

Israelis Facing a Seismic Rift Over Role of Women

By ETHAN BRONNER and ISABEL KERSHNER

JERUSALEM — In the three months since the Israeli Health Ministry awarded a prize to a pediatrics professor for her book on hereditary diseases common to Jews, her experience at the awards ceremony has become a rallying cry.

The professor, Channa Maayan, knew that the acting health minister, who is ultra-Orthodox, and other religious people would be in attendance. So she wore a long-sleeve top and a long skirt. But that was hardly enough.

Not only did Dr. Maayan and her husband have to sit separately, as men and women were segregated at the event, but she was instructed that a male colleague would have to accept the award for her because women were not permitted on stage.

Though shocked that this was happening at a government ceremony, Dr. Maayan bit her tongue. But others have not, and her story is entering the pantheon of secular anger building as a battle rages in Israel for control of the public space between the strictly religious and everyone else.

At a time when there is no progress on the Palestinian dispute, Israelis are turning inward and discovering that an issue they had neglected — the place of the ultra-Orthodox Jews — has erupted into a crisis.

And it is centered on women.

“Just as secular nationalism and socialism posed challenges to the religious establishment a century ago, today the issue is feminism,” said Moshe Halbertal, a professor of Jewish philosophy at Hebrew University. “This is an immense ideological and moral challenge that touches at the core of life, and just as it is affecting the Islamic world, it is the main issue that the rabbis are losing sleep over.”

The list of controversies grows weekly: Organizers of a conference last week on women’s health and Jewish law barred women from speaking from the podium, leading at least eight speakers to cancel; ultra-Orthodox men spit on an 8-year-old girl whom they deemed immodestly dressed; the chief rabbi of the air force resigned his post because the army declined to excuse ultra-Orthodox soldiers from attending events where female singers perform; protesters depicted the Jerusalem

police commander as Hitler on posters because he instructed public bus lines with mixed-sex seating to drive through ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods; vandals blacked out women's faces on Jerusalem billboards.

Public discourse in Israel is suddenly dominated by a new, high-toned Hebrew phrase, "hadarat nashim," or the exclusion of women. The term is everywhere in recent weeks, rather like the way the phrase "male chauvinism" emerged decades ago in the United States.

All of this seems anomalous to most people in a country where five young women just graduated from the air force's prestigious pilots course and a woman presides over the Supreme Court.

But each side in this dispute is waging a vigorous public campaign.

The New Israel Fund, which advocates for equality and democracy, organized singalongs and concerts featuring women in Jerusalem and put up posters of women's faces under the slogan, "Women should be seen and heard." The Israel Medical Association asserted last week that its members should boycott events that exclude women from speaking on stages.

Religious authorities said liberal groups were waging a war of hatred against a pious sector that wanted only to be left in peace.

That sector, the black-clad ultra-Orthodox, is known in Israel as Haredim, meaning those who tremble before God. It comprises many groups with distinct approaches to liturgy as well as to coat length, hat style, beard and side locks and different hair coverings for women. Among them are the Hasidim of European origin as well as those from Middle Eastern countries who are represented by the political party Shas.

As a group, the ultra-Orthodox are, at best, ambivalent about the Israeli state, which they consider insufficiently religious and premature in its founding because the Messiah has not yet arrived. Over the decades the Haredim angrily demonstrated against state practices like allowing buses to run on the Sabbath, and most believed the state would not survive.

The feeling was mutual. The original Haredi communities in Europe were decimated in the Holocaust, and when Israel's founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, offered subsidies and army exemptions to the few in Israel then, he thought he was providing the group with a dignified funeral.

"Most Israelis at the time assumed the Haredim would die off in one generation," said Jonathan Rosenblum, a Haredi writer.

Instead, they have multiplied, joined government coalitions and won subsidies and exemptions for children, housing and Torah study. They now number a million, a mostly poor community in an otherwise fairly well-off country of 7.8 million.

They have generally stayed out of the normal Israeli politics of war and peace, often staying neutral on the Palestinian question and focusing their deal-making on the material and spiritual needs of their constituents. Politically they have edged rightward in recent years.

In other words, while rejecting the state, the ultra-Orthodox have survived by making deals with it. And while dismissing the group, successive governments — whether run by the left or the right — have survived by trading subsidies for its votes. Now each has to live with the other, and the resulting friction is hard to contain.

“The coexistence between the two is breaking down,” said Arye Carmon, president of the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem research organization. “It is an extreme danger.”

Mr. Carmon compared the strictly religious Jews of Israel to the Islamists in the Arab world, saying that there was a similar dynamic at play in Egypt, with tensions growing between the secular forces that led the revolution and the Islamic parties now rising to prominence.

“Today there is not a city without a Haredi community,” said Rabbi Abraham Israel Gellis, a 10th-generation Jerusalem Haredi rabbi, as he sat in his home, an enormous yeshiva on a hill outside his window. “I have 38 grandchildren and they live all over the country.”

But while the community has gained increased economic might — there is a growing market catering to its needs — what is lacking is economic productivity. The community places Torah study above all other values and has worked assiduously to make it possible for its men to do that rather than work. While the women often work, there is a 60 percent unemployment rate among the men, who also generally do not serve in the army.

It is this combination — accepting government subsidies, refusing military service and declining to work, all while having six to eight children per family — that is unsettling for many Israelis, especially when citizens feel economically insecure and mistreated by the government.

“The Haredi issue is a force flowing underground, like lava, and it could explode,” Shelly Yacimovich, a member of the Israeli Parliament, and leader of the Labor Party, said in an interview. “That’s why it must be dealt with wisely, helping them to join modern society through work.”

While change has begun — thousands of Haredi men are learning professions, more are getting jobs and a small number have joined the Israeli Army — the community is in crisis. Many ultra-

Orthodox leaders feel threatened by the integration into the broader society by some of their followers, and they are desperately holding on to their power.

“We have to earn a living,” said Rabbi Shmuel Pappenheim, a reformist Haredi leader from the town of Beit Shemesh. “We are a million people with a million problems. The rabbis can shout a thousand times against it but it won’t help them. And so we have the extremism — on both sides.”

Dan Ben-David, executive director of the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel, said fertility rates in the Haredi community made the issue especially acute; the very religious Jews are the only group in Israel having more children today than 30 years ago.

“They make up more than 20 percent of all kids in primary schools,” he said. “In 20 years, there is a risk we will have a third-world population here which can’t sustain a first-world economy and army.”

And, Mr. Ben-David added, what children learn in the ultra-Orthodox school system — largely unregulated by the state as a result of political deals — is unsuited for the 21st century, so even those who wish to work are finding it hard to find jobs.

“Their schools do not give them the skills to work in a modern economy and no training in civil or human rights or democracy,” Mr. Ben-David said. “They don’t even know what we are talking about — what we want from them — when we talk about discrimination against women.”

The Haredi community thinks this is a wild misunderstanding of its views.

Rabbi Dror Moshe Cassouto, a 33-year-old Hasid, lives with his wife and four sons in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Mea Shearim, one of the centers of Haredi life in Israel. He never looks directly at a woman, other than his wife, and he believes that men and women have roles in nature that in modern society have been reversed, “because we live in darkness.”

His goal is to spread the light. “God watches over the Jewish nation as long as it studies Torah,” he said.

Still, the spitting and Nazi talk horrify him. He says hard-liners have caused harm to the Haredim.

Asked about the recent troubles, Rabbi Cassouto shook his head and said, “A fool throws a stone into a well and 1,000 sages can’t remove it.”