

Jewish Feminists Organize to End the Occupation

A Tale of Two Conferences

The Palestinian uprising, now raging for a year and a half, has radically changed the Palestinian national movement and the Israeli movement for coexistence. Within this context there has been a rapid increase in feminist organizing for Middle East peace among Israeli, Palestinian, and Jewish women in the United States and around the world. BRIDGES is particularly committed to reflecting in our pages the strong and articulate voices of these women.

by Marcia Freedman

"We, Jewish and Arab Israeli women, Palestinian women from the Occupied Territories and American Jewish women, declare that as feminists we support the struggle of the Palestinian people for self-determination and we understand the concern of the Jewish people for security. . . We demand that the government of Israel declare its readiness to negotiate with the internationally recognized representatives of the Palestinian people - the Palestine Liberation Organization - in order to reach a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of the peaceful coexistence of two independent states, Israel and Palestine."

This is the call that issued from a gathering held in Jerusalem on December 2, 1988 of more than 350 women, most but not all Jewish and Israeli, under the banner "Occupation or Peace: A Feminist Response." Organized by two Israeli women's peace organizations, Women in Black and SHANI - Israeli Women Against

the Occupation, the conference was timed to coincide with the presence in Jerusalem of 300 Jewish women from 23 countries for the "Empowerment of Jewish Women" conference sponsored by the American Jewish Congress, the World Jewish Congress and the Israel Women's Network. The conference on the occupation was planned as a "post-conference" to the Empowerment conference.

Since the start of the *intifada* (uprising), most Israeli feminists have devoted their energies and resources almost entirely to ending the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This response was an intuitive one. A year later, Israeli feminists were still trying to figure out what propelled them into the peace movement.

During the 1970's, Israeli feminists were seriously split on the Palestinian issue to the extent that all feminist organizations, large and small, carefully avoided taking "political" positions. At that time I was a controversial figure in the Israeli feminist movement because as a Member of Knesset and a known advocate for a two-state solution I unavoidably and publicly linked feminism with the peace camp.

The peace issue threatened to split the feminist movement many times. In 1980 it came to a head, at the closing session of a two-day national conference organized by activists from the three main centers—Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The conference, attended by 700 women, was meant to bring us together to celebrate a decade of feminism in Israel. The so-called "political" issues were avoided until the very end, when a small group of left-wing women introduced a resolution calling for an end to the occupation.

The very word "occupation," never used in Israel in those years except by anti-Zionist groups,

aroused passionate opposition from those against the resolution. All who tried to speak for the resolution were drowned out by cries of "anti-Zionist," shouts that those in favor were trying

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to "politicize" the movement and that the status of the "territories" was not a feminist issue. Though the majority present would probably have voted for a resolution affirming the Palestinian right to self-determination that did not use the word "occupation," a vote on a more moderate amendment was never taken. For just as it was being called by the chair, opponents rushed to the podium, wrestled for the microphone and, finally, pulled the plug on the sound system. Horrified at the prospect of having to do battle for control, Amalia Bergman, who chaired the session, decided to simply walk out of the auditorium, followed by almost everyone else.

Eight years later, on December 2, 1988, a year after the start of the *intifada* and after almost two decades of feminist organizing in Israel, those who had been so violently opposed to Palestinian nationalism were actively involved in the feminist peace movement and present in Jerusalem to express their opposition to the occupation and their solidarity with Palestinian women.

This time, opposition to a conference billed as "a feminist response to

* Most of the West Bank women present at the post-conference remained anonymous, and the names of those who didn't have been omitted here, lest they be endangered.

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the occupation" came from a different and relatively new segment of the Israeli women's movement. The Israel Women's Network, a coalition of professional women, most of whom have some influence in the Israeli establishment, was organized in 1984. Though it has been an important factor in making feminist issues acceptable within the Israeli middle class, and has sometimes worked effectively together with grass-roots feminist groups, it does not use the word "feminist" in its name or its literature. The IWN, one of the sponsoring organizations of the Empowerment conference, did not support the post-conference and, in fact, tried to get the organizers to call it off.

Further opposition came from the Commission for Women's Equality of the American Jewish Congress. The Empowerment organizers refused to make their mailing list available so that participants could be apprised of the post-conference in advance. There were threats, never carried out, to cancel the main conference if the post-conference wasn't cancelled and to bar organizers and panelists of the post-conference from playing an active role in the main conference. The threats were enough to cause a group of New York feminist leaders to withdraw their support for the post-conference, among them several women who had actively participated in the early stages of planning. But for the continued support of an ad hoc group in Berkeley and the determination of Israeli feminists to proceed on a more limited basis than what they originally envisioned, the post-conference on the occupation would never have happened.

The Empowerment conference was a posh affair held at Jerusalem's new Hyatt Regency Hotel and lasting four days. Its program reflected the American Jewish establishment's avoidance of the issues that

preoccupy Israeli feminists: the occupation, violations of human rights, and the growing power of religious fundamentalism and rightist nationalism in Israeli politics. Nevertheless, mostly because of the efforts of Israeli feminists, these subjects were often on the agenda. Really, it was impossible to be in Israel and read the daily papers without becoming preoccupied by the occupation and its consequences for both Israelis and Palestinians.

Here are only a few events of the week during which the conference met. The Attorney General announced that Rabbi Moshe Levinger, one of the most fanatic anti-Arab settlers of Kiryat Arba, would not be prosecuted for the fatal shooting of a Palestinian in Hebron, even though the police, after a preliminary investigation, recommended bringing charges. A bill was introduced to the Knesset by 22 Members that would establish "security distress" as a legal defense for acts of civilian violence against Arabs. Under its provisions, the now jailed members of the Jewish underground would be released, and any Jew who felt threatened by an Arab would have the right to kill in self-defense. A Jew was arrested for wearing a button bearing the symbol of crossed Israeli and Palestinian flags. And both major parties agreed that if they were to establish a coalition with the ultra-Orthodox parties, they would support not only the "Who Is a Jew" legislation, but also the criminalization of abortion and increasing the power of the rabbinical courts.

As women gathered for the opening reception of the Empowerment conference, dozens of members of SHANI distributed an open letter announcing that, "Some SHANI members and other women working against the occupation will be attending the AJC conference with the intent of raising the issue of the occupation.

We urge you to talk with them. We want to be sure that you hear the Israeli voice of dissent against the continuous abuse of human rights by the Israeli government." The letter documented the intimidation and harassment of Israeli feminists organizing the post-conference. The SHANI letter also protested the conference site. The Hyatt Regency, on Mount Scopus, was erected two years ago on land confiscated from Palestinians in 1968.

During the opening session, as Bernice Tannenbaum of the World Jewish Congress welcomed participants, several SHANI women entered silently and spread a large banner across half the hall bearing the words, "Join Israeli Feminists To End the Occupation." A standing ovation from at least half of those present indicated that these issues are as much on the minds of Diaspora feminists as of Israelis.

At each of the sessions in which Israeli women participated, they spoke of the occupation and made their views known, whether or not the topic was appropriate to the subject of the session. In a workshop on violence against women, Barbara Swirski, a feminist publisher and one of the founders of the first shelter for battered women in Haifa, spoke of the violence of Israeli soldiers against Palestinian women. On a panel on images of Jewish women in the media, Rachel Ostrovitz, an editor of Israel's only feminist magazine, *Noga*, spoke of the absence of images of the occupation in the Israeli media.

Most dramatically, the occupation dominated the conference's last session on "Women and War." The two Israeli panelists chose to deviate from their assigned subject matter and talk about the occupation. Naomi Chazan and Galya Golan had been invited to speak about their research on women's attitudes towards war and peace; they are also leaders of

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Peace Now. Both argued passionately for an end to the occupation. "It was a moral decision," Golan told me afterwards, the same moral decision made by almost all the Israeli participants in the Empowerment conference. This was the most well-attended, the most protracted and the most electric of all the sessions, bringing home the fact that though the establishment Jewish organizations that sponsored the conference wished to avoid confronting the issues of the occupation, participants from the Diaspora as well as Israel did not want to and could not comply with the attempt to silence criticism of the Israeli government.

The women attending the Empowerment conference were not uniformly dovish. During the open mike that followed the "Women and War" panel, several women, mostly Israeli, angrily denounced the organizers for presenting a one-sided view of the occupation. They defended the use of whatever force is necessary to put down the uprising and continue the occupation. Some spoke of the rightful establishment of Jewish sovereignty over the whole of "Eretz Yisrael," and some spoke of the threat to Israel's existence inherent in the idea of a Palestinian state. In response to the overwhelming majority support for the Israeli peace movement on the part of the mostly non-Israeli audience, they expressed their anger that those "who choose not to live here and share the danger" dare to express opposition to government policy. Identifying themselves as feminists, they denied that there was any connection between feminism and opposition to the occupation.

The post-conference was a very different affair. Most of those present were radical feminists and/or leftists, and many were lesbians. Few were famous and few held positions of influence in government or establishment organizations. Most had not attended the Empowerment conference, some because they could not

afford the \$50 registration fee charged to Israelis or could not take time off from their jobs, some because on principal they refused to patronize the Hyatt Regency, and many because the program seemed irrelevant to their concerns.

Four Palestinian women and five Jews were on the panel. Palestinian women from Israel and the occupied territories were also in the audience, as were American Jewish women from the Empowerment conference. Both the panel and the discussion that followed took place in three languages—Hebrew, Arabic and English. Translators were scattered throughout the audience, their whispering a constant buzz that intensified the sense of urgency and excitement in the room. Nabila Espanioli, a Palestinian psychologist from Haifa, moderated.

The Palestinian women from the occupied territories expressed a unified response to living under occupation. By contrast, the Jewish women used this forum to offer complex and sometimes contrary reasons for their opposition to the war as Israelis, women, feminists. Hanna Saffran, director of *Isha l'Isha*, the Haifa women's center, and an organizer for Women in Black, said, "I was born in the Middle East, so this is my struggle, not because I am a Jew. As a feminist, my solidarity in this struggle is with other Israeli and Palestinian women." Many American Jewish women present, as well as many recent immigrants to Israel, were disturbed by what they perceived as Saffran's denial of a connection between Judaism and Israel.

Leah Shakediel reestablished the connection, but from a religious point of view almost as alien to many Diaspora Jews as the secular *sabra* view. Shakediel is an Israeli feminist heroine for her successful struggle against the ultra-Orthodox establishment, who tried to deny her right to serve on the Religious Council of Yerocham to which she was legally

elected, because she is a woman. Reading from a text prepared earlier and without intending to take issue with Saffran, she described her evolution from a follower of *Gush Emunim*, the messianic nationalist settler movement, to a supporter of the religious peace movement, *Oz v'Shalom*. "The older I got, the more confused I got," she said, until she came to understand that her religious convictions and the Jewish values they embody stand in contradiction to what she called an "elitist" tendency in Zionism "to dehumanize Arabs, even to deny their existence."

The next Jewish panelist raised an issue disconcerting to everyone, Israelis, Palestinians and Americans, but to Israelis in particular. Carmel Shalev, an attorney and author of a study of human rights violations in the occupied territories, was undaunted in her analysis of the difficulties of reconciling opposing feminist and nationalist interests. Shalev raised an issue that once seemed very clear to Israeli feminists but that has now become an embarrassment—women's service in the armed forces. Israeli feminists have protested the ghettoization of women soldiers and their banishment from combat-related duty. Shalev encapsulated the meaning of Israeli women's exclusion from battle in the double meaning of the Hebrew word *zayin*—both weapon and penis. She argued that so long as Israeli women are denied weapons, their voice in the national debate on security and defense could not signify. Since the start of the *intifada*, this issue has quietly been dropped from the Israeli feminist agenda. By giving up the demand for equality in the armed forces, Shalev argued, Israeli feminists cede one of their most popular demands, one that, as she put it, is "in line with national priorities."

"Why is she talking about that here of all places?" muttered the woman sitting next to me, squirming with discomfort.

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Photo by Debbi Cooper



Photo courtesy of Lil Moed

Left: The author and U.S. feminists Phyllis Chesler and Andrea Dworkin join Women in Black demonstration. Right: Israeli Women in Black hold signs saying, "Dai laKibush," "End the Occupation."

Lillian Moed and I, both immigrants (though I have been back in exile for eight years), addressed a different theme, neither Israeli nor Jewish. We both took a global feminist view and tried to justify opposition to the occupation in these terms. I say tried because neither of us, I think, succeeded very well. Moed drew the parallels between women's liberation and national liberation and the important point at which, in contemporary Israeli history, they overlap. "The same ruling power that controls the Palestinians also controls us," she said. I spoke about the dangerous confluence of militarism, fundamentalism and messianic nationalism, the breeding ground for virulently anti-feminist and anti-women fascism, that has been developing in Israel as a direct effect of the occupation. Israeli women working on violence against women are already seeing the consequences in more rape, more battery, more child abuse and more brutal pornography.

Lil Moed touched on yet another sore spot for Israeli feminists. In opposing the occupation, Jewish feminists look towards Palestinian women as our closest allies. Yet, Moed reminded us, we cannot expect Palestinian women to support our feminist agenda. "The heavy hand of

oppression is on them day and night," she said.

The post-conference was not a Jewish feminist conference per se; the issues inherent in a Jewish-feminist response to the occupation were expressed but not joined and debated. For Israeli feminists, working in concert with Palestinian women is an imperative. Many of those who objected to the Empowerment conference, among them those who refused to attend, did so not just because it was held on Mount Scopus, but because by definition, it excluded Palestinians. Israeli Palestinian women active in the Israeli feminist movement were troubled by the strain on their dual identity that the Empowerment conference represented. They were drawn to the presence of an international feminist gathering in Jerusalem because of its potential to empower Israeli feminism. But by the fact of its being so explicitly a Jewish feminist conference, they felt excluded. Some Jewish Israeli feminists objected to the conference on these grounds, saying that it was not only insensitive but counterproductive. The post-conference was, in part, meant as a corrective.

Of the Palestinians who spoke at the post-conference, three were from the occupied territories, two

from within the Green Line, citizens of Israel. The West Bank Palestinian women are active in the uprising. One, a young high school girl, had been arrested and held in administrative detention for several months but never charged with a crime. She had, she said, been singing the Palestinian national anthem with a group of friends, eight of them all together, when they were surrounded by twenty Israeli soldiers who ordered them to stop singing. When they refused, they were beaten and one arrested. The Israeli organization, Women for Women Political Prisoners, spoke of the situation of Palestinian women held in Israeli prisons, whose numbers are growing. In addition to the usual forms of coercion during interrogation, women are often sexually harassed, and one, at least, has been threatened with rape.

The only West Bank Palestinian present who would be identified by name is an activist in a women's group fighting deportation. Reminding me of Renée Epfelbaum, one of the Argentinian Mothers of the Plaza des Mayos who spoke so movingly at the Empowerment conference, the Palestinian told of her husband who had disappeared twice into Israeli prisons under administrative detention. Since those arrested are rarely

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brought before a judge, their families often do not receive knowledge of their whereabouts or official confirmation that they are under arrest. Her husband, a professor of physics at Bir Zeit University, is now one of twenty-five under deportation orders.

A third West Bank Palestinian woman was also, we knew, a leader of the Palestinian women's movement. She came with a prepared statement, as a representative of the leadership of the uprising. "We Palestinian women turn to you, women of Israel, and hold out our hand in peace. We do this in the clearest possible way. There is much distrust in Israel of the declarations of the Palestinian National Council. We wish to say, through you to all Israelis, that there is nothing to fear. Stop the occupation. Give your support to peace." The Palestinian National Council (PNC), she said, has explicitly acknowledged that the conflict must be settled by negotiation and territorial compromise, and in doing so it has renounced its earlier claim to all of Palestine. She pointed out that U.N. resolutions 242 and 338, accepted by the PNC in November, 1988 for the first time, explicitly recognize Israel's right to exist within secure borders. This is the position urged by the West Bank Palestinians, she said. In renouncing terrorism, the PNC has given political legitimacy to the resistance struggle of the people of the West Bank and Gaza. "We offer our hand in peace. Peace, peace is the daily prayer in every Palestinian home."

Samira Hourri, a long-time political activist from Nazareth, represented the public Israeli Palestinian stance—opposition to the occupation because it prolongs the state of war between Jews and Arabs and because it claims resources needed to deal with other problems. Like Hourri, most of the Israeli Palestinians at the conference were members of *T'nuat Nashim Demokratit*, the Democratic Women's Movement associated with Israel's Communist Party, for a long

time the only political party in which power is shared equally between Jews and Arabs. Towards the end of the conference, as I was taking notes on the amendments to the draft resolution I'd introduced, I found myself surrounded by a group of older women, Arab and Jewish, all faces I recognized as Democratic Women. They urged me to drop the word "feminist." They would not dare bring it to the floor, but they feared the word would offend much of their membership, though not, of course, themselves.

The conference was a success. Still, it has left a number of unanswered questions in its wake. What, among all these nuances, does unite us as feminists opposed to the occupation? Is it more than a shared political agenda with the left? And how do we, as feminists, accommodate our more hawkish sisters who share our demand for equality for women but disagree with us on the Palestinian issue or, more subtly, about whether the Palestinian issue is a Jewish feminist issue? Among the former are Israeli women who support the continued occupation and the use of whatever means necessary to hold on to the West Bank but who are nevertheless active in the Israel Women's Network, as well as American Jewish women, like Bernice Tannenbaum of the World Jewish Congress, who are political hawks but support Jewish feminist activities. Among the latter are larger numbers of Israeli and American Jewish feminists who believe that for the sake of unity, the politics of the Middle East and Jewish feminism must be kept strictly apart.

Both the Empowerment conference and the post-conference on the occupation, one indirectly and the other by affirmation, made it clear that the vast majority of pro-Zionist feminists, though not all, oppose the occupation and support the Palestinian national struggle. But even among

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"Women In Black" in the U.S.A.



Member of Israel's "Women In Black" holds sign. Photo by Debbi Cooper.

There are currently several vigils in the United States: in San Francisco, Berkeley, New York, Ann Arbor, Boston, and Washington, DC.

In San Francisco, contact Kathy Saade Kenny, 2934 22nd St., San Francisco, CA 94110 (415) 826-2547; in Berkeley, contact Ruth Michaels, P.O. Box 820, Berkeley, CA 94701, (415) 644-0480;

in New York, contact Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, 163 Joralemon St., Suite 1178, Brooklyn, NY 11201 (718) 855-2905; in Ann Arbor, contact Judy Seid, 910 Arbordale, Ann Arbor, MI 48103 (313) 665-2825

in Boston, contact Nancy Murray (617) 482-3170

in Washington, DC, contact Hilda Silverman, 2700 Connecticut Ave. NW #502A, Washington, DC, 20008 (202) 667-0924.

The JWCEO is now putting out a Jewish Women's Peace Bulletin. Information about women's Middle East peace activities should be sent to them, at the above address, as well as to this magazine, and to Nan Fink, publisher, Tikkun Magazine, 5100 Leona, Oakland, CA 94619.

Sherover-Marcuse, continued from page 7

acy in its varied forms. It was an oppression she acknowledged intellectually, but only at a distance. Yet everything about her work, her style, her charisma, evoked a definite and peculiarly female sensibility that made her so profoundly effective.

In her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker described her mother as she worked in her garden: "I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible - except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have."

Ricky was radiant like this in her workshops. We were her flowers; she taught us how to bloom.

Chavera yikara, dear friend.

Ohevet ha-Shalom, lover of peace.

Bettina Aptheker teaches Women's Studies at University of California, Santa Cruz. Her most recent book is Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness and the Meaning of Daily Experience (1989, U. of Mass. Press). She is a lesbian, the mother of two children and co-parent to a third.

Contributions to assist in the continuation of Ricky's work may be sent to: "The Ricky Sherover-Marcuse Liberation Work Fund," 6501 Dana St., Oakland CA 94609.

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breaking silence and the growing support of women in Minneapolis and St. Paul, women in Israel, women in Palestine, women around the United States. The vigils are both empowering and effective because women of varying class backgrounds, Jewish identities, and sexualities, slowly listen, consider, and begin to slowly, slowly, and courageously

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these feminists, opposition to the occupation is far from clear and simple.

The post-conference ended with a demonstration of 450 Women in Black. For the past year, Israeli Women in Black have held a weekly vigil in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. They stand, silently, dressed in black, their signs white on black, calling for an end to the occupation. Though they are silent, passersby shouting support or denunciation, and counter-demonstrators (mostly followers of Rabbi Meir Kahane) are not. Their numbers continue to grow, and the media continue to cover their demonstrations.

The women, Israeli and Palestinian, who organized the post-conference need the support of their Jewish and Palestinian allies in our respective dispersions. Here are some of the things they would like to see happen:

— Women in Black demonstrations in cities throughout the United States and Europe, at the doors of Israeli consulates, before major Jewish organizations, and outside United States government buildings. They want us to pressure the Israeli government, our own governments, and the Jewish people of the Diaspora to accept the need for direct negotiations and a permanent

peace settlement that respects the needs of both sides.

— Fundraising to support the expansion of women's peace activism in Israel.

— Expanded dialogue and cooperation between Jewish and Palestinian women.

Feminist peace workers in Israel stand doubly isolated and doubly embattled. They deserve, indeed require, our active support. Contacts for Israeli feminist peace groups in Israel are:

SHANI, P.O. Box 9091, Jerusalem
Women in Black, P.O. Box 3742, Jerusalem

The Peace Quilt (Mapat Shalom), c/o Barbara Swirski, P.O. Box 36448, Tel Aviv

Women's Organization for Women Political Prisoners, P.O. Box 31811, Tel Aviv, 61318

Women's Movement for Peace, (Umbrella Group) P.O. Box 61128, Jerusalem, 91060.

Marcia Freedman is a former Member of the Israeli Knesset and a founder of the Israeli feminist movement. She currently lives in Berkeley, California and is writing a book on her experience of Israeli politics and feminism (Land of Exile, to be published by Firebrand Books).

open their hearts. This gives us hope.

B'shalom, in peace

Comments can be sent to
Hannah Arendt Lesbian Peace Patrol
PO Box 7041 Minneapolis MN 55407

Sharon Jaffe works as a cook in a transitional home for homeless women in the Twin Cities.

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*A subscription form
is on page 23.*

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