen their mode of action as signs of

women's empowerment. And indeed, many of these women are active and powerful. However, they adhere not only to an ideology which in principle constructs women as ultimately subject to male control but is also highly racist towards those who are not part of their ethno-religious community.

**Note:** This article has been written before the results of the third-round elections in Israel have taken place and before the outbreak of the Corona virus pandemic which has brought major, probably unprecedented, local and global health, economic, social and political crises. At the same time, these crises have also highlighted the different strategies taken up by different governments and societies to tackle them. In the case of Israel, Netanyahu has used the pandemic as an excuse to reassert his political power and major parts of the centre-right opposition used it as an excuse to join his government, rather than face a situation in which they would have to rely on Israeli Palestinian support for their minority government. At the same time, the pandemic crisis has also exposed the extreme dependency of Netanyahu on the ultra-orthodox, as a result of which they have not been policed into following safety rules adopted as a protection against the pandemic, to the detriment of the Israeli society as a whole.

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**To cite this article:**

Yuval-Davis, N. (2020). In between neo-liberalism and religious fundamentalism: some reflections on contemporary Israel and some of its women. *Feminist Dissent*, (5), 94-150. Retrieved from:  
<https://doi.org/10.31273/fd.n5.2020.760>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on secondary rather than primary data, as in recent years I was able to spend only short periods in Israel, not long enough to conduct independent field research. I want to thank the generous and kind help and support to the many Israeli friends and colleagues who shared with me their time, thoughts and writings on the issues discussed in the paper, especially the new generation of Israeli feminist social scientists that have researched them. I therefore want in particular to mention here (in alphabetical order) Rabab Abdulhadi, Sarai Aharoni, Orly Benjamin, Sylvie Bijawi, Michal Frenkell, Neve Gordon, Manar Hasan, Catherine Rottenberg, Amalia Sa'ar, Orna Sasson-Levy and Yofi Tirosh. Thanks also to Rashmi Varma and Gita Sahgal, members of the *Feminist Dissent* editorial collective, who have read and commented on the first draft of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> <https://jewishlink.news/op-eds/3222-is-all-zionism-really-religious-zionism>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israels-declaration-of-independence-may-14-1948/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/11/mutiny-fear-israeli-army-zionists?INTCMP=SRCH>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-defying-court-idf-still-presses-non-jewish-soldiers-to-convert-1.8946282>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/israeli-army-rabbi-under-fire-amid-women-s-singing-row-1.405493>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.acri.org.il/single-post/16>