



## The Early Feminists of Israel: Blazing a Trail for Women of Today

*In her studies of gender in pre-State Israel, Dr. Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern has found that the role of women was not exactly as liberated as Zionist legend has it. Nevertheless, largely unsung heroines such as Ada Fishman Maimon contributed greatly to improving the status of women and to the significant role that women would take in the fields of labor and social affairs.*

In the Zionist ideology of pre-State Israel, equality – including gender equality – was extolled as one of its pillars; a factor that would contribute to the creation of a new, revolutionary Jewish society. That is why one of the standard images of woman of the time

was a tough pioneer, a hoe over her shoulder as she tills the fields in harmony with men. Golda Meir is the often-cited example of a woman who rose as high as any man could and who exemplifies the equality of opportunity that was ostensibly available to women.

But it wasn't exactly that way, says Dr. Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern of the Department of History, Philosophy & Judaic Studies at the Open University and the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, and author of *Redemption in Bondage – The Women's*

## Research

*Movement in Israel between 1920-39*  
(in Hebrew.)

"It is true that women were equal partners in theory, but when we look more carefully at these narratives, the reality was different. Though equality between the sexes was part of the Zionist credo, in fact, women were discriminated against in many fields, including labor. They were usually expected to take 'women's jobs' such as house cleaning, work in the textile industry, nurses and kindergarten teachers and even then, though they were a majority in these occupations, they were still paid less than their male peers and promoted less.

"People often cite the kibbutz cooperative agricultural framework as a place where women and men were treated equally, but even here, women mostly worked in traditional women's jobs (such as kindergarten teachers). Nevertheless, the kibbutz can be credited to some degree with helping to achieve women's rights. Because they were freed from household and childcare tasks, kibbutz women were available for other things, such as volunteering and working in the public sphere. That can be seen by the fact that most of the leaders in the Women Workers Movement were kibbutz women, whereas many of the rank and file were educated, middle-class city women. For these urban women living in an immigrant society, devoting time and effort to anything outside earning a living and minding their home and children was a luxury they couldn't often afford. That was especially true of women from Oriental countries, who generally played little part in these feminist activities, and indeed were often patronized.

"In the fighting forces too, although women played a part, it was not an

equal part. Only a certain percentage of women were recruited as fighters. Yet in spite of all these difficulties and restrictions, women did fight for their rights, balancing their loyalty to the Zionist credo with their desire for equality. The Women Workers' Council (Moetzet HaPoalot), for example, created in 1920 within the Histadrut workers' organization, was a magnificent endeavor which furthered work opportunities for women. Everything women achieved was due to their own struggles."

Eventually, volunteer women's organizations such as WIZO and Hadassah turned to social service

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activities as well as to the struggle for suffrage and other issues. Such groups helped create the welfare structure. They made significant improvements in the life of women through improving such things as childcare and health facilities. They also published for a short period a journal which pushed agendas of interest to women.

According to Dr. Stern, one of the women who achieved the most for women in pre-State Israel was Ada Fishman Maimon, who was a leader of the women's labor movement in Eretz Israel, a pioneer of women's rights and a Knesset member.

Although her work is little-known today, she actually accomplished a great deal in her time, notes Dr. Stern. Born in Russia in 1893, Maimon came to Eretz Israel in 1912, where

she worked as a teacher and in 1914 opened a Hebrew school for girls in Safed. From 1913 to 1920, she was a member of the Central Committee of the Hapoel Hatzair worker's movement and in 1920, she was a delegate to the Prague Conference where the federation between Hapoel Hatzair and Youth of Zion was established. She participated in the founding convention of the Histadrut and served on its executive committee, where one of her prime achievements was to raise the issue of women.

"Women were not represented as women in the Histadrut Federation of Workers so Fishman and her colleagues threatened that if they were not given representation, they would create a separate organization. This was a real threat to unity. The Histadrut gave in and the women's council became the elected apparatus of women workers in the Histadrut. This eventually became the biggest women's organization in pre-State Israel."

Maimon went on to work for the Women's Workers Movement, become the head of the Aliya Department of the Histadrut from 1946-7 and a member of the world leadership of WIZO.

Today, women in Israel are reaping the fruits of the struggle for equality undertaken by these brave women of pre-State Israel. "They were the vital link," said Dr. Stern, "the stepping stone between the old, traditional past and the Zionist future. Without their struggles, women's status in Israel would have been far less optimistic. They did not succeed on every front, and they paid heavy prices, but they achieved better conditions in many fields, especially labor. In the public arena dominated by men, they assured that attention was paid to every question connected to women." ▶





## Queen for a Day

*The Purim Carnival Parade in Tel Aviv, 1934*

*Selecting women of Yemenite origin as Purim Queens promoted Zionist ideals in pre-State Israel*

In an article "Who's the Fairest of Them All? Women, Womanhood and Ethnicity in Zionist Eretz Israel" in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* (published by the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies and Brandeis University), Dr. Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern examined the ways Zionist aspirations towards women materialized in the pre-State era, focusing on the Queen Esther contest as an example. She posits that selecting Yemenite women as "queens," the epitome of beauty, enhanced the Zionist agenda and promoted its ideals, while at the same time instilling and preserving the Yemenite ethnic identity.

The fact that the contest took place on Purim was significant. "The carnivalesque nature of Purim helped obscure the old religious meaning and enabled the Zionists to use the holiday as a foundation for their new 'folk' culture," she noted. "Thus, the dynamics of Purim reflected the relationship between the various elements of the Zionist cultural system. New rituals were added to existing traditions, which were used as a means to build up a sense of solidarity and communality among members of the Zionist society. The beauty pageant was one of these new rituals, and as such it functioned to model norms and ideals, social relationships and gender roles."

The queens were invariably Yemenite, perhaps, posits Dr. Stern, because "in Zionist iconography as in Western culture in general, the Orient was a platform for vivid imagery. In the Jewish context, Yemenite Jews were synonymous with "authentic" biblical Jews, and Yemenite women, in particular, became the archetype of the "genuine" Eretz Israel woman. "Like the French People's Muse, the Zionist beauty queen was also queen for a day, after which, she continued to face the hardship of economic insecurity. Yemenite women's positive imagery in the Zionist culture may have compensated them somewhat for their lack of equality in everyday life, both in their communities and in the Zionist milieu."

"Ashkenazi women, on the other hand, opted for a more complex depiction of women. Although they accepted men's representation of "true" and "genuine" womanhood, they introduced another model as well: "We believe that no woman is prettier than the *halutzah* (pioneering woman), who dresses in a simple dress with a simple hat . . . adorned with locks of hair."