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1 I use this term, which is laden with Christian connotations, with some trepidation. Here it refers to a large and varied group of people who were not brought up as Orthodox Jews but adopted Orthodoxy, often with great intensity, later in life. The Hebrew term for formerly secular Jews who have adopted Jewish observance is hozrim biteshuva, which means “those who return in penitence.”
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God created a pure heart for me.  
Let me create, O God, in purity.  
Enable me to create from sanctity.  
You, who create worlds and produce them  
And I, who was created in Your image, draw the power of creation from You.  
Everyone has been given the tools with which she can  
Discover divinity in the world, and You have given me the power of imagination,  
The need to act, and the ability to encounter a character.  
My soul summons me to create, to discover, to express, to transmit  
The holy with my words and my body.  
Enable me, O God, to bring this sanctity  
From potential to actual.  
Make me a vessel in your service.  
And may it be Your will that I will not stumble, will not fail, and will not be swayed by with pride,  
For everything is Yours, and everything comes from You.  
Amen.

Yael Schechter, “Prayer before Appearing on Stage,” Teatron Mahut [The Essence Theater], 1997
Introduction

I did not come as an outsider to Orthodox Jewish women’s theater. I chose this topic because of a personal affinity, because I am an Orthodox woman and educator who teaches theater and produces plays in educational frameworks. The complexity of this research topic—Orthodox women’s theater in Israel—was influenced by my own multiple and complex identities, and by my fields of interest. I found myself doing research in various disciplines: theater, feminism, anthropology and sociology, each one of which contributed insights and research methods of its own.

The research into Orthodox women’s theater, upon which this book is based, took longer than four years. It was a fascinating opportunity to link my biography with my research. I became a natural partner in conversation for the artists, a kind of indirect partner in their original creation, and they allowed me to get to know them personally. Our friendly relationship included conversations during which I was asked to express my opinion about their plays, and sometimes even to suggest improvements. Occasionally I even helped them set up the chairs and benches in the auditorium where the play was going to be put on and to carry props and scenery. This intimacy and involvement made me and my responses part of the research, and they also influenced my interpretation of the findings, my understanding of the phenomenon, and the changes that are taking place today among Orthodox women in Israel.

Throughout this book I will be discussing Orthodox Jewish women, not the Muslim or Christian women of Israel. To avoid repeated and cumbersome use of the adjective “Jewish,” I have omitted it below, but obviously with no intention of slighting women of other religious faiths.

The intense research was begun in 1998. While preparing the material for presentation in a book, I brought details up to date and added information about activity in the field until 2006.
The relations that grew with the subjects of the research were close and egalitarian, contrary to the “naturally” hierarchical relations commonly found in academic investigations, between the researcher, who possesses authority and knowledge, and the subjects, who provide information. In this study, the women artists, the educators, and the rabbis cooperated actively with me, consciously or unconsciously, in gathering the material. Sometimes they also agreed to read chapters of the study and to express opinions about the interpretation that I gave to the plays and to their theatrical work. By expressing criticism of passages that I wrote, they in fact also participated actively in the stage of analyzing the findings.

The research enabled me to meet adult women who had no education or rich experience in theater, not even amateur theater, but nevertheless—and perhaps for that very reason—they decided to create a theater of their own, original and sometimes daring, that expresses their experience as Orthodox women. While I was gathering the material from interactions with the subjects of the study, I felt that I was observing myself and the reasons that led me to be the kind of anthropological “witness” known in the literature as a “participant observer,” and not one of the initiators of the process, despite my eagerness to act and direct. I am sure that there is something to the claim made among anthropologists, according to which “every version of the Other is also a construction of the Self.” This closeness revealed another stratum of information to me, the stratum that researchers call “romantic” or “intimate,” without which this study would certainly have had a different character.

I also saw plays presented by ultra-Orthodox women for their own community, but the book is mainly concerned with the theatrical activity within the narrow and dynamic sector of Orthodox Zionism, on the axis between Modern Orthodoxy and the relatively new ultra-Orthodox-nationalist sector, which is sometimes influenced by elements from the adjacent societies:
Hasidism, the born-again, and the New Age.

I determined the women’s appropriateness to the field of research according to criteria such as: Orthodox observance of the Sabbath, the type of education that the women give or intend to give to their children, and their commitment to the State of Israel—meaning, whether they or members of their close family did national service or served in the army. During the research it became clear to me that the plays were not only a means for examining a new pattern of culture, which was created among Orthodox women in Israel, but also the processes of change that have been taking place in that culture during past few years, and its contacts with the adjacent cultures. I owe a debt of gratitude to these women and also to the rabbis and educators who agreed to devote time to me and be interviewed, sometimes more than once. I have not mentioned them all by their real names, sometimes according to their request, sometimes for reasons of my own.

From a theoretical point of view, this book demonstrates the mechanisms involved in cultural changes within a marginal, conservative society. It deals with a critical period in the developing of self-consciousness of Orthodox Israeli women, which resulted in many forms of cultural and social activism. Ironically perhaps, I discovered that their theater expresses their desire to be separate and different from secular society in parallel to their desire to be part of it, influence it and function in it professionally, socially and culturally. Feminism and post-modern thought as well as current political and social developments have exacerbated the crises members of this formerly insular society experience. Theater is one of the cultural venues they have to engage in reflective soul searching in what Victor Turner termed “redressive actions”. Rabin’s assassination by an Orthodox Israeli Jew and the anti-religious sentiments regular expressed in secular society provoked these women to act. As a result, these women’s initiatives have injected new, original elements into Israeli culture and encouraged
open discourse mainly within their society on topics which were once silenced. Perhaps now, two decades after its advent, Orthodox women who are more confident in their artistic endeavors will be able to engage more freely in broader artistic contacts with other factions as well.

This is the place to thank the organizations that supported me during this study and later in publishing the book: the Section for Teacher Training in the Ministry of Education and Culture; the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and the Lafer Center for Gender Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute for the study of Jewish women at Brandeis University, which appointed me Scholar-in-Residence and gave me a translation award; Talpiot Academic College, Holon, the college I have been working in for over two decades which has always supported my dramatic and academic projects and has also contributed to the translation of the book; the Cultural Administration in the Ministry of Science, Culture, and Sport; and the Gur Theater Archive and Museum at the Hebrew University.

Many people stood at my side: my husband Elchanan, who thought of the subject of the study and believed in me as a researcher and author; my grown daughters Avigail and Na’ama and their husbands Shlomi and Dovi; our son Hillel, who, though still a child when I undertook this project, became a sensitive and demanding reader like them; my friends: Dr. Miriam Ben Yehuda, Hannah Levkovitz, Michal Ben Tsur, Yehudit Mekler, Daniella Yoel, and Dr. Shlomit Cohen; my friend Professor Yerahmiel Cohen; Professor Shulamit Reinhartz, the head of the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute who supported my research throughout its duration; the translator of this book, Jeff Green; Bethany Wolfe, for her work on the digital edition; Phyllis Hammer, for her generous translation award; members of the Rutlinger and Reiner families; and many other friends who encouraged me during the years of this research.
My greatest gratitude is to Professor Tamar Elor, who guided me with wisdom and grace, not only forward but also into the depths of the topic, and empowered me as a scholar.

This book is dedicated to the blessed memory of my beloved parents: my father, Henry Haim Rutlinger, who passed away at a young age, and my mother, Sarah. My parents combined their love for beauty–art, dance, music, theater, and sports–in full harmony with their Orthodox way of life. I also dedicate this book to the memory of my husband’s parents, Rabbi Yosef Yehuda Reiner, one of the heads of the Kol Torah Yeshiva in Jerusalem, and his wife Marta, both of blessed memory, who embraced me as a daughter and bathed me in their abundant love.

The author

Kislev 5774 (November 2013)
Chapter One:
The Uniqueness of the Phenomenon

The connection of Israeli Jewish Orthodox women to theater is not a self-evident one, and indeed it has aroused disbelief among many people. One reason for this is that the physical presence demanded of actors in the theater is contradictory to the principle of modesty with which Orthodox women have been educated. The famous verse from Psalms, “All the glory of a king’s daughter is within” (45:14), is frequently cited as the basis for the discussion of the education of Orthodox Jewish women. This verse emphasizes the importance of cultivating women in the domestic, hidden, intimate arena—“within.” However, the Orthodox women who appear on stage have to attract the audience’s attention, to speak convincingly and dramatically, sometimes to sing, and sometimes to reveal their inner selves to an audience of strangers in order to communicate the feelings and thoughts of the characters they are playing. Thus, the appearance of Orthodox women on the stage is in absolute contradiction to the traditional education that demands modesty.

Another reason for traditional Jewish opposition to the theater is the prohibition that appears as early as the Talmud (Bavli Avoda Zara, 8b and Bavli Shabbat 150a) against going to “theaters and circuses,” and it derives from the identification of the theater as a place of idol worship, of sitting with frivolous people, and wasting time that should be devoted to Torah study. That opposition seeped deep into the traditional Jewish consciousness and restricted theatrical activity such as the Purimshpil, Hanukkah plays, and

5 “Shpil” in Yiddish (cognate with German Spiel) refers to a popular, satirical skit presented on the Purim holiday. Central to it are the characters of Mordecai and Esther or other biblical figures. The genre developed during the Haskala (nineteenth century enlightenment) period, and Yiddish theater grew out of it.
wedding jesters, to festive occasions. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Yiddish theater began to develop in Eastern Europe, but it was regarded as secular, anchored in mundane Jewish life, and its source was the breezes of Enlightenment that penetrated the Jewish community.

That Orthodox women turned to the theater in the past decade must be seen as a unique act of “border crossing,” which is connected to their desire to change cultural patterns from within. With this act many women express their deepest religious feelings. Even when they protest against the Orthodox social framework in which they live, they do not do so as a preliminary step toward abandoning it, but rather to express their frustration and their desire to make their voice heard publicly. Not only the actresses but also the spectators are complicit, because by purchasing tickets to the play they become partners in the subversive acts and in breaking the ancient taboo against the theater.

The Orthodox women who take part in the theater are not only crossing boundaries, they are also pioneers. This is a kind of cultural activism, an alternative activity to the synagogue, where most Orthodox women are physically separated from men by the mehitsa (a screen that divides the women’s section from the men’s section) and separated by the restrictions of halakha [Jewish law] that prevent them from taking active part in ceremonies such as being called to the Torah, reading the Torah, and leading prayers. In the theater, which most of these women create, the spectators are a kind of community, and the actresses are prayer leaders, as it were, who guide and lead them. Like the cantor in a synagogue, the actress also is the focus of the audience’s attention, on a raised platform, and she pronounces a text written in advance—which is often familiar to the audience. This new cultural practice, which the women initiated, opened an alternative way of worshiping God for them, aside from prayer, Torah study, the keeping of commandments, and donating to charity.
The uniqueness of the phenomenon is expressed in the originality of the plays. On the whole, the women do not make use of plays from the existing repertoire, nor do they look for texts in various theater archives. For them it goes without saying that writing the play is part of the theatrical work, along with acting, directing, designing the scenery and costumes, the lighting, and the production. Many plays are based on texts from the religious canon, which the women adapt, making them into plays or “story theater.” Chapters from the Bible, Midrash, prayers, stories about Tsadiks [Hasidic holy men], and stories about rabbis—all of these are raw materials. Writing the original play based on the canon enables them to engage in interpretation—give a current and feminist meaning to these texts. Their exegetical activity shifts the focus of attention to the figures of women and the dilemmas connected with women’s lives in the religious corpus, connecting stories of the past to the present. This concern with hermeneutics as the basis for the plays makes the authors into homileticists—a prestigious function that hitherto had been reserved to men—and it creates a women’s exegetical community on the margins of male religious hegemony. This activity empowers the public that is involved—both writers and spectators. It is an intercultural activity, taking the Jewish content of the study and interpretation of Jewish texts and injecting it into an alien cultural pattern: the theater. The adoption of theatrical discourse and form to create a new cultural product reflects the ideology and the way of life of the writers, who live on the seam between Orthodox and secular society and tries to adopt elements from both.

For the Orthodox women, the theater therefore serves as a “heterotopic” space, which is to say: a marginal space that challenges the accepted manners of representation and creates a

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6 A term coined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, as a key concept for understanding the existence of social life in the twentieth century, where there are separate and closed units of space and time, which simultaneously create stratified human existence. See his *Heterotopia* (2003).
different, unstable space, where acts of opposition and boundary-crossing exist alongside the creation of order and control. A heterotopia is a single, actual space, which was created by means of the juxtaposition of things that do not ordinarily fit together, and it is characterized by all the lack of clarity that derives from such a combination: it provides a place for an alternative space, following the opposition to representation of the existing social order. The heterotopia is isolated and not an open public space; entrance to it and departure from it are regulated by a system that demands effort or intention. The connection between theories connecting heterotopia to the women’s theater is clear. The institution of the theater and theatrical activity are in opposition to the existing social order within the national-religious community, but for the women, who are compartmentalized from liturgical and communal activity, it is grasped as an alternative space by virtue of its transitory nature and its illusory characteristics. It is a place for seeking change in the society. At the same time, the closeness between artists and the spectators (also women) creates a mechanism that moderates the subversive character of the theatrical activity, the sharpness of its messages, and the challenge that it poses to the hegemony.

In daily life the spectators would certainly oppose anti-establishment messages such as the desire to rebel, the difficulties and doubts of faith and maintaining an Orthodox way of life. They would also criticize the extroverted and immodest use of the body. However, in the framework of the theater, challenging messages and techniques like these are accepted as artistic conventions. It should be noted that in the view of spectators from “outside,” secular or ultra-Orthodox, these plays seem like a form of therapy whose proper place is the psychologist’s couch and not the stage.

Initiatives in the area of theater are part of a “revolution” that has been taking place in the past few years in this community, and it can be related to trends of Orthodox Jewish feminism,
which is emerging within its ranks and challenging the traditional Jewish world view. This approach cannot be summarized as solely a demand for equal rights and opportunity. Rather, it represents a spiritual revolution that offers an alternative reading of the world, of God, and of history. Feminists oppose the assumption that halakha, being an expression of a divine commandment, determines the high status of men in Judaism, thus discriminating against women. Tamar Ross claims that Orthodox feminism presents a different, particular agenda that gives preference to religious feeling and insists on a more pragmatic system of religious values, that affects daily life. Nevertheless, even in an atmosphere of social change, theatrical creation by Orthodox women is exceptional.

The Complexity of Orthodox Jewish Society in Israel

Outwardly Orthodox society is taken to be homogeneous, but a closer look reveals that it is composed of many segments with different ways of life, political opinions, and beliefs, as well as different styles of dress, and the contacts among them are fluid and dynamic, open to trends of thought from within and from without. Modern Orthodoxy seeks to combine a way of life integrated into the whole world with a way of life restricted by strict observance of halakha. This community grew up under the influence of the ideology of the Mizrachi Movement, which

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8 Orthodox society is aware of its own diversity, and it is no coincidence that so many terms are used by that society to characterize its various segments. Among others there are: hazzanit [people new to the religion, kozrim bitieshuva]; datashim [former Orthodox now secular], hardalim [ultra-Orthodox Zionists]; benishim [yeshiva students, bnei-yeshivot], gushnikim [people connected with the Gush Etsion yeshiva], Hasidei Bralslov, who study the teachings of Rabbi Na[hman of Bratslav, and Merkaznikim, who are connected with the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem.
9 This movement was founded in 1902. Its basic ideas, formulated by, among others, Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Reines (1839-1915) include a relationship
evolved into the (now defunct) National Religious Party. It places itself in the middle, between ultra-Orthodoxy and liberal streams of Judaism. This middle way demands considerable ability to maneuver, openness, and flexibility, along with great diligence in keeping the commandments. The other streams in Israeli society—the ultra-Orthodox, on the one hand, and secular Jews, on the other—offer clearer ideologies, and consequently to some degree they are more seductive. In fact, the modern Orthodox Jew deviates from the traditional halakha in three areas: the status of women, relations between men and women, and with secular culture. This deviation derives from deep commitment to universal human values such as equality and freedom. Rabbi Ronen Luvitz, one of the rabbis of this sector, claims that “modern Orthodoxy is not concerned so much with rebellion as with the search for a spiritual path in the post-modern age, and therefore it opposes a one-dimensional world and seeks to make possible a life of Torah along with a life of the spirit and culture of our times.”

Rabbi Daniel Sperber, also a university professor, adds, that because “no one today lives according to the Shulhan ‘Arukh, so the modern Orthodox Jew is opposed to stasis in halakha and seeks an opening for flexibility that can adapt it to reality and changes.”

In recent years, Orthodox educational institutions have been encouraging “Torah and spiritual fortification.” This fortification has led many people to be more punctilious in the observance of the commandments, to the increased involvement of rabbis in every area of daily life, and to the avoidance of activities connected with the leisure culture of secular society, which were once acceptable in national religious society. Thus a separation was made

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between state religious educational institutions and more ultra-Orthodox, independent institutions. In the private schools that emerged in the Zionist ultra-Orthodox sector, girls and boys are separated from a very early age. Politically, most of the adherents to this trend regard themselves as the true followers of religious Zionism. Rabbi “Ya’akov Gur,”¹² for example, a disciple of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh of Kfar Chabad,¹³ does not feel he belongs to the national religious community, though he was raised and educated in it. He is a vehement critic of the effort of the national religious community to combine the Orthodox Jewish world with the Western world. In his opinion, lack of commitment to the uniform line that is connected to life according to the halakha and according to the Torah is a shortcoming:

I admit that I don’t understand what the religious nationalists think… I don’t know what’s in their heads. I don’t know if what they want is right. In general, I feel that the national religious society isn’t clear enough—they want this and they want that at the same time. I was in a yeshiva high school, and I felt that erosion: to teach mathematics and English and also to teach Gemara. What about watching out for our own interests? (Gur, Interview, 2001).

Many of the ultra-Orthodox nationalists take the path of Rabbi Kook,¹⁴ who emphasized the connection between the nation and its land and the importance of self-realization though creative action. This approach sometimes slides in the messianic direction

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¹² A pseudonym. Throughout the book, the names of people referred to by pseudonyms will be placed in quotations.

¹³ A well-known rabbi among the born-again and Orthodox artists, and a charismatic leader. He is known to the secular community as one of the authors of the publication, Barukh hagever [Blessed is the Man], which justified the mass murder committed by Dr. Barukh Goldstein at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in 1994.

¹⁴ Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi under the British mandate and a highly influential leader and thinker.
in matters connected with the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. For many young people, who feel they belong to this stream, the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, which they call “The Expulsion,” impelled them to join more extreme political movements.

The born-again stand between the ultra-Orthodox and the secular Jews—they tread a difficult and winding path from total secularism to an ultra-Orthodox way of life. Many of them are connected to Hasidic yeshivot such as those of the Bratslav Hasidim and Chabad. Many of the born-again ultimately find a place for themselves in ultra-Orthodox society, and for that reason they find it difficult to understand national religious Judaism, which tries to combine the two worlds—the Orthodox world of halakha and the secular, Western world—and they level harsh criticism against it. Born-again artists who lead an ultra-Orthodox style of life are asked by the national religious community to produce theatrical events, upon the assumption that their work will suit the spirit of the national religious community with respect to form (modesty), language (clean), and content (Orthodox). At least two examples of this kind of cooperation are presented in the book. These encounters were replete with philosophical and theological misunderstandings and revealed the gap between the mentality of the born-again and that of the “Orthodox from birth” in the national religious sector. These gaps cannot be bridged, and they can only be seen as parallel to the misunderstandings that arose between women who were “Orthodox from birth” and the secular directors who worked with them.

In the discussion of the character of the national religious society, one must also take account of the influence of New Age on a considerable part of this community. The tendency toward mysticism and ecstatic religiosity has existed in this community for a long time, both because of the Hasidic tradition, with which an important part of this community grew up, and because of the atmosphere in Bnei Akiva yeshivot and in Hesder Yeshivot.
[yeshivot that combine Torah study with military service], which draws upon that tradition and nurtures it. This atmosphere is fostered, among other things, by means of the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, which are interwoven with kabbalistic elements and anchored in a mystical-mythic outlook regarding “Jewish sanctity.” This background fostered the development of ecstatic, radical mystical streams, neo-Hasidic in character, on the margins of the national religious community, in synagogues inspired by Shlomo Carlebach, in the Hilltop Youth in Judea and Samaria, and in groups of young people who have returned from journeys to India and the Far East and internalized the mystical religious ideas they encountered there. To maintain national religious society, despite the gradual decline in its strength in Israel, it was necessary to move away from a rational outlook to mystical ways of thinking and acting. According to Garb, this change derives from the open, multi-cultural atmosphere, in which it is possible to make room for a variety of religious and spiritual forms. This transition also finds expression in Orthodox discourse and leadership in Israel, which has accompanied the great changes that have taken place in this community in recent years.

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15 Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994) was a charismatic religious teacher who used his creative musical talents to attract young followers, mainly in North America. Some synagogues and prayer groups which use his tunes throughout the service and are considered more ecstatic.

16 The so-called Hilltop Youth are a militant sub-group, born in the settlements of Judea and Samaria, mainly adolescents, who live in the outskirts of these settlements, do not belong to mainstream educational systems, defy the Israeli army and in many cases instigate provocations against the Arab population living in the area...

Chapter Two: General Survey of the Theater Groups

This chapter surveys the Orthodox women’s theater groups from the sectors mentioned in the previous chapter, groups that were active from around 1995 to around 2005. The social affiliation of the artists is not always clear, and they did not always before appear audiences only from their own sector. Thus, by means of the theater, connections were made among sectors of the Orthodox population, which would not otherwise have been made. For example, women who appeared to be ultra-Orthodox with respect to their clothing were actually active in the national-religious community; women who, ideologically speaking, were national-religious or ultra-Orthodox-national appeared before audiences of ultra-Orthodox women, while there was no demand for their plays within the national-religious community. The differences between the sectors find expression mainly in insistence on modesty in dress, language, and the content of the plays.

Over the years, while this research was being conducted, among both ultra-Orthodox and national-Orthodox women increasing openness developed as well as willingness to deal in public with inner communal issues, family relations, marital problems, and social concerns. These theatrical encounters are therefore a way of examining these apparently “little” differences among the sectors of Orthodox society. It appears that these differences are quite significant, and it is important to be familiar with them in order to understand ways of thinking, the ideology, and the way of life of each sector, and the contribution of the theater to the changes that have been taking place in them recently.

Unlike the prolonged friction between the artists and a varied Orthodox community, the encounter between the Orthodox women’s theater groups and the secular community was rather
limited until recently. Despite the declarations of the women from the national-religious community, that they want to reach a secular audience, only a few of them managed to do so, mainly because until recently the professional level of these groups was not high enough to convince a secular audience, accustomed to professional theater, to come to see it. Another reason was that the Orthodox women were not aware of the need for public relations and publicity, so that publics not directly connected to the actresses did not know about the plays or about the theatrical activity among Orthodox women. This situation began to change when young women entered the theater—women who had studied theater professionally and intensively. But until now these groups have mainly appeared before women from Orthodox society, which encourages the women to continue in their activity because of their very interest and the excitement of the audience about the production of each play. The phenomenon of Orthodox women’s theater can be divided into two main categories: the theater of ultra-Orthodox women and that of national-religious women. Since I concentrated in particular on the national-religious community, I divided that group into two: settlers in Judea and Samaria and urban groups. But first I will discuss the theatrical activity among ultra-Orthodox women, activity which has been expanding and has not yet been studied.\(^\text{18}\)

**Theater among Ultra-Orthodox Women**

Among the ultra-Orthodox there is an expectation that plays will be produced on certain significant dates, such as at assemblies on the New Moon, which is a minor women’s holiday, on 11

\(^{18}\) The survey that appears here is meant to sketch out the characteristics typical of the activity that I observed on the margins of my study of Orthodox women’s theater. The reluctance of the ultra-Orthodox women to be interviewed and include a person from the outside in the process of their work made it difficult to include them in this study.
Heshvan, which is, according to the tradition, the day of the matriarch Rachel’s death, or at mass revival meetings that deal with “strengthening faith,” and where money is raised for needy families. These meetings have a set form: lectures by rabbis on the subject of the assembly, such as the New Moon, the religious duty of charity, helping others, the weekly Bible portion, followed by viewing plays based on the Jewish tradition, which last longer than ordinary plays—three or more hours. The audience is prepared for this. The women bring food and drink from home, and mothers bring their babies and place the carriages in the aisles, so that the play becomes a vibrant social event, colorful and full of life. The plays include choruses, dancers, and even multimedia, such as a film projected onto a gigantic screen while the dramatic activity continues on stage. “Yocheved Der’i” is regarded as a successful director in the ultra-Orthodox community, and she has directed three plays with large casts for the anniversary of Rachel’s death. Two of the three elaborate plays took up subjects that concerned the entire public in the State of Israel: the disappearance of the submarine Dakkar and, in 1997, the matter of the abducted Yemenite children. “Der’i”’s own Yemenite origins might have influenced her choice of the subject of the Yemenite children. She gained publicity even in the local secular press.\(^{19}\) The third production, “On the Main Highway,” was presented in 2000 in Binyanei Hauma [a large auditorium] in Jerusalem, to a packed house, with a cast of at least one hundred—girls, young women, and older women. Some of them played male parts in quite convincing fashion. The male characters spoke in lower voices and also moved on the stage like men. They wore long, black skirts with elastic bands on the bottom, so that they looked like trousers. The play was based on a book that is well known in the ultra-Orthodox

\(^{19}\) “Three thousand women gathered in Binyanei Hauma [‘The Buildings of the Nation,’ an auditorium in Petah Tikva] on Tuesday, and another thousand disappointed women went home without tickets.” *Ma bapetah*, a Petah Tikva weekly, Nov. 21, 1997.
community: *Hakol laAdon hakol* [Everything for the Master of All], by Ruĥama Schein. The book tells the story of the Herman family, who emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States in the early twentieth century and became a model in preserving an Orthodox life style and faith in God, as well as fostering virtues such as hospitality and charity. A representative of the family was present in the auditorium, which excited the huge audience that was packed into Binyanei Hauma. In Jerusalem it was evident that the audience enjoyed the adaptation of the well-known book for the stage, with the addition of dancing, songs, and technical effects.

Another director who was active in ultra-Orthodox circles, mainly in Bnei Berak, is “Rivka Schlechter.” She, too, staged spectacles that lasted for many hours, and time after time she filled the Cinerama Auditorium in Tel Aviv with thousands of ultra-Orthodox women. One of her plays, *Ne’ila* [“locking,” also the name of the concluding service on Yom Kippur], dealt with the effect of Alzheimer’s disease on members of a family, and it was so successful commercially that in Jerusalem thousands of tickets were sold to a film of its performance in the Cinerama Auditorium in Tel Aviv several weeks previously.

My efforts to persuade these directors to be interviewed were only partially successful. “Der’i” agreed to be interviewed by telephone, but “Schlechter” would not even agree to that. She sounded very self confident and she declared: “We’re at the top, and that’s very interesting to outsiders. An interview—absolutely not! You understand that you’re not the only one who’s asked me, and that’s a line I won’t cross” (“Schlechter,” telephone conversation, 2000). According to “Rakefet Ganon,” a born-again member of the Chabad community, about whom I will speak below, the theater that was produced in Bnei Berak was not at all artistic, and it draws its audience because of the investment in scenery and effects like the giant screen, the sound, the lighting, the revolving stage,
and several talented and well-known actresses, who appeared in the plays for a few minutes. In Ne’ila, for example, Batya Lentset, a well known, rather elderly actress who became Orthodox several years ago appeared:

They change the scenery all the time, and it takes hours... But [“Rivka Schlechter,” the director] is interesting... She doesn’t know the difference between literature and theater. There’s a story, and in the middle of that a process has to take place, otherwise no story is left on the stage. They don’t understand how to create dialogue, the difference between a story people tell? ... She, for example, definitely consults professional people... It’s as if she’s bringing the wide world to them–she thinks she’s doing Broadway... No ideology stands behind it, no art. Nothing... With them, if it’s pain, you can put it on stage: my pain, that of the neighbor across the way... There was a jumble of styles from the classics to Hagashash haḥiver [The Pale Tracker,” a popular Israeli comedy troupe], but the interesting things is that “the great” Batya Lentst stood there, went on stage and recited a monologue. She’s not a young woman anymore, and she spoke to the audience straight, from the beginning to the end, and they had no patience! Somebody who was sitting next to me explained to me: “We have no patience for old people, none!” Commercialization again—to use Batya Lentset. She transmitted the message best of all, and nobody understood.

(“Ganon,” Interview, 2000)
Born-again Actresses and Directors in Ultra-Orthodox Society

Along with artists who grew up within the ultra-Orthodox public, there are also born-again women, including former professional actresses from Israel and abroad, as well as naturally talented women who have received some training in acting and directing in their education studies. They work with the feeling that acting is the purpose of their lives, and they have to fulfill it. They regard theater as part of the process of “moral improvement” [tikkun hamidot], which is meant to overcome the pride connected with appearing before an audience. They put on plays based on texts from Jewish sources as well as from their own personal religious experience. On example is Irit Sheleg-Neria, whose one woman show, Sura [Sarah in Yiddish], has been presented at New Moon assemblies organized by the Torah Culture Department of municipalities as well as before ultra-Orthodox women. This actress, who is also her own scriptwriter and director, is a born-again woman, well known because of her marriage to the son of one of the heads of the national-religious society, Rabbi Zvi Neria. Today Sheleg-Neria dresses like an ultra-Orthodox woman, but she maintains close connections with the national-religious sector. Her play describes at length the way a woman named Sarah gradually became religious.

Sheleg’s friend, Fira Kantor, also an actress who became Orthodox, has presented her play, Havera mizman aber [A Friend from Another Era], 250 times, mainly before ultra-Orthodox women. I saw this play at a summer camp—vacations arranged for ultra-Orthodox women with large families in a modest Jerusalem hotel. There women leave their homes behind for a few days, and they can rest, study subjects that touch upon the household, education, and self-development, and they can also

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Schwimmer-Shilo, 2000, pp. 110-112.
enjoy “entertainment.” The play deals with a spoiled girl who is “drawn into” a book about the difficulties of life in Jerusalem under the Ottomans, and she learns, among other things, the value of making do with little. Kantor appears with two other women, Veronika Gottlieb and Keren Carmeli, who are not Orthodox. In 2002 Kantor also directed women from Gush Katif (in the Gaza Strip), putting on a play based on *Train Stories* by Sholem Aleichem. She and Sheleg-Niria continue to work together, in writing plays and in other theatrical projects. Both women are intensely active in these circles.

Born-again ultra-Orthodox women connected with Chabad Hasidism are mainly active in theater connected with girls’ schools. From time to time women ask them to organize a theater club. Two born-again artists who are active and well known in Chabad Hasidism are “Alice Rives,” who was a professional actress in France, and “Rakefet Ganon.” They include messages of Orthodox faith in their work as well as messages particular to the Chabad movement, connected with the teachings of the late Lubovitcher Rebbe. During the 1990s “Rives” was active in the ultra-Orthodox settlement where she lived, and she directed a theater group for women, who put on plays for three years, including *Mi ani haaber*? [Who am I—the Other?] and *Hatimbonit* [The Eccentric Woman]. She led a drama group for women in the community center of an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem, and every year she put on a play in schools. A few years ago she was asked to be the principal of a Chabad high school for the arts, but the project was never carried out.

“Ganon” is employed as a drama teacher in high schools and in a teachers’ seminary of the Chabad movement. She regards the production company that she and her husband established as another source of income, but primarily, she says, it is an artistic enterprise. She presents plays that deal with women’s lives, such as *Nosse–isha* [The Topic–Woman], *Otot hazman* [Signs of the
Time], and *Pegishat mahzor* [Class Reunion]. When she advertises the production company, which her husband manages, she does not use the word “theater,” because, as she says, “It isn’t ‘Jewish.’” She puts on the plays in smaller cities like Ashdod, Netanya, and Rehovot, and only afterward in Bnei-Berak and Jerusalem. According to her, despite the economic recession, “The audience wants to go out, and if it’s a good thing, and the cost isn’t too high—a ticket costs around forty to fifty shekels—it’ll go” (“Ganon,” Interview, 2003).

Although “Rives” and “Ganon” have been connected with Chabad Hasidism for more than two decades, their work in the theater still makes their acceptance difficult in that society, and they feel the great difference in mentality between them and the women who were “ultra-Orthodox from birth”:

> The people don’t have the same mentality, perhaps way of thinking, as you do. When I start to work on a play, the teachers are all against me until the end of the play, and then—they kiss me. But you have to go through all the pressures, the looks, the terrible suffering. I have a thermometer in my belly and my head. I have intuition and experience, and that’s good. I don’t make mistakes. I don’t sleep at night, and I think about whether the people will like it. Because we’re working for the audience. I understand them. I’m dying to direct a play by Racine, but it’s impossible. Our audience [Chabad and the ultra-Orthodox] has no notion about good theater. When I was young, every day I went to the theater, and our conversations were about directing and acting. But in the Orthodox world people don’t care about art, about directing, only about the idea. It was a huge letdown when they started to debate about the idea instead of talking about the
directing. ("Rives," Interview, 2001)

As someone born-again, I came from the place where I was, to this place – they didn’t come to me. I chose Chabad, so I do what can I do. I’ll be honest with you – I also protect my skin. If I had come ten years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. It’s like the process of a new immigrant. My language has changed, my style of speech, my style of dress… Today I have more courage. I’m in the educational system, I already have credit with a lot of people. I’m an artist in my soul, and I’m also an educator… More often than not I go home discouraged… It really is hard for me, and I wonder what direction I should go. For example, my family, because they didn’t get education in art, and they have no artistic sides. My children, still somehow, but my grandchildren… They’ll just think they have a nutty grandma! I want to break out, but they won’t understand me. ("Ganon," Interview, 2000).

Ganon emphasizes that ultra-Orthodox society is varied, but it has uniformity on the subject of the theater: it does not regard it as an art but as a didactic tool. Their viewpoints are different:

The ultra-Orthodox community wants a story, a message, it doesn’t have to be Orthodox, but in the end I’ll know that you have to honor parents and I’ll come back to that place. A real conflict won’t be seen. We only talk about the nice things. You ask, is there art? No! Is there a gigantic statement? No! Is there theater? – Yes! There’s an event, there’s interaction, there’s acting, and the desire for us to put on a play. Now I’ll tell you something that
belongs to your research. I have a feeling that there’s something nosy about our community. A grown woman shows who she is. She has no other opportunities to present herself. Some of them, when they go on stage say: “I didn’t fulfill my intellectual abilities, I didn’t continue in my studies, so at least I have something else.” I think that the Age of Ratings has come to the ultra-Orthodox sector, too. Really! The women want to be famous. (“Ganon,” Interview, 2000)

“Ganon” claims that her desire to produce women’s plays does not derive from feminist ideology but from her interest in artistic creativity. She declares:

I’m in favor of chauvinism. I’m a big chauvinist. I have to feel like a woman. I need men… There’s no doubt that the society relates to me in physiology the way we relate to a handicapped person: we rush to bring him a chair. The question is whether we oppose it. I have no problem with that—it’s what I as a woman can do. I do some things more than he does. Actually, when I became religious, I cleansed myself of lots of things that I didn’t have as a secular woman. I always was looking for something… In what way something? Something productive. Today I don’t have that. I’m very energetic. But if you ask me, “What is it that you want to do?” I’ll tell you, “To get home.” (“Ganon,” Interview, 2000)

Except for the two born-again women, most of the ultra-Orthodox women who were active in theater were not willing to cooperate with me and be interviewed. For that reason I decided at an early stage of the research to focus on what was going on with the women from the national-religious sector. They did
want to cooperate, and they were willing to devote time to being interviewed, to explain, and even to include the researcher more intimately in the processes of work, in the motivations for working in the theater, and in the problems they experience. At the same time I continued to follow developments in theatrical technique, in acting, and in the content of the plays by ultra-Orthodox women.

**Theater Groups of National-Religious Women**

**Characterizing the Groups**

One can find similarities among the Orthodox women’s theater groups. Until recently, the participants were amateur actresses from their mid-thirties until over fifty. Most of them were Ashkenazi (of European origin), some had a large number of children, and many lived in settlements in Judea and Samaria. They did not study theater in an academic or professional framework, nor were they exposed to theatrical experiences as actresses or spectators. Rather, they came to it through community organization or educational in-service training. Usually one woman who was highly committed to the idea would start the theater group in a local community center, receiving some support from the regional council. All the women showed great enthusiasm, and they were willing to invest great effort to produce the play and afterward to travel and perform in distant places throughout the country. Indeed, some of the plays were put on in many places over a period of several months or even years. Professional groups that manage to preserve financial independence, such as Noa Ariel’s *Domem-Medaber* [Silent Speaker] Theater, and the *Hadarim* Theater (named after

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21 For example: *Ruth*, by the Emunah College; *Bina yetera* by the Nekuda Hayehudit group; *Mirkam* [Texture] by the Women of Samaria; *Tehilot* [Praises, but also women named “Tehila”) by the Women of Gush Katif; *Ha’erev hayafe behayai* [The Most Beautiful Night in my Life] by the *Domem-Medaber* [Silent-Speaking] Theater; and *Prusat lehem* [A Slice of Bread] by the *Delatayim* [Double-Doors] Theater.
the father of one of the actresses) run by two graduates of Emunah College, are rare, but this phenomenon, too, is expanding. Another surprising characteristic is that, except for one group from Efrat, most of the women are native Israelis.  

The content of the plays is varied, ranging from personal monologues that connect the personal to the collective, to stories about Tsadikim [holy men] and Midrashim [homiletical legends] about female figures from the Orthodox canon. Similarly, literature is used, as in Tehilot, an adaptation of “Tehila,” a story by Agnon, and recently political plays have been performed.

In his The Jewishness of the Israeli Theater, Dan Orian devotes two chapters to the subject of women’s theater. In one of them he analyzes the theater of The Jerusalem Theater Group since the late 1970s. This group, which is still active, includes women who are not identified—or affiliated with the Orthodox community. Nevertheless, this group was very influential on the method, the content, and the type of theater created by Orthodox women in Israel today. This theater is well anchored in canonical texts and Orthodox life. The method of The Jerusalem Theater Group includes study of the texts in small groups for some time before the play is written. Usually the texts deal with women and serve as a source of inspiration in writing the play and later in presenting it. Sometimes the study includes consulting rabbis regarding the interpretation. The later women’s theater groups also adopted their way of working “without any hierarchy, in which various artists collaborate in

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22 Recently I learned about another Orthodox women’s theater group consisting of English speaking women, which is active in Beit Shemesh. In 2006 it produced a play in English about the withdrawal from Gush Katif.

23 For example, Mirkan by the Women of Samaria group, Pesek-Zman–isha [Timeout–Woman], of the Mahut [Essence] group, and Bi’ur hametz by the Emunah college.

24 Such as Biketse hahevul [At the End of the Rope] by the Theater of the Katif Women [hevel, in Hebrew can mean either “rope” and a region, as in hevel Katif], and Na’omi by the Emunah College.
the ideas, the writing, the acting, and the direction." Other characteristics of The Jerusalem Theater Group that influenced the Orthodox women’s theater groups is the deep work on the connection between language, voice, movement, and the use of the voice as a central vehicle of expression.

Recently the character of the groups, their composition, and the kind of plays they present have changed. Theater groups composed of younger, more professional women, graduates of theater programs in institutions of higher education have been formed. Their studies include four years of theoretical courses as well as practical courses in directing, acting, movement, lighting, set design, and production. The subjects that the women treat include some that had previously been kept out of sight, not discussed in public: the rebellion of adolescent girls, relations between the sexes, violence against women, fear of living in the occupied territories, and the tension between the desire to break out of the Orthodox framework and the commitment to it. The goal of the theater that they create is to raise public awareness in the national-religious community of the inner communal problems, and at the same time the message is usually to encourage women to continue their lives in the existing conservative frameworks, because in the end they support and protect women from the threatening outside world.

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25 This is a well-known pattern in feminist theater, as characterized in the books of Elaine Aston (1994), Lizbeth Goodman (1993), and others.
27 Examples of this are: The Dosiot group, which I will discuss in a separate chapter, the Splendid Theater, which was established by two graduates of the theater department of Emunah College in Jerusalem, and the play, Voice of My (Womanly) Soul by the Looking Glass group.
The Settlements: the Forge of Orthodox Women’s Theater

Many theater groups were active during the decade between 1995 and 2005 in the settlements of Judea and Samaria. Theater groups were organized in community centers of regional councils, and usually they invited a professional director from “outside” to work with them. The work on each play continued for many months, and when the groups decided to perform, they usually received some financial support from the regional council. Many of the plays were planned in advance to be modular, since many of the women had small children, were pregnant, or had just given birth, so they could not always appear. The fact that the theater group formed around the community center strengthened the women in times of physical danger, for example, during the first and second Intifada, and they served as a kind of therapy that helped consolidate and strengthen the community in the face of the isolation forced upon it because of the attacks on the roads and in the settlements.

The First Harbinger: “The Samaria Women’s Group”

The Samaria Women’s Group, which became active with the outbreak of the first Intifada and after the Oslo Agreements, was the first theater group of national-religious women. The purpose of their play, Mirkam [Fabric], was to expose the world of “settler women” and “to refute the settler stereotype.” However, to the disappointment of the director, the late Tsipora Luria, this did not happen. The play was performed ten times before an audience of secular women, who did not identify with the group’s

28 “Settlements” refer to Israeli Jewish towns and outposts established on land captured from Jordan in 1967. The term has powerful political connotations in Israeli public discourse.

right wing agenda, and no “significant dialogue” took place. In contrast, the play was successful with a “convinced” audience of Orthodox women like themselves, women who adhered to the Gush Emunim\textsuperscript{30} version of the national-religious world view. It was presented for two years throughout the country, and its main importance was its documentation of the collective life of the settlements as a human mosaic composed of the born-again, converts from other religions, new immigrants, as well as Sabras (native Israelis), living in harmony. However, it was also important as a means of reinforcing the ranks from within. In his study, Orian emphasizes that the lofty rhetoric of the women settlers recalls the pathos that accompanied the pioneering myth of the soil from before the establishment of the State of Israel.\textsuperscript{31} The play paved the way for other theatrical initiatives among Orthodox women, plays in which personal problems were exposed along with inner communal problems, with great sincerity.\textsuperscript{32}

**Dina Schochet’s Hanekuda Hayehudit Group [The Jewish Point Group]**

The Jewish Point Group and its special relations with the national-religious and ultra-Orthodox public are documented in detail below. However, it must be included in the general survey of the theater groups that were active between 1995 and 2005 in

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\item[30] Gush Emunim [the Faithful Bloc], one of the influential organizations of the Orthodox settlement movement which advocates settling Jews all over the country and especially in the territories taken over after the Six Day War—Judea and Samaria and until 2005, Gaza.
\item[31] Ibid., p. 81.
\item[32] One of the central women in this production appeared a few years later, in 2000, in a one-woman play in various places in the country, for many months. In the one-woman play she told about her personal life as a girl, a mother, and a settler, and she drew a parallel between the events of her life and the historical events of the country. Upon her request, I did not include a discussion of her or her play in this book, although her initiative was exceptional and interesting from many points of view.
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Israel because of its extensive activities both in ultra-Orthodox society and in the national-religious society, though the content of the plays is more appropriate to an ultra-Orthodox audience than to a national-religious audience. The group was founded by Dina Schochet, from the Bat Ayin settlement in the Etzion Bloc, and it has only two members: Schochet, the founder, playwright, producer, public-relations woman, and book-keeper, and her friend Daniella Devash, a convert to Judaism from Switzerland, who also lives in Bat Ayin. Both women have led a hasidic Orthodox life style for more than twenty-five years. Schochet defines herself as an ultra-Orthodox-nationalist, though she is close to Chabad Hasidism and also influenced by Bratslav Hasidism, with which she became familiar in the 1980s. However, she modifies that definition in many ways. The material she adapts for the stage is taken from the stories of Rabbi Zaritsky, Midrashim, the stories of Rabbi Nachman, and parables, and these compose a modular play that is called Bina yetera [Additional Wisdom]. The play was performed in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem such as Har Nof, Romema, and Giv’at Shaul, under the sponsorship of the Jerusalem Municipality, as part of ongoing neighborhood cultural activities. Schochet also donates performances to raise funds for causes such as “An Evening for Her Health.” I was present on such an evening in the Jerusalem ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Har Nof. The women gathered to recite psalms for the recovery of a resident of the neighborhood, and to donate money to help her family. Watching the play was a form of entertainment on the

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33 Since 2004 the number of performances decreased drastically, and the group hardly performs anymore.

34 1914-1978, A well-known ultra Orthodox writer and editor also known for his erudition and knowledge in religious studies.

35 Rabbi Nachman of Breslow was the great grandson of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov and became an important figure in a Jewish revival movement. Among his writings, there are thirteen Tales—mythical stories of kings and wizards based upon Kabbala, capturing the essence of his thought and teachings.
margins of the evening, a kind of bonus for the many women who took the trouble to come, to pray, and to contribute. The remarks of the director of neighborhood ultra-Orthodox culture in the municipality indicate that the neighborhood rabbis had approved seeing the play:

A lot of women never go out of the house, because their husbands study Torah, and they have little children. The women need to go out like a breath of fresh air. I’m concerned about what it will give the woman. So she won’t feel like she’s wasted time, and she should go home refreshed and happy… Just going out does that for her. (“Batya” Cultural Coordinator of Giv’at Shaul, Interview, 2002).

Because Schochet became religious later in life, her approach to the Bible and to Orthodox life is different from that prevalent in the ultra-Orthodox world. Therefore the ultra-Orthodox cultural coordinators carefully examined every play that the group performed. Sometimes they demanded changes in the text, the costumes, or the language, to avoid offending the audience. Because Schochet regarded that public as her target audience, she tried to take their feelings into consideration and agreed to slight changes. Usually she foresaw problems, but sometimes she was surprised by the demands addressed to her. One example is from the play *Hakhnasat kala* [Bringing in the Bride], which is about motherhood. A ultra-Orthodox educational organization commissioned the play, which deals with values connected to the figure of the matriarch Rachel—but the play was poorly received in those circles, because they did not want holy figures to be presented on the stage as flesh and blood, and the frame story was also problematic, because it dealt with tense relations within the family. In this instance, Schochet decided not to accede to the demands of the ultra-Orthodox cultural coordinator and not to change large parts of the play. She preferred not to distort the play
severely in order to make it acceptable to the ultra-Orthodox public and instead to make do with a few performances for national-religious high school girls. This case testifies to the great gap between the spiritual and religious outlook of women who became ultra-Orthodox and those who are ultra-Orthodox from birth. This gap influences the relations between them, which are not based on trust and understanding, but on suspicion and emphasis of the differences in their attitudes toward matters of culture and religion.36

The Theater of the Gush Katif Women–Tehilot [Many psalms]

_Tehilot_ was performed by the Women of Gush Katif under the auspices of the regional community center, directed by Irit Sheleg-Neria, in 1996-98. It was presented throughout the country, even in the Alley Theater in Jaffa, so that a secular audience, not right wing politically, could see it. The play is an adaptation of the short story by Agnon, “Tehila” [which means “praise” or “psalm” in Hebrew]. Around twelve women appeared in it, playing the character of Tehila, and one woman played the narrator. The play concentrated on the inner struggle that took place in their souls.

A constant struggle between the two forces–faith and heresy. The struggle and all the rest–doubts and clarity, the thin line between them. The choice is the power that motivates us in our infinite search for meanings in our existence, the great question: what is my task here on earth? During the play, we see the narrator’s journey into himself through the characters that he meets or in fact creates, designs,

36 These relations are also discussed in the chapter on the Emunah College, in the sub-chapter on the play, _Dim’at hashoshan_. One may draw conclusions about the complex relations between the born-again and the ultra-Orthodox community as well as the national-religious community from the characterization.
and they in turn shape him (From comments by Irit Sheleg-Neria that were printed in the program of the play).

The women’s official explanation for splitting Agnon’s single literary character into many characters is as follows:

All of us—the women—are worthy of Praise, and all of us are Tehila. Our lives aren’t all that easy, but powers of the soul and the enormous strength of faith, of action, of love exist. We have to discover strength within ourselves, in our actions, and to believe in it. We women harbor enormous strength and despite the trials that life poses for us—we can overcome them. In the story we see the tragic, narrative level of the heroine, but we also see another, deeper, hidden level, about the place and function and power of a woman— from then and forever. Each of the actresses has five, six, seven or more children, whom she’s left at home. Most of them have regular jobs, and despite the difficulties, they go out to perform throughout the country to show the public the beautiful side of Gush Katif, the talents hidden in it, and mainly the power of women. (From a memorandum sent to me by Na’omi Eldar, the Cultural Coordinator of the Gaza Coast Council, 1999).

The women declared that they had come out of a desire “for self-fulfillment in an area we love,” but when they stood before the finished product, they saw that the play had an educational aspect connected with the empowerment of women. The women reorganized again in 2001-2002 and worked with Fira Kantor, Sheleg’s friend. In the end they performed a selection of stories by Sholem Aleichem entitled, Sipurei Rakevet [Train Stories], three times in Gush Katif, but they did not manage to arrange
performances elsewhere. In 2005, the women of Gush Katif organized a theater group once again, and this time they invited Rivka Vitriol, the founder of the Delatayim [Double Doors] theater group in Beit El, to work with them. During the year, when the governmental decision was made to remove the Gush Katif settlements, they decided to work on a play that would describe their lives in the shadow of that event. The play, Biketse hahevel, [At the End of the Rope] directed by Vitriol, was first performed for an audience of women in the intermediate days of Passover, 2005, at the local community center. The play was written by Devir Schrieber, and it depicts the difficult feelings of the settler women in response to the withdrawal, which they called “The Expulsion.” For the first time the anti-establishment voice of the younger generation of the settlements was heard clearly. The women managed to appear more than ten times in various places in Israel: in Petah Tikva, Rehovot, and Jerusalem. They continued to appear until the area was closed off, shortly before the withdrawal.

The Domem-Medaber [Silent Speaker] Theater of Noa Ariel

Noa Ariel from the Yizhar settlement established the Domem-Medaber Theater in 1995. Although it is a puppet theater, it is included in this survey because Ariel is one of the only women so far who managed to establish a theater of her own. She supports not only her own family but also four other families who are connected to her work. She works professionally with a team of experts: puppet makers, set designers, a lighting specialist, a musician, and a director. Her virtuosity is expressed in the large number of plays she puts on at the same time for both children and adults and in her facility in moving from character to character. Ariel was the first to deal with intimate subjects, which had not

Translation: “At the End of the Rope.” In Hebrew “rope” and “region” are homonyms.
hitherto been discussed in public in national-religious society: problems of couples, violence in the family, and fears in daily life because of the security situation. The repertory of the Silent-Speaker Theater is extensive and includes at least ten original plays by Ariel or plays she has adapted for both children and adults.

Ariel is about forty years old, with four sons, and her husband, Israel, was a rabbi in the Yeshiva that was active at the Tomb of Joseph in Nablus. He is a disciple of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh.\textsuperscript{38} Her dissatisfaction as an art teacher led her to study in the puppet theater school of Mina Peeri in Beit Steinberg in Holon:

I had no patience for making puppets. None at all. It’s very precise work, detailed, and it’s… I really didn’t want to do it. But I simply discovered acting. There was someone in the course who made amazing puppets. Without anything in mind I approached him and asked: “Can I try them out?” He said, “Yes.” I took the puppets and ran with them. I made some movements. It’s something you either have or you don’t. To put your whole personality in a piece of cardboard—it’s very hard to focus on this. A really hard control of your personality, and on the other hand, the flow of the… It’s a very healthy, precise channeling. Either you have it, or you don’t. If you have it—you can learn to work well with puppets, even do very nice things and very beautiful productions. But only if you have it.. And I discovered that I had it. Simply a gift just like that. Of course you’ve got to work, to improve—like with anything else. But that basic gift—I’ve got it. That’s it… I know how to make people laugh—I knew that. But can you see yourself as a professional in that area? It’s all a matter of

\textsuperscript{38} On Rabbi Ginsburgh, see above, page 13 footnote 18.
self-image. To make a switch in your image: I could, I knew I could get something done, I could take something and go with it. That was something really new for me... Until then I was a pile of wasted talent. Just a big barrel of wasted talents. Unbelievable! Until I got to the puppet theater, I really didn’t do anything (Ariel, Interview, 2001).

It is hard to believe that until then Ariel had done nothing, because she is an energetic and opinionated woman with regard to her work. While she does permit “wasting time” during rehearsals with things like telephone calls, breaks for snacks, chatting with children and the family, when she organizes a performance, she is very focused and well organized, and she knows exactly how to design the puppets, how the scenery and lighting have to look, and what quality of movement is needed from the puppets to transmit their messages. She has a sense of humor, she is affable and has winning ways. When she talks politics, she expresses views of the extreme right and also expresses disappointment with the right. In her plays she refrains from presenting these views and
emphasizes the human, sensitive, and warm side of her personality and the mission she has taken upon herself to transmit educational messages.

Ariel manipulates her puppets on a tabletop, so that she is visible, not hidden behind a curtain. The movements of the puppets change according to the character traits she has given them, as do their voices. Ariel does this with great professionalism, giving the puppets strong and clear character traits: shyness, frivolity, insecurity, vulnerability, confusion, affability, and so on. As noted, she makes certain to work with the best professionals, most of whom are secular and hold different political opinions, sometimes even opposite ones. She is involved in the entire process of designing and planning, sparing no expense even if she is short of funds, so that her art will be precise and as close to perfect as possible. She improvises the texts of the plays in the presence of a secular director—Mikki Mevorakh—with whom she has worked for several years. They rehearse until the text is set.

During the rehearsals I record, and then I select and shape it. Sometimes I write. With Mothers, for example, it was written. I have a written text that I just worked out with a tape recorder. I just did it. Then I wrote it out so that I could read it again and again on the way to the performance, so I’d remember it... I sit in front of the tape recorder and I act with the puppets. I know where I’m coming from and where I’m going to. In the play on domestic violence that we did, I had to do things again and again, and every time we changed a section. (Ariel, Interview, 2001).

Relations between Ariel and Mevorakh are cordial, with mutual professional respect, but their political views are diametrically opposed, and their ways of life are different. For that reason, in her most recent play, which dealt with day to day fears
during the Intifada, Ariel decided to work with artists from the settlements and to perform it only in Judea and Samaria:

I had a lot of aggression while working on that play. A lot of anger. For example, it was clear to me that I wasn’t going to hire Mikki to direct it. How could I allow her to earn money because the Arabs are killing us? It’s bad enough that she gives them rifles, but she should also make money? That was clear to me.

I don’t feel like having other people talking about me and needling me. We on the right stick to our own path: “Do you feel guilty about the children? About where you’re raising your children? In little cement boxes? Don’t you have guilt feelings?”

Everybody’s got guilt feelings... So it doesn’t suit me to take it [the play] “outside,” also because of the kind of fortitude it shows. The settlers’ fortitude just drives other people crazy. It’s what puts them off the most.... Because like it’s clear to them that the only reason we’re there, is for the money. For money you don’t stay. You don’t stay for money! That’s absurd. Twelve new families came to live on the settlement this year. Another three came just now. Unbelievable! Exactly in these places [settlements] the population has grown, because lots of people want to link up with that fortitude. (Ariel, Interview, 2001).

The Domem-Medaber children’s theater is based on passages

39 Ariel, as someone affiliated with the extreme right wing, considers those with left wing convictions as supporters of Palestinian terrorism against Israelis.

40 She is quoting claims against settlers in the West Bank and Gaza settlements who sometimes live in small pre-fabricated homes until they build their permanent houses. The children are bused to their schools and have to travel on roads that sometimes were attacked by terrorists.
from the Talmud, on Hasidic stories, on legends connected with the Jewish calendar and the Temple, and about Torah study. They are produced on various scales, according to the audience’s request. Ariel consults “Rabbi Yitchak” (which is what she calls Rabbi Ginsburgh) about the play and the meanings of the plots. However, she told me emphatically, she did not consult him about the recent play about fears, among other things, because he seldom visited the settlements of Judea and Samaria, and she did not think he could give her advice.

The First Play for Adults: *Baesh uvamayim–temunot mihayeini nisuin* [By Fire and Water–Pictures from Married Life]

By 2001 *Baesh uvamayim–temunot mihayeini nisuin* was performed more than a hundred times all over Israel, sometimes even before mixed audiences of men and women, after the approval of a rabbi. It described four situations in a marriage. Between one part and another Ariel held a lively discussion with the audience about the scene and analyzed it, and while doing so, in a humorous way, she mentioned popular books about marriage, such as *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, by John Gray.

Let’s say that Nehama has found a husband worthy of her. I’ll suggest a solution. Women have a built-in ability to touch their inner souls, to look into the emotions and the development they’re going through. It’s natural. She wants him to touch her soul without her telling him to do so. Women have hubris, pride. Women have developed, learned and thought: “If we teach them—they can learn, like Rottweilers. If you tame them—they turn into poodles. They can—but differently. Men have a way because they’re from Mars, and we—we’re from…

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41 For reasons of modesty, Orthodox actresses are ordinarily unwilling to perform before men.
Venus [the women complete the sentence; it’s clear they know the theory—R.R.R.]. Something has happened in the past two hundred years. It’s impossible not to relate to the feminist movement... Women have turned into a labor force, and you know: the ones who run the world have power and money, and that’s why they have independence. Independence allows us to get up and go. So, men feel threatened and women? [They answer together—R. R.] No! ... We want him to touch our soul. And in return...we’ll touch his soul, and that’s exactly what he doesn’t want, and we—we do (From a discussion led by Ariel at a women’s conference, the Binyan Shalem, summer 2000).

The audience isn’t used to public discussion of intimate topics, and nevertheless they responded by completing her sentences. That is the way she led the discussion on the status of women: “And about how she should feel toward her husband? Is ‘he shall rule over thee’ a curse or a blessing?” (Ariel, Interview, 2001), and on relations within the family, for example, relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law:

It’s a good thing when children come for a visit on the Sabbath: Itzik, the grandchildren and the ‘Princess.’ I don’t go there anymore. Every time I come, she makes a face as if some spoiled herring was hanging under her nose, and how often do I really come? Once a week? Twice? Not more than three! Sometimes, sometimes four.

The problem in marital relations that she raises in Baesh uvmayim—temunot mihaye nisuin is solved by a well-orchestrated three-way meeting that the rabbi arranges in his office. Ariel got

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42 Reference to Genesis 3:16: “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”
the inspiration for the meeting from consultation with Rabbi Ginsburgh on the play and its messages:

He said that we all believe in the Holy One, blessed be He, there is power even to bring the dead back to life. But you have to believe that the Holy One, blessed be He, has the power to bring the dead back to life. That’s really a key sentence. He wrote this in his own handwriting on the script. He added it. He tells me that He has the power, that it’s possible to continue anew. That’s an amazing expression: ‘to continue anew’ (Ariel, Interview, 2001).

**The Second Play for Adults:** *Ha’erev hayafe behayai* [The Most Beautiful Night in my Life]

The second play for adults, *Ha’erev hayafe behayai*, was commissioned by the *Bat Melekh* [King’s Daughter] Association, which helps Orthodox women in distress, and by the Jewish Agency. The goals of the play were:

To make the facts clear to girls about violent men, that it’s not manly, and it isn’t limited to a low economic, social, or educational level. The play mainly focuses on the symptoms of an abusive husband (that the girls are liable to take for romantic signs), that should turn on a red light and set off alarms [from the program].

The play was presented in 2000 in independent Orthodox girls’ high schools and national religious schools, and it was intended for girls in the eleventh and twelfth grades. Ariel went over budget and incurred burdensome debts, which took some time for her to repay. The play is about an adopted girl who is about to decide to marry. She decides to look for her biological mother, and it turns out she was a battered woman. The puppets that Ariel designed are
typical young people in national-religious society: the daughter, Oriah, with long, curly hair, dressed in a long jeans skirt and a buttoned shirt with sleeves down to the elbow; the boy, Yoḥai, with a wild beard, dressed sloppily, with ritual fringes dangling outside of his trousers, wears leather sandals, and a large skullcap lies on one side of his uncombed head of hair. Not only are the characters familiar to the audience, but so are the subjects of conversation between them, including her studies at the university, her volunteer work with difficult children, his religious studies with a partner in a yeshiva, and even the conversations between Oriah’s adoptive parents and about the approaching wedding. Also the design of the interiors of the houses, the embarrassment at the courtship meetings before the marriage, the kinds of joking between the members of the young couple and the older ones, the hand motions, the head motions, and mainly the language they speak—they all reflect life in this society. The similarity between the puppets and the particular social group significantly promotes identification, so that Ariel cannot present the play in ultra-Orthodox circles. To do that she would have to make a total change in the components of the characterization: dress, language, and body language. The use of puppets to address such a painful and intimate subject, and to a great degree even a secret one, offers an easy “escape hatch” for the audience, to separate themselves somewhat from the subject matter and enjoy the theatrical experience: the operation of the puppets, the scenery, and Ariel’s virtuoso performance. Ariel plays six different characters and she displays flexibility of voice, hand movements as well as concentration and talent. Because of her virtuosity in manipulating the puppets, the audience is barely aware that a single person is playing all the many characters, so different from one another, and that the characters are “only” puppets. It’s a kind of Brechtian technique, which permits the audience a certain “estrangement” from reality, heightening their awareness of being spectators at
a theatrical event and not part of it. In that way the theater encourages the audience to change the negative social reality rather than be drawn into it by paralyzing and passive identification.

The dramatic action takes place on a revolving wooden stage. Ariel stands in the center of it, operating the puppets and turning the stage when it is time to change the scenery. The circle is divided into settings appropriate to the action. One set represents Oriah’s adoptive parents’ house, there is the public park where Oriah meets Yohai, and a different garden, more neglected, where Oriah’s biological parents met in the past. The interior of her biological mother’s house is symbolically divided in two: a lower space (the underworld?) and an upper space, the living room, where the mother reveals the reasons that led her to offer Oriah for adoption. The scene of violence is rendered by means of slides of the puppets that represent Oriah’s biological parents in situations of beating, submission, and defeat. The slides are projected in fast sequence on a screen in the center of the circle, and Noa disappears behind it. At the same time a sound track of thundering music is heard, screams, the sound of shattering glass, and weeping. The combination of the soundtrack and the slides shocks the women in the audience. Some of them cover their eyes, others block their ears, and all of them, in a discussion after the play, stated that that scene was very hard for them to watch.

At the end of the play, slides are again projected onto the screen, with the music of a Hasidic wedding. The end brings feelings of relief and happiness, and the audience usually claps in time with the music. The “happy end” comes after a light comic

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Bertholt Brecht (1898-1956), the “father of the epic theater,” was a German playwright and a Marxist theoretician of the theater. He opposed the Aristotelian theater, which advocated identification of the actor and the audience with the characters. Among other things, he argued that by means of “estrangement” between the actors and the characters they portray and between the audience and what was transpiring on the stage, the spectator could be more aware of the social injustices depicted on the stage, and then the theater could fulfill its educational role and bring about social change.
scene where Oriah tests her boyfriend to be sure that he—unlike her biological father—isn’t obsessive about her, that he respects her, and that he wants her to keep developing after their marriage. In the first slide Oriah is shown in a wedding gown, praying for a moment before the ceremony. Another slide shows the groom leaning over to cover her face gently with the veil.

In *The Happiest Night in My Life*, Ariel communicates important messages to national-religious girls by means of puppets made of wood, cloth, and foam rubber. First, she makes it clear that the choice of a spouse is a matter for serious consideration, not a decision one makes out of blind love. In the discussion that she leads after the play, she tells the girls, “Lose your hearts—not your heads.” Second, she empowers national-religious girls and encourages them to keep developing in their studies, their professions, and socially, even after their marriage, and also to include their husbands in what happens beyond their life as a couple. Third, it raises the girls’ consciousness of the problem of violence in their society. She gives them practical advice about how to avoid getting involved with a potentially violent man. Ariel sees the messages of the plays for young adults as a mission, which is meant to empower the young women so they can lead independent lives, even after they are married. She protests against injustices to women, such as lower salaries for the same work as men do and violence toward women, but she refuses to connect her theatrical activity to feminism. She regards feminism as a power-oriented movement that does not suit her desire to connect with the spiritual realm, to the divine:

I’m not a feminist! I can’t stand their power-oriented atmosphere. And not the women who study either—I can’t stand that. First of all they published a book now called “Women Read from Genesis.” Most of the books by men are better. What can you do? I read an article, three pages–
three pages!—“The Torah and I, I and the Torah, I and this, I and... The Holy One blessed be He isn’t mentioned even once in the whole article. So shut up! That hunger for power. Why does there have to be a war? It’s a process. There’s a huge difference between the process and a war. It’s a process. Things are happening anyway. They’re happening. Conscious, participation in the process, advancing the process, keeping it from going in wrong directions. I’m ready for all that. But when you say I’m a feminist, that means I’m connected to something social… I’m far from that! I want holiness, I want purity, I want inwardness. Feminism isn’t that. It’s not that. Its concepts are alien to the spiritual essence of this movement, and I want God, and they—God doesn’t interest them. Some of them, maybe, in a general way, one yes, one no. As a movement—He isn’t there, as a movement, He doesn’t exist (Ariel, Interview, 2001).

Daaga belev ish [Worry in a Man’s Heart]

In the midst of the second Intifada, Ariel created a play that deals with the daily fears in the settlements. This time she was assisted by her regular staff, and the puppets, the stage, and the props that were available to her. Arieh Malakhi, one of her assistants, who studied film-making in the United States before converting to Judaism, helped in the directing. This play, Daaga belev ish, was performed in settlements throughout Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip in 2001-2003. She says it was meant “to let off steam among the settlers. People are strengthened by observing other people.” Using two puppets that present four
situations from daily life in the settlements, she exemplifies “four moods that typify the settlement movement these days: fear, anger, guilt feelings, and conflict regarding the struggle against the Arabs” (Assaf Patrik, Haaretz, November 2001). For her, the play was also a solution for a monetary crisis of months without work because of the Intifada, which paralyzed the settlements and restricted the movement of the settlers on the roads. It was a practical decision that Ariel had to make, “because I support five families: for me I’m almost the sole support, and two of my workers are the sole support, and my secretary is the sole support, and also my house-cleaner. I had to pay them all (Ariel, Interview, 2001).

Observing the Domem-Medaber Theater was interesting, mainly because of Ariel’s original personality, her talent and virtuosity, along with her impressive professionalism. It was also an opportunity to examine the relations between the establishment and a professional theatrical artist. Ariel repeatedly faced bargaining about her fees with the institutions that hired her to perform, and she saw that as contempt for the art she was creating in consideration of their fields of interest and sensitivities. The frustrating encounter between an Orthodox artist and the national-religious establishment within which she was active and for which she created presented another aspect of the phenomenon of women’s theater in Israel. At that time, Ariel’s conclusions about the art emerging within the national-religious community were bitter and pessimistic, since she had personally felt that the community did not tend to support it:

My play about violence was very influential. I heard about a lot of canceled engagements after seeing the play. The Rabbi said it was “saving life” to perform my play, but he bargained over the price of three thousand shekels. How big is his salary? His car allowance? It drives me crazy... Is
all Orthodox art on my shoulders? Why do I have to fight over this? I could work for the community center, earn my monthly salary, instead of feeling all the time that I’m at war... Don’t the Orthodox people deserve to see my play? If art isn’t something we need—we won’t get anywhere. I supply your needs: art and content and pressure to preserve. If I’m the supplier—why doesn’t anyone care? To hell with Orthodox art! I put a lien on my husband’s salary for my creation! I need financial support so I can work in peace... When I suggested that girls could help me drag stuff up to the top floor, they told them that’s what I was paid for... What a humiliation! I have to run after the school administration for months so they’ll pay me for the subsidized play that I put on. (Ariel, Telephone Conversation, 2000).

Despite the disappointment and difficulties that Ariel experienced in her contacts with the establishment, she didn’t address a different audience, such as a secular one, because she regards her plays for adults as a social mission, and the content that she transmits in her plays touch upon life in national-religious society: the difficulties, the customs, the discourse. But she voices intense criticism of the national-religious establishment, which is contemptuous of the art it needs, according to her, for the community’s spiritual existence. The establishment sees Ariel’s work as a tool for transmitting didactic messages, but it is not interested or does not understand the artistic considerations of her work, and it does not respect them. As a person who became religious, Ariel knows that in secular society artists are respected. Perhaps this intensifies the humiliation that she feels when she is not paid for performances, when they bargain over the price she sets, and when they greet her with contempt in the schools. In
Ariel’s opinion, until it receives the respect and support it deserves, true art cannot flourish in national-religious society.\textsuperscript{44}

**The Delatayim [Double Doors] Theater of Rivka Vitriol: A Little Soldier Who Keeps Watch**

The Delatayim Theater was established by settler women from the area of Beit El on the initiative of Rivka Vitriol, a woman of about fifty who lives in Beit El, worked in informal education, mainly with drama in the settlements and in state religious educational institutions in Jerusalem. When she was younger, she studied for three years at Seminar Hakibbutzim (an educational college) but did not complete her studies. Over the years she took part in in-service training courses in theater for teachers in various settings. Vitriol wants to bring “my world of art, and not necessarily Orthodox arts–my whole way of looking at life,” into the theater. Instead of the common approach in the educational system, of denial of the body and the emotions, theater, in her opinion, permits the use of “a better developed tool” in the person for the expression of her inner world. It is a tool that is beyond the intellect, “and there’s no shame in it, and it’s not bad. I think that because of this the gates were opened.” On the one hand, she feels that work in theater opens up emotional and physical possibilities for expressing an Orthodox person’s individual world of faith. On the other hand, she does not believe in total devotion to the theater, and in her opinion not everything has to be laid bare. For example, she opposes methods of direction and acting that make the actor give himself up totally to the theater, and she calls the preservation of distance between the actor and the depths of his soul, “a little soldier who keeps watch,” and “modesty.” In her

\textsuperscript{44} In a telephone conversation in 2006 she modified her words and stated that all the institutions did not treat her that way, and she added that lately she feels that a change for the better has taken place in the attitude of the establishment toward artists. In July 2010 she decided to close the theater due to financial difficulties.
opinion, this is the appropriate way for Orthodox people to work with theater:

I know there’s a way of working with the actor, when you say to him, “open up, open up,” and, “that’s the only way you get to the truth of the actor.” I don’t believe in that. Open yourself up to the group as much as you feel you can...
The hardest thing is to encounter the abysses of yourself. Because those are abysses where you don’t know what you’ll meet. I certainly don’t want to take anyone by force and bring him there, even if I had the tools, and certainly not a group... I definitely think there’s good reason for modesty, and it has to be taken into account. I don’t think it’s a great achievement to show the actors’ abysses... So there are people who say that this doesn’t allow me to get to the depths of art? I say the opposite! It’s a sure thing that this is the uniqueness of this art. That I want to give a special character to this kind of people. It’s a theater that “contains,” whose creators live according to that way. (Vitriol, Interview, 2000).

The Delatayim Theater developed out of a drama club that Vitriol organized in her settlement in 1998 upon the request of a group of women. She agreed to work on the elements of acting and theater in a slow, deep process, without the pressure of performing—at least not during the first year. Nevertheless, before Purim the group put on a purimshpil\textsuperscript{45} in the gymnasium of the settlement. Despite the poor conditions, the audience’s responses were enthusiastic, and after that performance, other women asked her to start groups, even a men’s theater group. This enthusiasm led Vitriol to think about establishing a regional theater—the Beit El

\footnote{45 Comic play put on traditionally on Purim in many Jewish communities}
Theater—a “real” theater with a place of its own and a permanent staff of teachers and directors. In her opinion, the name “Double Doors” raises associations of behind the scenes, a screen, hiding. She established a non-profit organization, raised money for activities, and reduced her working time at the schools in Jerusalem so that she could be the administrator, stage director, producer, public relations woman, and bookkeeper of the new theater. Here are the goals of the theater in her view:

To make somebody smile for half an hour—that’s my mission in this world. Maybe the goal is to give people an emotional experience, intellectual, artistic, maybe just a hint, maybe just to nourish something for you, either your feelings or your mind, your anxieties, in the deepest places. There you sometimes want to touch... My dream when I talk about setting up an institution like this, which is called a theater, is to have a group of people for whom that’s their challenge, a group of writers. Not all of them actors. We need playwrights. That’s our biggest lack today. There’s no writing! There’s no writing with this kind of thinking about the theater, and that’s the thing that’s most missing. Because there are actors, the kind who act spontaneously, but those who write spontaneously, they don’t write plays! They write poems but not plays, and that has to be encouraged, too... let’s form a study group that will have that as a goal. I didn’t start dreaming about this just now... A rabbi should be involved with it, but I think that I would want him to know about theater. So I could consult him not only on questions about difficulties, but also about the depth of becoming, of the process. He would have to understand that! (Vitriol,
Interview, 2000).

She worked with twelve women for two years before presenting Prusat lehem [A Slice of Bread], based on Faith that Stood the Test, a book written by her mother, Rachel Horak, an autobiographical account of survival in a concentration camp. At the same time, Vitriol organized a group of men who worked with the director Barukh Gotin.

I want to establish the right kind of theater. True, that will take more time, and it will have to lay many more foundations. Perhaps somebody else will enjoy the fruit, but I know that I laid the foundations... I get more than I got a year ago, right? Now every quarter we have an amount of money, and we use it to take the members of the group to plays that I think are important for them to see. And we buy equipment, like, for example, a video camera, because it’s really important for me to film, and not to borrow a camera from the pedagogical secretariat all the time. Slowly, slowly,
gradually, step by step. My house has turned into a costume warehouse. I have patience, because there’s nothing! Right? Nothing. Now there are a few people with awareness. Maybe that’s like the Redemption: bit by bit and then maybe everything will break out. (Vitriol, Interview, 2000).

Although Prusat lehem isn’t professional, it has been performed about twenty-five times all over the country for women from the national-religious and ultra-Orthodox-national sectors. Representatives of Hen haredi [Ultra-Orthodox Grace], Jerusalem officials who are responsible for cultural events for ultra-Orthodox women, were enthusiastic about the play and invited the group to perform in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Har Nof in Jerusalem. In contrast, in the summer of 2000, when the group appeared at a summer camp for girls from a Beit Yakov school\textsuperscript{46}, they had to stop in the middle, because the counselors decided that the play was not modest enough since women portraying male

\textsuperscript{46} Ultra-Orthodox stream of education
guards in concentration camps appeared as soldiers. Similarly, it was mentioned that Jewish women were ordered to strip and deliver the jewels hidden in their clothing to the Germans.

Along with performances of Prusat lehem, Vitriol produced Erev Rahel [An Evening of Rachel] in Beit El on 11 Heshvan 2003, the anniversary of the matriarch Rachel’s death. The performance included several artists and presented homiletic stories by the Sages about the matriarch Rachel. The singer Rachel Vilner appeared, the dancer Rivka Azulai, and four actresses from the Beit El Theater. Its success led to an invitation to the group to appear before Emunah Women (an Orthodox women’s organization) in Jerusalem and a promise was made to Vitriol that the department of Torah Culture of the Jerusalem municipality would also have her perform the play. Connections were made with the settlements of Kedumim, which wanted to create a similar community theater. However, the financial straits of the local councils and municipalities stalled all the connections with Vitriol, and the promises of budget allocations and additional invitations to perform were not fulfilled. However, the non-profit organization continued to receive a small operating budget from the Ministry of Education, and it was also promised a small allocation from the local council, but it ran into financial difficulties. Vitriol tried to continue her activities and at the same time she worked with a group of ultra-Orthodox women from the Har Nof neighborhood. She was trying to survive financially, but she felt isolated in the struggle, because she had still not found anyone “crazy about the idea” as she was, which would have made her organizational and financial task easier. Meanwhile, she refused to give up the idea of the Delatayim Theater:

I’m really paying a high price for it, but I don’t want to give up my dream. Because I see there are responses, and there is interest, and you can’t go backward, although the situation is very difficult.
But even when I was disappointed, I believed that some other “crazy” person would join me, that I would have a partner in this madness, and it hasn’t happened yet. The settlement doesn’t realize what it has in hand (Telephone conversation, 2003).

In 2005, close to the time of the withdrawal from Gush Katif, Vitriol produced the play, Biketse hahevel, by Devir Schreiber, with the participation of the women of the Gush Katif Theater.47


Hagai Luver established the Looking Glass Theater about six years ago in 1999. Luver was born in Bnei Berak, lives in Beit El, and studied at the Sha’alavim Yeshiva and the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva. He is an educator and the father of eight. He was ordained as a rabbi at Merkaz Harav and for a while worked in informal education in the Bnei Akiva youth movement, and then he began his educational career as the rabbi of pre-army yeshiva programs in Eli and Ma’ale Levona. He took part in a three-year acting course organized for graduates of hesder yeshivot [yeshivot that combine military service with Torah study], and upon completing those studies, he decided to establish a theater. In the first two years of its existence, the Looking Glass Theater appeared 250 times in plays that were written for it. Its well-known play, Uprooted, was famous in national-religious circles and presented all over the country because it dealt in a daring and open way with the process of “Questioning,” the loss of faith, undergone by an adolescent in a yeshiva high school. Luver left the end of the play open so that discussions could be held with the audience about the future of the young man. In general, the discussions were intense, and they aroused great interest among the young men and their parents who came to see the play. Since then, other plays have been performed:

47 See above, p. 23, on the Theater of the Women of Gush Katif.
Yotse min haklal [Exceptional], Sof haderekh [The End of the Road], and Teshatron [Ninetheater]—a play that includes stories and Jewish folklore. He also produced and performed in children’s plays, for example, Oysh moysh. For him, the theater deals with “doubts that I encounter connected to questions of values. Naturally, it also reveals the space of doubt about Orthodox values” (Luver, Interview, 2001). Luver works in educational theater, and he is very focused on transmitting clear messages of the national-religious establishment: “Finding your way within halakha, even at the cost of dreams and aspirations of self-fulfillment” (Luver, Interview, 2001). Luver had far-reaching plans for there to be “a women’s section that would put on plays for women, but not necessarily about women’s issues, not necessarily Orthodox, but concerned with ‘Jewish values’” (Luver, Interview, 2001). That is why he initiated the play Kol n(af)shi [Voice of My (Womanly) Soul], which I will discuss below. His innovation is in the means that he employs to present real problems in their full ferocity before the audience, with rousing acting, music, and the blunt and coarse language of adolescents. The discussion that takes place after the plays also contributes to the establishment view of the theater as a didactic tool rather than as art.

What frightens me about those words—“didactic” and “educational”—is that it’s bad theater, not because I don’t think we have a right to educate, and “Who are you to say?” And, “Why should you speak in truisms?” I think that everyone has the right to try to influence others. I definitely see the theater as something that can be influential, and in fact an intentional influence and not something general. It’s true that an explicit statement is bad, because it isn’t theatrical language, and so the word “didactic” includes plays according to the ultra-Orthodox formula (do you know them?)—I don’t
have a set path. That doesn’t say very much. We try, seek, but that doesn’t deter me, you understand, “educational” doesn’t deter me, and “didactic” doesn’t deter me, on condition that it doesn’t harm the medium, but it doesn’t bother me to teach. I come from there. (Luver, Interview, 2001).

The Play Kol n(af)shi

*Kol n(af)shi* was intended for Orthodox high school girls, and it was produced in the Aspaktaria Theater in cooperation with the Midreshet Ofra [a women’s yeshiva] in 2002-2003. It was performed more than seventy times throughout the country. Three women students played the roles: Tova Birnbaum, a psychology student at the Hebrew University, who was at the same time a member of the Dosiot Group,48 and “Tali Lubell” and “Merav Itzkowitz,” students in the theater program at Emunah College.

48 See below, the chapter on the *Dosiot* Group.
“Lubell” directed the play along with Anat Junger, a graduate of the theater program at Emunah College. The play was written by Renanit Parshani, a graduate of the Orthodox cinema school, Ma’aleh. The play deals with the dilemmas of young women in the national-religious sector and with the tension between the desire for self-fulfillment in the secular world, such as enlisting in the army and attempting to join an army entertainment troupe, and in the Orthodox world, e.g. observing commandments that women are not obligated to keep, as opposed to living according to the conventional standards of national-religious society. Similarly, it examines the boundaries in relations between members of a couple during courtship. “There are three characters, and each one expresses another aspect of our struggle with our desires versus halakha” (from the program). The plot takes place in a group belonging to the Bnei Akiva Youth Movement and describes the doubts of three girls “who are not yet women but no longer little girls” (From the program): Effi, a sort of “Jewish scholar in the school of Nehama Leibovitz” (Itzkovitz, class assignment, 2001) wants to insist on the performance of commandments, even those that do no obligate women. Her sister, Ya’el, decides to resist the conventions of the Bnei Akiva Youth Movement, and instead of doing civilian national service, she secretly applies to an army entertainment troupe, though she is aware of the prohibition in halakha, “a woman’s voice is her nakedness,” which prevents women from singing in public. Ya’el’s friend, Michal, is a pretty

49 According to Orthodox Judaism, women are not obliged to observe commandments in which a specific time is a factor, such as praying three times a day within specific time spans or putting on tefillin. The character in this play wanted to observe that commandment.

50 Leibovitz (1905–1997) was a noted scholar and commentator who rekindled interest in Bible study.

51 While I was teaching at Emunah College I gave a course called “Criticism and Viewing.” With the agreement of the students, I am publishing some of their reactions to the plays that we saw or in which they were involved. None of the students is quoted under her own name, and on this occasion I would like to thank them all.
young woman who emphasizes her sexuality in her relations with Uri, the counselor, a yeshiva student, and he falls in love with her. She “struggles with the restrictions of the laws of modesty. For her, to cover herself up is to give up her strength, her beauty” (from the Program). In the end, Effi discovers that performing commandments like a man is not her true wish, and in fact she can also approach the Holy One, in a manner that does not deviate from the conventions of national-religious society. Ya’el is accepted in the army entertainment troupe but gives up her dream of becoming a singer and is persuaded not to violate the prohibition based on “a woman’s voice is her nakedness.” Instead she becomes a guide in a field school in the framework of civilian national service. The pretty Michal understands that Uri is not attracted to her, but to her physical beauty, so she tests him. Just before meeting his parents, she shaves her head to see whether he will accept her as an “ugly” woman. His shocked reaction shows that their relations, which were based only on sexual attraction, are not what she wanted, so she breaks up with him.

The Innovation of the Looking Glass Theater

This play is a landmark in Orthodox women’s theater for three reasons: the content of the play and the direct discourse among the characters, the original theatrical technique that Luver chose to overcome the lack of male actors on the stage, and the way of working—the combined direction of Luver and Anat Junger, an Orthodox woman.

The play depicts complex reality in a revealing and direct manner, using words that are not common in this society such as “virgin” or “you’re turning me on,” and a Midrash on the subject of which is how a man should behave “when his sexual desires ‘attack’ him.” On the other hand, the play offers extremely conservative solutions—the women forgo self-fulfillment to maintain an
Orthodox life style according to halakha and to behave according to the conventional norms of national-religious society. The problems within Orthodoxy—women’s eagerness to be more involved in keeping commandments and Orthodox life, the issue of relations between the sexes, and the temptation of self-fulfillment in a secular artistic framework—were represented convincingly and sensitively. Therefore, to convince the women in the audience to accept the conservative solutions that Luver offers them, it downplays the women’s desire to be involved in Orthodox life and the importance of sexual attraction. It presents the secular world as vulgar and alienated through the unseen character of the entrance examiner for the entertainment troupes. During Ya’el’s audition his voice is heard ordering her, “Stop singing like a virgin!” This shocks the audience. Here is one actress’ reaction to the scene:

That sentence grabbed us hard, and we felt that it expressed exactly the problem of “a woman’s voice” 52. We looked for a lot of ways to change it and make it more delicate, but we couldn’t find anything else that expressed the idea with the same power, and even though we were apprehensive about the audience’s reaction, we left the expression as it was—with its full force. (Lubell, Assignment for the course “Critical Spectatorship,” 2001).

Regarding theatrical technique, Luver’s work can be regarded as innovative, and perhaps it offers Orthodox women’s theater a solution to the problem of including male characters in plays, without actually including men. Luver filmed the men, and during the play he projected the film on a large screen next to the actress. In that way, dialogue took place between the actress and the virtual figure (Uri, the counselor, or Effi’s brother). This technique made the play more interesting and demanded great precision from the

52 This refers to the prohibition against singing in public deriving from the saying, “a woman’s voice is her nakedness”
actresses in saying their lines:
The rehearsals with the videos was no easy job. Precision depended on so many factors, and even if we found signals and ways of being as accurate as possible, but that doesn’t mean that the play would go without a hitch. Very rarely did it happen that the videos came out exactly according to the right time. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that video is an excellent solution for including “men” in the play and also as an interesting factor, fascinating (Lubell, Assignment for the course, “Critical Spectatorship, 2001).

The play *Kol n(af)shi* is also important because Luver, a rabbi and well known educator, directed a play along with Anat Junger in which Orthodox women took part. According to the actresses, this combination actually gave rise to tension and waste of time, but there is no doubt that it was an innovative conception. During the rehearsals, when problems of halakha arose deriving from his presence, he found solutions for them. For example, he was not present when the actresses performed dance movements or changed costumes. Nevertheless, the actresses felt embarrassed. In their opinion the play went against “the spirit of halakha” not only because of the process of working on it, which went beyond the bounds of modesty, but also because of the coarse language used in the play:

I’m quite shocked by all sorts of things, for example, “you’re turning me on,” or “virgin,” or the Midrash that Uri tells Michal about wearing black clothing.\(^53\) That disturbed me a lot. They even had one of the teachers in the college read the text,

\(^{53}\) Rabbi 'Ilai says: “If a man sees that his instinct is overcoming him he should go to a place where people do not know him and wear black clothes and wrap himself up and do what his heart desires but not profane the name of heaven in public” (Bavli, Mo’ed Katan 17a; Kidushin 40a).
and she was a little shocked... Hagai didn’t agree with me. He claims that on this subject you have to shock the audience, and if we take an indirect route, it will create a lukewarm discussion of these subjects... I still think there’s an urgent need to make the play milder... I remember myself sitting during rehearsals, very embarrassed... From my point of view, to this day I think that it’s not right for me to work with a male director. Maybe in very simple plays, that don’t demand a lot of work with the body. It’s still hard for me to have a man look at me in a critical way, how I walk, and all that... It bothers me to have a Torah scholar put himself in a situation where he has to look at the outward side of a girl (Itzkowitz, Assignment in the course, Criticism and Observation, 2001).

Luver did not ignore the problems in halakha that arose, but he claimed that, since he was a rabbi, he was able to solve them by himself, without consulting other rabbis. When I asked him about the difficulties of his personal involvement in the directing the play, he said he was doing “holy work”:

“The spirit of the halakha”—that’s the thing that bothered the girls. I myself took part in the rehearsals. I didn’t take part in all the scenes, and there were places where I lowered my eyes in advance, and if they weren’t according to halakha I lowered my eyes. But I had no doubt that from the point of view of halakha, it was permitted, and necessary, and important (Luver, Interview, 2001).

Kol n(af)shi was an interesting crossroads in the theatrical work of Orthodox women in Israel, showing how great the demand for professionalism is. At the same time it shows that the establishment wanted to maintain conservative patterns of behavior
in the face of a dynamic reality, which called for changes in the attitude toward the status of women and their involvement in Israeli Orthodox, cultural, and national life. Despite the ostensible outward signs of liberalism in the plot, the message of the play suits only the way of life of the most conservative sector of national-religious society.

Another interesting point is that the director and actor who broke artistic boundaries actually used the theater to transmit a conservative message: he required women to restrict the area of their activities and recommended that they should give up their artistic and liturgical ambitions and freer relations between the sexes. Paradoxically, he transmitted this message by means of actresses who were moving in the opposite direction. Each of the actresses proved she was willing to make ideological sacrifices to do exactly the opposite of what Luver preaches: to fulfill her dream of being an actress in the theater. Birnbaum agreed to appear in a play that opposed her world view, and Itzkowitz agreed to be directed by a man and to be offended by the lack of modesty inherent in that situation. This play about the dilemmas of young Orthodox women dealing with temptations raised central questions with which the national-religious community is grappling today, from a hidden place, from “behind the scenes.” These dilemmas are connected to the blurred boundaries between halakha and the “spirit of halakha,” the contradiction between openness and willingness to raise social questions in public discussion and the rigid conservatism of the solutions that the establishment offers. With its daring and bluntness, Voice of My (Womanly) Soul, as well as with its conservatism, demonstrates the problematic situation of national-religious society today, both within itself and also in its relation with the outside world.

The Efrat/Gush Etzion Raise Your Spirits Summer Stock Company

54 Which was more liberal
In the summer of 2001 native English speaking women from the settlement Efrat\textsuperscript{55} began working in theater because of the distress caused by the precarious security situation that had caused casualties in the community. The women began to correspond via email to find out what could be done during the summer to distract themselves from the distress and fear they all felt. The proposal to produce the famous musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, \textit{Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat}, excited everyone. More than a hundred women, aged six to sixty, turned up for the rehearsals, and it was decided that everyone would have some role in the musical. The organizers–Toby Klein-Greenwald (who was the director), Sharon Katz, Arlene Chertov (who was the choreographer), and Shulamit Marciano (the cultural coordinator at the Gush Etzion Community Center, which encouraged the activity), took it upon themselves to hold auditions for the main roles, to find financing and a place for rehearsals and performance, to sew costumes, and to build the scenery. Klein-

\textsuperscript{55} A large settlement south of Jerusalem.
Greenwald turned to Rabbi Shlomo Riskin for his opinion about this initiative, since he was the rabbi of Efrat, and he approved it. The rehearsals were held five times a week during the summer vacation, and every rehearsal lasted three hours. Despite the technical difficulties in organizing such a large group, cooperation among the actresses, the singers, and the organizers was positive. It was decided that the play would be performed only in the auditorium of the nearby settlement, Alon Shevut. Women from out of the area who wanted to see it paid in advance for transportation in bulletproof buses. The profits were designated for families that had been injured by acts of terror. The organizers paid the authors of the musical for the rights to only a limited number of performances. Thus, despite the great demand, the play was performed only ten times.

We said, “What will we do with the money?” Tickets were sold: “We’ll give it to families injured by terror.” We didn’t expect such big profits—some of the money went to cover expenses. The community center gave us the auditorium and the rehearsal room for free, but we paid the sound man and the light man the fees we always used to pay them. So we raised more than 100,000 shekels, in ten performances all in all, according to our contract (Klein-Greenwald, Interview, 2001).

In her opinion, the decision to appear only before women was a feminist statement:

I regard it as something feminist. Because I think that a lot of women need confirmation, and here we declare that we don’t need your confirmation nor your admiration. We have a lot of admirers. We’re satisfied, and for some you could say that it’s a religious matter, for me it’s also a feminist matter, I don’t need men to see me to say, yes, we’re worth
something. For my part, in any case, it’s a feminist statement. (Klein-Greenwald, Interview, 2001).

A year later, in 2002, the women produced an original musical written by Klein-Greenwald and Chertov in English–Esther and the Secrets in the King’s Royal Court–which they performed twenty-one times. The music was written by Rivka Epstein. Klein-Greenwald directed this play, Chertov was the choreographer, and Katz was the producer. Since it was an original work, the organizers did not have to limit the number of performances. However, their decision to perform only in Gush Etzion remained in force. Except for two performances in Ra’anana and in Gush Katif (near Gaza), all the rest were in Alon Shevut, and the auditorium was always completely full. Women whose families had been injured in terrorist attacks were invited to every performance, and they were mentioned, along with their loved ones, before the beginning of the play.

This play was an adaptation of the Book of Esther in English, with the addition of Midrashim that shed comic light on the characters and transmitted feminist messages by means of the figure of Vashti. The message of the song, “Just Say No,” for example, was that even King Ahashuerus could not vanquish Vashti. During the play, a woman dressed in white entered and read the relevant verses to the tune of the traditional cantillation. The message of Mordecai’s dream of the return to Zion and the future ingathering of the exiles was also inserted in the play. A similar song appears as a chorus at the end of the play as well, and the audience joined in and sang it with the actresses. As in the earlier play, children, girls, young women, and older women participated, and the organizers emphasized that 127 women participated, which is the number of states over which King Ahashuerus ruled. The feeling of cooperation and enjoyment of both the cast and the audience were evident in the performance that I saw.
Every performance began and ended with a sort of religious ceremony. Before the play, psalms were recited, and the names of victims of terror (whose family members were sitting in the audience) were read. Klein-Greenwald led a short discussion on the reasons why the group had organized, its composition, and the play itself. At the end of the evening, Klein-Greenwald came forward again to sum up the evening and the message conveyed by the musical. Then the audience would rise to its feet and sing “Ani Maamin” [I Believe (in the coming of the messiah)] and the national anthem, together with the actresses, who were standing before them on the stage. In that way the theatrical event took on an additional, religious-Zionist dimension. The feeling of sisterhood erased the negative emotions that came from the difficult security situation and increased their strength to overcome problems by creating enjoyable theater, based on Jewish sources.

The event had some of the qualities of an American neighborhood event or a group activity in a Jewish summer camp in the United States. A representative of the group greeted the spectators who had ordered tickets in advance, and the
transactions proceeded in an orderly way. Stands were set up for
the sale of tee-shirts with the logo of the play, disks of the music,
typical American cookies, and soft drinks. English was the main
language heard in the corridors, in various accents, and there were
emotional reunions of women who lived in various parts of the
country and had not seen each other for a while. The ticket sales,
the transportation, as well as changes of scenery and movement of
the actresses on the stage were all carried out with admirable order
and organization, by volunteers. Thus in Efrat, in Gush Etsion, a
vibrant women’s theater was founded to provide for their personal
and community needs.56

Orthodox Women’s Theater Groups in the Cities

The Mahut [Essence] Theater Group

The Mahut theater group was organized around Amalía
Shahal, an educator who lives in the Haifa area and has been active
for years in promoting theater in Orthodox society. Shahal was a
theater teacher in the Haifa region employed by the Ministry of
Education, and a lecturer in the Shaanan College in Haifa. She
initiated the establishment of Yavнатron, a center for study of the
theater in the Yavneh state religious school in Giv’at Olga. High
school and college students come from all over the country to this
experiential center to learn about theater, its basics and history,
and to feel for the first time how the theater makes possible an
encounter with a complex world, through the understanding of
personal processes and the examination of values. The purpose of
Yavнатron is to remove children from the passive role of spectators
and to give them direct experience as “young artists.” Shahal was
the first to initiate a program for the professional retraining of a

56 After the conclusion of my field research, another play, Noah, was presented
twenty-one times in 2004-5. In October 2006 the women presented a new
play, Ruth and Nā’omi in the Fields of Bethlehem.
group of Orthodox educators: from general teachers to teachers of theater. In a drama group that met outside of the ordinary teaching hours at the Shaanan College, the participants, women in their thirties and forties, chose to deal with the tension between innocence and revelation, and insight into the essence of motherhood:

The decision to establish a woman’s theater derived from the need to take another step forward in the search for a connection between the theater and Judaism, a search through grappling with the questions raised by the encounter between Judaism and theater, to respond to their powerful desire to reveal themselves and to create a dialogue with various communities of women (from the program of Time Out–Woman).

Shahal adopted the methods of the Jerusalem Theater Group, seeing the work as a mixture of theater, psychodrama, and a Beit Midrash [House of Study]. She doesn’t believe in an “engaged” theater but in engaging the theater to make it possible for the artist to express herself. Thus, the participants went through “a group and an individual process, by means of which they revealed dramatic material connected to their world and derived from it, and they also dealt with material from Jewish sources, while looking for insights and contexts for their own spiritual, Jewish world” (Shahal, Interview, 2000). The work process during the first year included psychodrama on the subject of motherhood. Each actress chose a personal subject, and they worked on each piece for two or three sessions. Shahal also brought her own personal material, so that a “map of the cycle of life” was produced. By Pesah, all the initial material was collected and processed, and the consolidation of a continuum of stories began. This was meant to be a kind of “women’s tribal evening.” In the early summer, around the time of the Shavuot holiday, the members of the group began
to seek parallel or interesting stories in the Jewish sources, and they examined the way each of them related to the textual material. That summer, the members of the group met for a week of work “around the clock” at one member’s home. There they also heard lectures by local rabbis, and they consulted them regarding the interpretation of the texts when the need arose.

This process was very intense, and very strong pictures were born of it, with very deep insights regarding the Bible stories as well as present day, personal stories, like being torn between career and managing the home (Rachel) or sharing the raising of a child—giving up possessiveness of the child (Hagar). We discovered the possibility of the harmony of spiritual existence (personal and developing) and physical existence (fertility) in women (Shahal, Interview, 2000).

**Pesek-zman isha [Time Out–Woman]**

In the second year (until November) the members of the group held meetings lasting from four to eight hours in Shahal’s home in the evening before studies at the Shaanan College. The group slept at her house and the next morning the women all drove to the college and worked on writing and acting until two in the afternoon. The group was accepted at the women’s theater festival that was held in Haifa in 1997, though they were still in the early stages of their work. When they received a small budget allocation, they decided to call themselves the Essence Theater and to perform scenes that would present the profile of the women in the group. To ensure the success of the evening, the members of the group were asked for total devotion, for which not all of them were prepared. According to the director, the work for the festival created an “ugly atmosphere,” which ultimately broke up the
group.

The evening, which they called *Pesek zman isha* [Time Out–Woman], was composed of revealing monologues about the difficulties of relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, which, among other things, influenced relations between husband and wife; about the protest of a married woman against covering her hair; about problems of marriages between different ethnic groups; the sorrow and frustration that women feel when they cannot become pregnant along with superstitions, faith, observance of the commandments, and the performance of religious ceremonies that can help; the difficulties of a daughter of Holocaust survivors in day-to-day functioning; and the nostalgic yearnings of a remarried widow for the dead husband of her youth. The scenes were moving and sincere, but they were performed amateurishly. The importance of the evening lay in its being an authentic document about the life of middle-aged Orthodox women, which was presented in a public space: the theater. Appearance on the stage was taken as a religious act, and the proof: one of the actresses, Yael Schechter, composed a “Prayer Before Appearing on Stage,” which was printed on the program.\(^5^7\) However, after the performance the group broke up with bitter feelings, and the project on the “Motherly Boom” was halted.

Shahal began to deepen her activity in theater education and along with Elisheva Kagan-Marvis, a movement teacher, she founded the Artistic Study Houses organization, at Shaanan College. Two years later she accepted an offer from the Ministry of Education to become the principal of a school in one of the small towns north of Haifa.

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\(^5^7\) This prayer appears as an epigraph at the beginning of this book. In a telephone conversation with Schechter in 2006, she told me that recently she had heard that in schools where the prayer was recited before a performance, it was attributed to an Hasidic Rebbe!
The Hadarim Theater for Children and Youth

Neta ‘Am Shalom and Michal Hadar-Peretz, graduates of the theater program at Emunah College, founded the Splendid Theater in 2002 and performed the play, \textit{Ani lo pohed miklum (kim’at)} [I’m Not Afraid of (Hardly) Anything], about sixty times throughout Judea and Samaria. They established the theater after the death of Hadar-Peretz’ father, and they named it “hadarim” after him [“hadar” means “glory” or “splendor” in Hebrew]. They invested money in equipment: a sound system, lighting, basic scenery. They work without advertising or public relations and without government support. The play deals with the area in which Hadar-Peretz’ father worked professionally as the district psychiatrist: psychological support for victims of terror motivated by Palestinian nationalism. The play tells the story of a girl wounded in a shooting attack. She and her friend experienced fear, and they find surprising ways of coping with it. They presented one version to audiences within the Green Line and another to audiences living on the other side of it. They claim that it was “the most fun” to appear in dangerous places, “because a lot of performers aren’t willing to go to them, so they know how to appreciate the ones who do come” (Liron Nagler-Cohen, Hatsofe, May 10, 2002).

In addition to this play, ‘Am Shalom and Hadar-Peretz perform two children’s plays: Mashalim—\textit{‘al hayot veanashim} [Fables–about Animals and People] and a one woman play by Hadar-Peretz about Rabbi Akiva’s daughter and the snake. Their plans were interrupted for several months by the birth of Hadar-Peretz’ son. They added more children’s plays to their repertoire, including puppets, and they employed scenery makers, puppet operators, and a sound man on a permanent basis, to make their theater more professional. In 2006, their activities include seven plays, one of which was addressed to women (\textit{Al habakbuk veba’look’) [On the Bottle and the “Look”).
The Dosiot Group

The group was established by two friends from Haifa, Orly Alufi and Hadas Gal, who studied theater in the university and sought an appropriate framework in which they could act after completing their studies. In the middle of their last year at university, they decided to organize a group of Orthodox women to work together on a play. They approached the Center for Alternative Theater in Akko, because most of them were impressed by the work of Dudi Ma’ayan, one of the founders of the center, and with whom they had studied. I discuss this group at length in a separate chapter below. However, I mention it in this survey to demonstrate the broad range of Orthodox women’s activities in the theater, from amateur narrative theater among ultra-Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox-national women to avant-garde theater performed in the framework of secular fringe theater. This group was active for two years and presented two plays: Bat-Mitzvah: the Dream and its Shattering (2001), directed by Moni Yosef and Halad Abu-‘Ali; and Don’t Say, “Water Water” (2002), directed by Miri Lavi. This play was performed in the contest of the Center for Alternative Theater in Akko and received honorable mention.

This group was unique in its subversive, anti-establishment material, its professional level, and its total devotion. The group’s theatrical work was very different from that of the others, in that they used body and voice to transmit their messages, their avant-garde plays were derived from material taken from the Orthodox canon, and also from the actresses’ lives—Orthodox women who lived on the seam between the secular world in their daily life and the Orthodox world—from a philosophical, existential point of view. Similarly, the group performed before mixed audiences of men and women, and they also included a man in their second
play—the husband of one of the actresses—in the role of the narrator. The group did not consult rabbis, and it set the boundaries of what was permitted and what was forbidden by itself, according to the autonomous opinion of the members, based on their understanding of halakha and on mutual respect. This group was the most courageous and innovative of those that I observed and shows that Orthodox women’s theater can develop in surprising directions, professional and even daring.

Orthodox Men’s Theater

Along with the initiatives of women, there have also been theatrical projects involving men who are graduates of yeshivot and also studied acting. These men began their activities a few years after the women, and they have established two theaters: Aspaklaria [Looking Glass theater mentioned above] and Tair [Shed Light]. The plays are based on canonical texts taken from Midrashim and with typical problems that arise in national-religious society, and they are addressed to the general public of young people, women and men, Orthodox and secular. Unlike the women, the male actors have a well-developed business sense, and there are almost no Halakhic restrictions on them regarding modesty, use of the voice, or of movement. For that reason, they can appear before mixed audiences of women and men. Today these actors appear throughout the country in various frameworks. They also maintain wide-ranging educational activities in both secular and Orthodox schools. The Aspaklaria Theater recently established the Jewish Acting Studio, where men and women in separate groups learn acting techniques in courses of varying

58 Upon the initiative of Rivka Monovitz, at the Ma’aleh school for cinema, television, and the arts, a three-year course in acting was given from 1998 to 2001. Some of the graduates established the theaters mentioned in this section. I discussed the Looking Glass Theater briefly above, in connection with The Voice of my (Womanly) Soul.
length.  

**Summary: “Is there such a thing as Orthodox women’s theater?”**

Many of my friends have asked me whether the phenomenon that I was investigating actually existed. It seems to me that the previous survey shows that dynamic theatrical activity does indeed exist among Orthodox Jewish women in Israel, and it is developing in several directions among various segments of Orthodox society.

While I was engaged in this research, changes took place in various aspects of work in the theater: in the subjects of the plays, in the level of direction and acting, in the scenery, in the inclusion of video in the plays. In the late 1990s many of the plays dealt mainly with Hasidic stories and Midrashim, which were conveyed by the technique of narrative theater or as subjects for children’s plays. Toward the end of the research period, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, many more plays dealt with inner communal problems, problems that had not hitherto been addressed in public, and which perhaps had even been silenced. In 2005, the year of the withdrawal from Gush Katif, plays on decidedly political topics were produced, and the theater became an arena for clarifying political and national issues.

The language of the theater also changed. The influence of the first avant-garde experiments, including those of the Jerusalem Theater Group, which has been active since the 1970s, is evident in the groups at work today, three decades later. Recently young women with more professional backgrounds have begun to take

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59 In the summer of 2006 two plays by students of the studio were performed: *Voices*, directed by Professor Yehuda Morali, and *Come, Mom*, directed by Sela’it Ahi Miryam.

60 In 2002 the *Dosiot* Group won honorable mention in the Alternative Theater Contest at Akko (see the chapter on this group below), and in 2005, in the Beit Lessin Theater, *Mikveh*, by Hadar Galon, an Orthodox woman standup comedian, won the “Play of the Year” prize.
part in all areas of theatrical activity, and this will certainly influence the field in the future as well. The fact that the phenomenon has already existed for more than a decade also influences the audience and their expectations from the emerging Orthodox theater. Today Orthodox audiences are more familiar with the artistic medium and so, with purchase of a ticket, they expect the play to be interesting, to convey an Orthodox values message, and that the theatrical event will take place in an organized manner. Even those who are used to viewing plays of the professional repertory theaters of Israel prefer to encourage Orthodox creativity anchored in Orthodox life and the Jewish canon, although it may be on a lower professional level.

The religious-national establishment still does not give financial support to women’s Orthodox theater and relates to the phenomenon with suspicion. The establishment is pondering how far it should cooperate with the artists. In small communities, in the settlements, fertile and encouraging cooperation has emerged between the local councils and the theater groups, but in cities they find it difficult to obtain financing and a place for their activity. In recent years the establishment has had to cope with the fact that within its sector an art form is emerging that is not always adapted to the conservative outlook. This is probably the reason why it does not allocate resources to the establishment of an Orthodox theater in the manner that it does allocate resources, for example, to women’s Torah study centers. Nevertheless, it does encourage the opening of theater courses in state religious educational institutions.

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61 In the spring of 2005 there was a joint project of female students at Emunah College with male students of the Otniel Yeshiva to produce street theater in Jerusalem at the time of the referendum in the Likud Party regarding the withdrawal from Gush Katif. The women directed and produced the event, and the men acted in the city streets. In the summer of 2006 Voices was produced, a play by students of the Jewish Acting Studio of the Looking Glass group, directed by Professor Yehuda Morali. Three female students from Emunah College took part in production, lighting, set design, and costuming.
for women. The reason for this encouragement might be that channeling the creative powers into the field of education makes it possible to create a mechanism for supervising the emerging theater. On the one hand, the Orthodox establishment understands that ignoring the arts is liable to drive creative forces into the secular world, to various festivals that take place throughout the country, so it encourages them in partial fashion. On the other hand, the secular theatrical establishment regards the Orthodox women’s theater groups as a marginal phenomenon or, even worse, as folkloric—and it embraces them up to a certain limit, without examining them or relating to them in terms of artistic categories.

My research shows that attention should also be paid to the emerging theater in the ultra-Orthodox community. Since the plays are connected with events that in any case are regarded as special occasions in the women’s calendar, they have gradually become an integral part of ultra-Orthodox life. The ultra-Orthodox women’s audience is thirsty for a representation of its life on the stage, and for that reason the establishment allocates financial resources to encourage attendance at plays appropriate to that sector. Actresses and directors who became Orthodox have joined the ranks of ultra-Orthodox society, and they make the theater in that sector more professional.

The inward turning of the Orthodox sector, in all its branches, in the wake of political and national events in the decade from 1995 to 2005, such as the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, has encouraged sectarian artistic creation that is “in correspondence with the outside world.” It has begun to become a substitute for the professional repertory theater

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62 See below the chapter on Emunah College. According to data that I collected in 2005, from the inspector in charge of art education in the state religious schools, Revital Stern, there are twenty theater majors in religious girls’ high schools, in which the girls study for five units of their matriculation examinations.

63 See below, the discussion of the honorable mention received by the Dosiot Group in the Akko Theater competition in 2002.
many Orthodox people frequent but criticize strongly. Although the national-religious establishment does not yet support Orthodox women’s theater in a sweeping and significant manner, in my opinion, the phenomenon will expand. The women will become more professional in response to the demand of the audience for a higher artistic level. As time passes, the audience that has become familiar with the theater and learned to value it will be open to innovative and subversive forms that are emerging from the margins, thus encouraging women artists to produce a higher quality of Orthodox theater.
Chapter Three:
“The Right Hand Draws in, the Left Hand Pushes Away”: The Involvement of Rabbis in the Theater.

Is Innovation Desirable According to the Torah?

National-religious rabbis seek to influence the leisure activities of the Orthodox community.\textsuperscript{64} They claim that the Orthodox community is not interested in the places or forms of entertainment that attract the secular community: “The Orthodox public wants something different. Its entertainment includes studying a page of Gemara with a study partner as well as art—as long as it’s of high quality, esthetically and morally” (Rabbi “Arieh Ginat,” Interview, 2001). Hence, rabbis who are willing to regard Orthodox women’s theatrical activities as legitimate restrict their approval to the content and the appearance on the stage. They are apprehensive about the sweeping and all-encompassing nature of work in the theater, because they understand that it demands exposure of the actress’ emotions and her body to the gaze of strangers:

The paradox is to speak about modesty and theater. Theater is the peak of extroversion, but on the other hand people talk about the need to influence, and theater is a very significant tool for exerting influence in the modern world. The paradox is not in necessarily for women alone, but with them we feel the motive of modesty more, so a bigger dilemma emerges for women (Rabbi “Roni Armon,” Interview, December 2000).

\textsuperscript{64} The names of the rabbis quoted from interviews are pseudonymous, but quotations from books mention their authors’ real names.
The rabbis I interviewed were trained in the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva, and they speak in concepts taken from the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook\(^{65}\) about the spiritual renewal that accompanied the people’s return to their land and the need to encourage all of a person’s creative forces. They recall Rabbi Kook’s support for the art association that was to grow into the Bezalel Art Academy. In 1908 he sent them a letter of congratulation, expressing his support for the art that was emerging in Palestine, defining it as part of “repairing the world”:

&emsp;One of the most pronounced signs of renewal is the honorable activity that is about to emerge from your respectable association: the rebirth of Hebrew art and beauty in the Land of Israel. It is encouraging to see the splendid sight of our highly talented brethren, geniuses of beauty and art... and the High Spirit bore them and brought them to Jerusalem to grace our holy city, which is like “a seal on our arm” [ref. to Song of Songs] with their pleasant flowers to be within it for honor and glory and also for a blessing and benefit (Letters of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook, 158, 1985, p. 203).

Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh,\(^{66}\) who serves as a guide for many artists who have become observant, also adopted this approach to art, an approach permeated with kabbalistic terms. He is concerned with theological questions about the connection between art, truth, and science, and in his lectures he explains that artistic freedom is given “through the connection of art with ‘divine freedom.’” In

\(^{65}\) (See earlier footnote.) Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook came to Palestine in the early twentieth century and developed a philosophical and kabbalistic doctrine that was favorable to Zionism and to the secular settlements. He was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi and the founder of the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva. His son, Zvi Yehuda Kook, was the spiritual figure behind the Gush Emunim movement for settlement on land conquered from Jordan in 1967.

\(^{66}\) See page 18 footnote 18.
his opinion, the Jewish artist “redeems material from the vain state of being of the imagination and penetrates it with consciousness of ‘the true being’ of the essence of the blessed Lord. In contrast, the non-Jewish artist claims the freedom of the rebel against the limitations of matter, that is to say, external and false freedom, thus destroying the foundations of nature and the search for the ‘infinite’ in the material world.”

Many rabbis believe that “one cannot invoke the principle that ‘innovation is forbidden by the Torah.’ On the contrary, very often new things are desirable in God’s eyes.” At the same time, they emphasize that their approach to theater is different from the secular, Western approach, which, in their opinion, accords the artist unlimited freedom to create:

Every artist, after he has finished his work, has to place it in a frame. An “army” approach would say: every drawing requires paper, paints, and a frame. I was talking to a gardener, who said that the beauty of grass is in the edges, the boundaries. That’s its beauty, and it’s part of art... Every artist has his own boundaries. Today art has lost all good taste. A low level person produces that kind of art. I say: the artist who grapples with difficult questions and conflicts has to express something. He has to express values. If there are no values—he’s just presenting a no-exit solution, and that’s problematic. You have to seek, but you need both aesthetics and ethics, and that depends on the person’s level... Today the whole level of art has

67 Anis (1996), pp. 74-75. Anis adapted ideas that he heard in the lessons of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh.
68 Cherlow (2000), p. 50. The principle that “innovation is forbidden by the Torah” was the motto of one of the founders of ultra-Orthodoxy, Rabbi Moses Schreiber (1762-1839), best known by the title of his book, *Hatam sofer* [The Scribe’s Seal].
gone down, and I see that as a problem. Artists have to make a living, and they use cheap material to attract a crowd. If only they would do it differently. That would be valuable art. (Rabbi “Arieh Ginat,” Interview, 2001)

Judaism and the Theater—a Fertile Stage in the Culture War

Rabbis maintain that the desire of the Orthodox community to integrate and to produce art is parallel to the integration of Orthodox young men in the high ranks of the IDF during the 1980s and 1990s, and it is part of the “culture war” that is challenging secular hegemony in social and cultural life in Israel. The desire to create high quality theater in a society without an artistic tradition requires secular professional people who can guide the creative artists. In the rabbis’ opinion, this encounter entails dangers, because secular professionals encourage the women to break with convention, to present conflicts, and to make artistic experiments. They understand that these efforts have a cost, that they are part of the process of forming the theater, and they wonder whether the investment is worth the cost. Although many of them believe that the women’s new activity in theater is part of constructing the national culture, they expect failures and difficulties before the emergence of a positive “final product”:

Are we willing to take up this challenge and know that we’re going to pay a price? The price is part of the clarification, or, you could say, “the Land of Israel is acquired with tribulations,” and this is part of the tribulations—the grappling. It raises a moral, legal question: is “cultural construction” of the people that lived in exile for two thousand years to be acquired with tribulations? There will be failures
and problems in these attempts. What I’m saying is hard to say in my capacity as a rabbi. I think that experiments shouldn’t shock you into thinking that it’s horrible and it’s got to stop. Failure is part of the struggle and from it we’ll reach a modus vivendi, which is the cultural model I strive to attain. But how can we get there? Without failures? Without experiments? How many people will have to fall down and will have to go through the questions of whether it’s okay or not to make a film with nudity? And we’ll have to respond. Theater will necessarily bring failures and distress. (Rabbi Roni Admon, Interview, 2000)

Rabbi Luvitz claims that it is possible to create “spiritual purity in art,” but on the basis of his experience in teaching classes in art and drama in schools, this path “is paved at the beginning and full of potholes, thorns and brambles at the end... and in the end the demand to create religious art is liable to prove to be a demand to be satisfied with shallowness. It’s liable to uproot the urge for fertile creativity, and in any case it won’t achieve its goal.”

The Goal: Creation of a Theater “of Our Own”

The rabbis have great expectations regarding the “product” of the Orthodox women artists. Mrs. “Shemesh,” the wife of a well-known rabbi and a lecturer at Emunah College, requires Orthodox women’s theater to express the spirit of Judaism:

The words “drama” and “theater” contain the landmine of the problem. The landmine is taking a gentile concept and bringing it into our culture. Here I see the danger, the same danger as with everything we take from the gentiles, and we have

to be very vigilant about how much of our own we preserve and take technical tools from the gentiles, which is possible. We have the proverbs, “believe in the wisdom of the nations,” and, “the beauty of Japhet in the tents of Shem,” which means that we can bring the wisdom of the gentiles into us, but there has to be vigilance to make sure it doesn’t influence our spirituality. Theater, even because of that simple thing, its name, represents taking a spiritual element from the gentiles. The same goes for drama. You have to examine every single tool: singing, speech, and movement. You have to examine everything from the point of view of halakha. I can’t say: you have to leave that to the rabbis. Content—that has to be examined. If we learn techniques from the gentiles and from secular Jews, that’s fine. But if I take content from them and identify with it, then sometimes I’m a partner in non-Jewish or even anti-Jewish ideas... (“Bilha Shemesh,” Interview, 2000)

The high expectations and demands derive from the sweeping negative criticism voiced by the rabbis against the theater that exists in Israel, though all of them admit they have been to the theater very seldom. Rabbi Aviv, for example, argues that the Israeli theater performs “plays that want you to be disgusted with yourself and your society: everything is no good, everything is bad, and everything is corrupt.” In the same breath he expresses hope that theater of a different kind will be produced:

It will be more delicate, with a lot of sensitivity for the aspects that a secular person isn’t aware of at all, and every subject that is treated will be treated with a lot of nuance. I want “our” theater to make people better and not to look at themselves with a
feeling of disgust. (Rabbi Shlomo Aviv, Interview, 1999)

Perhaps the reason why the rabbis delve so deeply into theoretical questions connected with theater is that they have never experienced work as a director, actor, or spectator, and they do not understand that in order to depict reality, the theater creates a “stage illusion.” The rabbis condemn this reality as “specious,” and they claim that it blurs the boundary between reality and imagination, between “truth” and “lie.” The rabbis are disturbed by involvement with the “lying,” theatrical representation of reality, and they are afraid that this involvement will have a bad influence both on the actors and on the spectators:

I have a big problem with this and with the whole subject that’s called acting. Why? Because I think that in general and in particular in our age, there is a need to clarify the truth. There is, for example, cultural truth, and there is ethical truth. If the theater were to say: I want to strengthen the moral level. But the theater says: I want to provoke, I want to raise doubt, and that’s the power of the theater. I say—if the theater were to say: I want to fight against human pride, I would go with that with all my strength. But if the theater deals with the breaking of conventions, the religious foundations, I ask myself: “Where is the truth? So what is the task of the theater?” ...I try to understand through my contact with people who work in it: 1. Where is his life in relation to the position he presents? 2. How can a man repeat the same experience every week?...I wonder from the psychological point of view—not even the religious point of view or that of halakha. I want to understand the psychological process of a person
who works in theater. (Rabbi Eliahu Kaminsky, Interview, 2000)

Thus the rabbis analyze theatrical work with ethical tools and according to religious values. Their attitudes are unconnected with artistic work and the process of the artist involved with his or her work. They do raise deep questions that raise a theological challenge for the Orthodox artists, but in some cases these discussions are liable to halt and paralyze the creative work.

**Differences of Opinion**

The attitude of the modern Orthodox rabbis is very different from that of the Zionist ultra-Orthodox rabbis, mainly “in the relative weight that each of the camps attributes to submission, to authority, and to self-abnegation, on the one hand, and to individual autonomy and self-expression, on the other.”70 Every rabbi who belongs clearly to one of the groups levels vehement criticism against the other. For example, the late Rabbi Amital (head of the Gush Etzion Yeshiva, known for his moderate views and openness to innovation in Judaism) called the view that places halakha rather than the Torah at the center of Judaism a “shallow and dangerous” view:

People have the impression that there is nothing in the Torah except halakha, and that in any confrontation with new problems that arise from modern society answers must be sought solely in books of halakha. Many of the basic values of the Torah are based on the general commandment of “You shall be holy,” and on “doing the right thing in the eyes of God,” which did not receive formal expression as law. Not only have these declined from their exalted level, but they have also lost their

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validity in the eyes of the community that regards itself as obligated by halakha. (Rabbi Yehuda Amital, the Lavi Conference, 1999)\textsuperscript{71}

Rabbis like him to try avoid censorship and religious legal decisions connected with the emerging theater and to concentrate rather on the philosophical and theological questions that arise from it, in order to avoid cutting off the creative Orthodox community from halakha:

To avoid the feeling that halakha is a step-sister of creativity, something entirely marginal, a “motoric disturbance” ... We must not censor, because this isn’t something that can be developed [otherwise]... [But] it has to transferred to more of a faith and morality basis, that is, a basis in values; that is to say: What are the foundations of the human creative power, what are the considerations of the psychological forces with respect to the process that’s called acting and performance? What is the high point? That is, what can be reflected in plays about the relations between man and God. (Rabbi Eliahu Kaminsky, Interview, 2002).

The ultra-Orthodox Zionist rabbis think differently. They advocate censorship, because they claim that this will preserve a high moral level in the plays, resulting in a theater that is

\textsuperscript{71} The first Lavi Conference took place in 1985, and discussions were held on questions confronting the modern Orthodox community. Members of the [Orthodox] Religious Kibbutz movement and rabbis from the left wing of the Orthodox movement in the United States took part. In 1999, twenty-five years after the first conference, it was held once again on the day following the Shavuot holiday, with broader participation: Eda, an organization that includes Orthodox leaders from the United States, Beit Morasha in Jerusalem, people from Bar-Ilan University, yeshiva graduates, and representatives from the women’s movement, Kolekh. The subjects dealt with were: Orthodox feminism, the relation of the Orthodox movement to the Conservative movement, ethics and halakha, loss of faith, and Torah study in the present day.
essentially different in quality and goals from secular theater: That exhibitionist approach, that everything inside is garbage... I don’t care if they talk about people’s defects, but that coarse atmosphere, an atmosphere as if there are no secrets in the world, everything is open, as if there’s no God... Censorship is a good thing, a good sense, self-restraint with good taste, when a person keeps things inside him. As a result, he thinks, how he actually can say it in a balanced, correct way. It’s the same problem again: how much can the rabbis manage the problems of the theater? I don’t know. Maybe there should be some rabbis who are actors! (Rabbi Yisrael Gur, Interview, 2001).

These rabbis act urgently to write rulings in halakha that are based on rabbinical responsa. These rabbis act urgently to write rulings in halakha that are based on rabbinical responsa. Moses received the Torah on Mount Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the Sages. The Sages of Israel did not speak about arts like today, so there is reason for rabbis to write... You cannot say that something is permitted or forbidden. Forbidden on what grounds? Permitted on what grounds? ... Quarterlies have to be published about matters of art along with the rabbis who will give their answers, and this will be an improvement. (Rabbi Haim Fogel, Meeting with Students, 2001).

In their opinion, this is the path to be taken by those who

72 The responsa literature, “questions and answers” in Hebrew, is the term for one of the most active and prolific branches of Jewish legal activity. The responsa contain a collection of questions about halakha asked by the community at large with answers by a single rabbi or a group of rabbis. A collection of this kind, known as “Drama Responsa,” was written by Rabbi David Avraham Spektor and published in 2005 on the initiative of the rabbi of the Emunah College, Rabbi Haim Fogel, in an experimental edition published by the college in Jerusalem.
accept responsibility toward the Orthodox community when it adopts an alien cultural pattern. Any other way, in their opinion, would be a wager “on our life in the world to come, our eternal life” (Fogel, Meeting with Students, 2001). Bringing the dimension of “the world to come” into discussion of Orthodox women’s theater has two purposes: to serve as a warning against intense and sweeping occupation with theater, which could cause a “decline in fear of heaven,” to “worship of the ego,” and to “gossip,” and, in addition, to increase the power of the rabbis in their guiding role in the area of theater—an area foreign to them—and to shift the discussion to an area familiar to them, like that of philosophy and education.

**Asking the Rabbi: the Women’s Demand for Rabbinical Involvement**

Many Orthodox women ask rabbis upon their own initiative regarding the content of the plays, such as the interpretation or translation of canonical texts for the stage. For example, how is one to represent a biblical figure on stage without making it shallow? Sometimes they ask for advice and approval for presenting a play that deals with sensitive issues such as marital difficulties and the phenomenon of battered women, or even the story of their lives. Although the rabbis do not attend rehearsals or performances, some of the playwrights and directors ask questions connected with theatrical technique and direction. For example, does a woman who operates puppets have to be hidden behind a curtain, or is it permitted for her to appear openly before male spectators? How is it possible to overcome the prohibition against women singing in public because of the halakha that a woman’s voice is like her nakedness? Is it permitted for women to wear men’s clothes on stage? Is a woman permitted to play a male role? May women appear before a mixed audience of men and women? How is it
possible to have a political theater without slandering anyone?

The restrictions that the rabbis impose on women in the theater affect not only movement, costume, and content, but also the quality of the characters they are permitted to play. Rabbi “Ginat” said, “If there is something corrupt or evil there, it is not fitting for a woman to appear in an ugly way—not at all!” (“Ginat,” Interview, 2001). According to this way of thinking, a woman is forbidden to take part in the negative representation of other women, and she is not permitted to play distorted or negative characters. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a sign of the great importance that the rabbis attribute to the positive portrayal of women in Orthodox society. On the other hand, this determination limits women and shows the rabbis’ lack of understanding of the actor’s work and even more so, perhaps, their lack of confidence in women’s ability to behave professionally and separate the character they portray from their “real” lives.

Artists who direct questions to rabbis connected to their theatrical activities do not challenge their “extra-theatrical” authority. The consultations with rabbis are motivated by the women’s desire to remain within the Orthodox consensus despite their activity, which is exceptional in Orthodox society. Moreover, public approval of a play by a rabbi is good for public relations, because a play that has received rabbinical backing will attract a large audience, whereas one that the rabbis refuse to approve is liable to fail. The rabbis are an influential force in channeling plays in the direction they prefer from a religious and moral point of view. If the content of a play is subversive and rebellious, a rabbi will not give it approval, and thus he will indirectly cause its withdrawal from the stage.

It is important to emphasize that the rabbis are informed about the difficulties and problems of Orthodox women’s theater only when the artists confide in them, and not all the artists do so. There are women who intentionally refrain from sharing their
doubts with rabbis. When religious or moral problems arise within a group, they undertake a sincere and open process of clarification among themselves, within their theater group, and with friends and family members, sometimes consulting various sources in halakha. An example of this is the Dosiot group, which decided to censor some parts of the play called Bat-Mitzvah: Halom vesivro [Bat-Mitzvah: Dream and its Shattering], because they were afraid that members of their families would be wounded by its revelatory content and by their avant-garde theater work, but not because of considerations of halakha.73

“Engaged Theater” or “Emasculated Theater”?

Most of the rabbis I interviewed were of the opinion that there is room for an “engaged theater” to serve as a vehicle for transmitting educational messages and religious and ethical values and “to reflect the relation between man and God” (Rabbi Eliahu Kaminski, Interview, 2002). The rabbis ignore almost completely the view that advocates theatrical art as a place for personal expression, for the creation of art for art’s sake. Rabbi Ya’akov Ariel explains the proper relation between faith and aesthetics according to Judaism in his book, Beohalei Torah [In the Tents of Torah]:

Judaism places faith first. It also values aesthetics, but only when it serves ethics. Aesthetics for its own sake is not a Jewish value. An aesthetic experience is justified only when it expresses or strengthens faith or at least frees a person from psychic tensions and makes it possible for him to devote himself to the development of his faith with greater force. (Ariel 1998, p. 28).

Only a few of the rabbis whom I interviewed criticized “engaged theater” because it was “emasculated theater”—theater that

73 See the section on censorship in the chapter on the Dosiot.
is limited in terms of the subjects of the plays, the discourse, the roles that the women can play in it, and the way of working. Those who do hold that opinion point out that even if one attempts, by means of the theater, “to mold the ‘pure’ soul of youth and adults, there is no guarantee that it will be taken that way by the audience” (Rabbi Roni Admon, Interview, 2000). He reached this conclusion following a crisis that erupted in 1998 at the Ma’aleh School of Television, Film, and the Arts, an Orthodox school in Jerusalem. They saw this as a failure of the national-religious community to produce representative art that reflected its way of life and values. At the same time, they understood that it was impossible to stifle creativity and to dictate its character and content. At this stage they view their task as going along with the women artists who ask for guidance, even if they do not tread the straight and narrow and accede to the rabbis’ demands: “One question of the spiritual leadership will be how to express discomfort with a play, on the one hand, and to allow it to continue, on the other, until it reaches the growth we are hoping for” (Rabbi Roni Admon, Interview, 2001). Yonadav Kaplun, an Orthodox poet who taught creative writing in the theater department of Emunah College believes that it will be possible to produce an authentic, Orthodox theatrical work only after years of inner struggle, and that until then Orthodox theater will be tendentious and limited:

There will be several years of frustration and deep disappointment... It is very painful, but nothing can be done. We have to accept the fact that we have women who are undergoing a real process, and it is a slow and long one, and the hope is that when they finish quarreling, they’l calm down, stabilize,

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74 The screening of a student film in 1998, in which an actress appeared in the nude, caused an uproar in the national-religious community and forced the administration and the rabbi of the institution to resign (Effi Meir, “In Ma’aleh the Path is a Winding One,” Mekor Rishon (81), Weekend Supplement, Shevat 1999, Hebrew).
get settled, become domesticated, and get married. In other words, that they’ll choose to accept a spiritual commitment. Then there is a chance that one of them will rise up and produce a deep and interesting religious play. (Kaplun, Interview, 1999)

Developments in the Relations between the Rabbis and the Artists

In the years that have passed since Orthodox women began working in theater, many changes have taken in the field. Among others, there has been change in the attitude of the rabbis toward the various theatrical initiatives that arise within the national-religious community, especially among women. Today the rabbis acknowledge the women’s expertise in this field and even encourage them to act on behalf of the community through this art. Recently it has become clear that the rabbis enable them to develop in the field, but the artists do not always accept rabbinical authorization, and some of them prefer to restrict their theatrical activity. An example of this was the willingness of the rabbis to permit the participation of women in political street theater organized at the time of the withdrawal from Gush Katif in 2005. They gave permission to women to appear in the streets of Jerusalem in front of a mixed audience of men and women but made it conditional on the actresses’ wearing loose clothing and masks, so they would not be identified. The rabbis and the teachers in the college encouraged the women to appear in an original play that they wrote called *Lirkod ‘im zeevim* [To Dance with Wolves] and to create an

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The play was an adaption of the well-known children’s story, “The Three Little Pigs,” and it was intended as an allegory about what would happen if the settlers of Gush Katif were evacuated. Instead of little pigs, the actors decided to play lion cubs. The wolf, “who changed his skin from friend to enemy,” disturbs the cubs with his howling at their doorstep. In the end, “the brothers who got tired of the howling” let him into the little room in the corridor that belongs to the baby cub, “and we’ll put him somewhere
authentic theater of political protest. Despite the authorization, the young women chose to use male “actors,” students at the Otniel Yeshiva, who appeared in their place. Cooperation between young men and women in a theatrical production was an innovation in itself, and it, too, received rabbinical approval. However, the interesting phenomenon, in my opinion, was that the young women, all of them students, gave up the opportunity to appear in street theater and in that way demonstrated greater conservatism than the rabbis. One of the women who was involved in the activity explained:

For the moment it’s not natural, for the moment it’s not acceptable... In the end we would have needed the male actors. I don’t think I had enough courage to speak for myself in the street, and they did it. They started singing in Zion Square. (Levi, Interview, 2005).

The conclusion from this example is surprising: the rabbis accepted the value of theater for society and the contribution of the women to its quality, and they encouraged them to devote themselves to that activity if, in their view, the goal was justified. However, the young women were not willing to violate further conventions, beyond the ones they had already broken, such as, for example, appearing before a mixed audience of men and women. They did not exploit the permission given to them by the rabbis, which was connected to the particular “order of the day,” and they preferred to remain backstage and take care of vital tasks that were hidden from the audience such as writing the script, directing, and producing the performance. The conclusion is that, meanwhile, most of the artists are following in the footsteps of the

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else, far away.” In that way, they hoped to be able to get some rest at last. “What’s the end of the story? That depends on you.” (From the program handed out in the streets of Jerusalem by “Young Artists in Favor of Gush Katif,” May 2005).

Pseudonym.
traditional Jewish “woman of valor,” praised every Friday night in Orthodox homes before the blessing on wine is recited. Like her, they felt blessed in their labor in the secure and modest place of the women’s domain, or in the hidden, inner, but nevertheless vital space backstage, which even the rabbis could not convince them to give up.

77 Ref. to Proverbs 31:10 ff.
Chapter Four:
The Nekuda Yehudit [Jewish Point] Group

The Nekuda Yehudit Theater Group was the first that I studied. Dina Shohat and Daniella Dvash, members of the group, live on the seam connecting the boundaries of the three sectors that comprise Orthodox society in Israel today: national religious society, ultra-Orthodox society, and the society of the newly religious, who are connected to Hasidic movements, mainly Bratslav Hasidism and Chabad. They are newly religious, they maintain a strictly Orthodox way of life, and they are penetrated with Jewish faith, which they discovered on a long and twisting path. They live in a settlement that is unique with respect to its social composition: Bat Ayin in Gush Etzion (a few kilometers south of Jerusalem). By means of the theater, they maintain contact with various segments of the Orthodox population and, to a degree, with their secular past, which is characterized by exploration and freedom from frameworks. The theater is both the arena of encounter between the societies with which they are in contact and also the arena of their personal and intimate work, which permits them to connect the personal worlds that comprise their identities.

Thanks to their vital personalities, every meeting with them was interesting and exciting. They performed for two kinds of audiences: ultra-Orthodox women and national religious women. Thus I was able to examine the social processes undergone by every variety of Orthodox women in Israel. By means of the theater, I studied the differences between the societies with respect to the hegemonic control mechanisms over values and cultural patterns. I noted how they reject innovation on certain occasions, whereas on other occasions they permit the hesitant penetration of “alien” elements such as the theater and feminist messages.
Observation of the *Nekuda Yehudit* group throughout the years of this study showed that the theater created by women who had chosen to become Orthodox contributed to changes in the status of women in Orthodox society and expanded the areas of discourse within it. When the change in the areas of discourse is made in cooperation with ultra-Orthodox “cultural coordinators,” there was willingness to accept it. But when the newly religious artists initiated activities on their own, without cooperating with the supervisory hegemony, the huge gap between the patterns of behavior and thought originating in an alien and secular environment (“not our own”) and those of Orthodox society from time immemorial was revealed. The theater created by the *Nekuda Yehudit* group was a touchstone for the relations of the groups among which the group maneuvered and made it possible to draw conclusions about changing states of mind and patterns of discourse and culture in the various sectors of Orthodox society in Israel today.

**Dina Shohat**

Dina Shohat initiated and established the *Nekuda Yehudit* theater group in 1994 and serves it in several capacities: playwright, director, producer, and public relations person. Shohat, a mother of seven, lives in Bat Ayin in Gush Etzion, a religious settlement inhabited almost entirely by newly religious people, Bratslav and Chabad Hasidim. The settlement is known as a place for artists: painters, actors, cinema and theater people, novelists, and poets—some formerly and others still. The religious services in Bat Ayin follow the Chabad rite, and many of the settlers regard Rabbi Ginsburgh of Kfar Chabad as their rabbi, though he does not live

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78 The cultural coordinators bring the rabbis of the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods a list of performances which, in their opinion, are appropriate for audiences of women. Only after they have been approved is the performance booked for the neighborhood.
in the settlement. The settlers do not send their children to the state religious schools but rather to more liberal schools within the independent, ultra-Orthodox system. A yeshiva for newly religious men and women has been established in the settlement as well as a high school for ultra-Orthodox girls, which prepares them to take the matriculation examinations. Unlike many other ultra-Orthodox secondary educational institutions, this school makes them eligible for higher education. The residents commit themselves to bylaws that require the men to grow beards and the women to dress modestly. All the women must wear long skirts and stockings, and married women must cover their hair. It is forbidden to own a television, except for work purposes.

According to Shohat, the residents hold a variety of political opinions, from the extreme right to the center. The residents regard their settlement as a pluralistic place, but the image of the settlement is extreme right. Indeed, several of the residents were convicted of membership in a Jewish underground organization that planned acts of “revenge” against Arabs. According to Shohat, the settlement is “complex, and the people are mainly involved in the area of education.” The other residents of the region regard Bat Ayin as an eccentric and exceptional place because of the composition of the residents, their “hippy” and bohemian style of dress, and their Bratslav Hasidic way of life, which combines ultra-Orthodoxy with openness to the arts. Bat Ayin was a forerunner of the New Age wave that has been spreading among the young people in national religious society.

Shohat came to Israel from Romania with her family when she was two, and she spent her childhood “among the Bulgarians and Romanians in picturesque Jaffa.” She frequently went to the Yiddish theater with her mother, and she says, “Mom wanted me to study theater.” Yiddish and Romanian was spoken in her home,

79 The majority of pupils study in state funded schools: secular and religious. The more strictly religious schools are semi private or completely private if they do not agree to teach basic secular subjects.
which was not at all religious (“Dad went to synagogue only on the High Holidays”). Nevertheless, she attended a Beit Yakov religious girls’ school until fourth grade, for reasons of convenience (“My parents were afraid to have me cross the street”). That religious education made an impression on her, and memories of it have remained with her over the years.\footnote{80}{The short quotations are taken from an interview I held with Shohat in 2000.}

She attended Municipal High School Number 6 in the pedagogical program, so that she was destined to go on to study education. She joined the army and studied in the Sde Boker Teachers’ College in preparation for military service in the south of the country first as a soldier-teacher\footnote{81}{As an instrument for social change, the Israeli army sends women soldiers to teach in schools in outlying and underprivileged settlements.} and later as an officer. Shohat describes the time in Sde Boker as “the beginning of the search for myself in interaction with other people.” She did not complete her studies in literature and philosophy, begun at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and continued at the University of Haifa. At that time she felt that she had not found answers to her questions, “not in the university and not in personal relations.” Shohat decided to go abroad, traveling in England, Italy, and Greece. Upon returning to Israel, just before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, she went to live in the Beit Yisrael neighborhood of Jerusalem with her sister, who was studying the Bezalel Academy of the Arts. She began to study Judaism and to become observant “in a serious way,” and then she went to live in Bayit VeGan and continued studying Judaism in strict, “Litvak” frameworks,\footnote{82}{Beit Yisrael is an old neighborhood with a mixture of traditional religious people and students and artistic types, attracted by the low rent and picturesque urban landscape. Bayit VeGan is a newer, Orthodox neighborhood. “Litvak” refers to the rigorous, intellectual tradition developed during the nineteenth century in the influential yeshivot of Lithuania. It is thought of as arid in contrast to the emotional, Hasidic tradition, which it opposed bitterly.} which concentrated on teaching halakha: “They
didn’t teach ‘inwardness’—only halakha. That didn’t grab me.” She had not yet encountered Hasidism, which she later adopted and passed on to her children.

When they started to offer marriage partners to Shohat, she realized she was not yet ready to commit herself to the religious way of life, and she went to live in Rosh Pina, near the Sea of Galilee, where some “freaks” had gathered, with whom she had close relations. She was the only one in the group who had a steady job—as a teacher in elementary school—and she had her own rented room. All that time she was still observing the commandments. She taught Bible and Judaism in an unconventional way, and she gave a drama workshop for children among the half-ruined, abandoned houses of Rosh Pina (long since renovated and gentrified). After a while her interest in religion waned. She went to Scotland with her sister and thought she would become a “citizen of the world,” wandering from country to country with no time limit (“Without the Jewish thing—why stay in Israel?”), but in a short time she understood that “my bundle would stay with me forever,” so she returned to Israel.

She met a student of Gurdjieff in Rosh Pina, connected with him “from within,” and at the age of twenty-seven decided to start a family with him. They married and began to wander: to Safed, to Amirim (a vegetarian community in the Galilee), to Jerusalem, and from there to Mevo Modi’in (an alternative style religious community inspired by Shlomo Carlebach), which is where she began keeping the Sabbath again. They also lived in the United States for a few years, and there “keeping the commandments no

83 George Gurdjieff (1866-1949) was a Russian philosopher and spiritual teacher. From his travels in the East he brought the doctrine of man’s harmonious development, on all levels of consciousness, to the West. He described man as being imprisoned in a heavy slumber. The new harmonious development was intended to enable man to escape from the prison of negative emotions and become a free person by means of inner work. [For a more jaundiced take on Gurdjieff, see http://www.skepdic.com/gurdjieff.html].
It is difficult to make her speak about those years, and from the few things she agreed to tell, one can glean that they wandered from one Gurdjieff group to another, without any financial means. Meanwhile they had two children. After a few years Shohat decided to return to Israel with her children and accept an invitation from her sister, who had married meanwhile and become observant, to come and live in Kfar Chabad. In Kfar Chabad she met people who “gave me the chills with their power—not from this world, the power of Judaism.” Shohat mentions figures such as Rabbi Ginsburgh:

I was in shock! If a man like that keeps the commandments—I don’t have to ask questions... If a man on his level finds himself in Judaism, that’s no small matter that you can dismiss like a kind of trick. You have to check out what’s happening.

(Shohat, Interview, 2000)

Shohat began to cover her hair and to attend Rabbi Ginsburgh’s lessons regularly. She studied together with Golda Lipsh, “an amazing woman, not connected with motherhood but with a deep innerness.” When Shohat’s husband returned to Israel, she confronted him with a fait accompli, that she had become Orthodox. He did not want to become Orthodox, but he remained with her there for three years, and their third child was born. They moved to Safed, but after the birth of their fourth child, a daughter, they separated, and after a while they were divorced.

In Safed Shohat was the teacher of born-again people who came to the Alta’a Institute, run by Chabad. She invested many efforts in creating a vibrant home, full of social activity for herself and her children, “so as not to be a nebekh” [loser in Yiddish].

According to Shohat, Lipsh received permission from the Lubavitcher Rebbe to translate the Gemara to Russian, and she was so well known for her learning, that she took part in the lessons given by Rabbi Ginsburgh, which were intended solely for men, separated from them by a curtain.
I was stuck with four little children. I remember the day I decided I wouldn’t be a woman that was thrown away, a poor thing with four children, going to hear kiddush [the blessing on wine, recited on Friday nights] here and havdala [the blessing concluding the Sabbath] there. That was it. My house began to be a center for girls and friends, and that’s where my theater activity came back. (Shohat, Interview, 2000)

In 1982 Shohat and her friend Dorit Toker decided to adapt one of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav’s famous stories, “The Tale of the King’s Lost Daughter,” into pantomime to raise money for the Talmud Torah (religious elementary school) where they sent their sons. They did it with the blessing and authorization of Rabbi Koenig of Safed, who had gathered newly religious Bratslav Hasidim around himself. The rabbi also helped the group financially, enlisted a few husbands to be stage hands and drivers, and even obtained authorization for the play from the high religious court of the Eda Haredit. He was also involved in the work because his interpretation of the story influenced Shohat’s directing. According to her, Rabbi Koenig “understood our need [Shohat’s emphasis] as born-again people, to disseminate the stories of rabbi Nachman” (Shohat, Interview, 2000).

Nine women participated in the group, including two painters who made the scenery and a few women who played instruments and helped make the soundtrack. The rabbi’s sister handled public relations. All the women were married, and they all had young children (“It was complicated to transport them all, with the nursing babies. I think that if somebody had made a movie about the rehearsals, it would really interest you to see it”). They performed in Safed, in Hatsor, in Carmel, in Jerusalem,

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85 The Eda Haredit is the umbrella organization of the ultra-Orthodox community, known for its uncompromising conservatism.
and in Tel Aviv for a varied audience of ultra-Orthodox women, including those of Ger and Chabad Hasidism. Shohat defined this theatrical effort as “theater closely connected to a specific community,” meaning a community theater whose materials were those that interested the community. It had one special feature: just transferring the stories of Rabbi Nachman to the stage was a great innovation (“there was no precedent for it”). Until then people read and studied the stories of Rabbi Nachman—which are based on Kabbalah and regarded as holy—but no one had used them as the basis for a play, and certainly not a play performed by women. The group didn’t want to change the text, because of its status. Thus the play was performed in pantomime, while the original text was recited word for word in a soundtrack that had been recorded in a studio with music and special effects, or else it was read by woman narrator who stood on the stage.

A few years afterward Dorit Toker wanted to present the play again. However, because of the distance between Safed and Bat Ayin, Shohat could not take part in the new production. However, she recorded the story again in a studio along with a young Russian man who recorded a translation of the text, so that the women could appear before Russian speaking audiences that came to Safed. The puppets that were part of the play were refurbished, but as far as Shohat knows, the women did not continue performing for long.

When Shohat turned forty, she married again. The couple went to live in Jerusalem and then they joined the first group of settlers in Bat Ayin. Shohat’s four children were joined by her husband’s five children from his first marriage, and within the next four years they had three more children. Five years after their arrival in the settlement they moved out of a trailer whose area was sixty-three square meters to a permanent house more suitable to their needs. Shohat says that her activity in the theater, which is an extension of her work in Safed and Rosh Pina, is a kind of therapy, and that
it helped her cope with the complex situation in which she found herself. “Work in the theater was something for myself... I could do something that took my out of the house and brought me back to connections with women and creativity” (Shohat, Interview, 2000).

Shohat established the *Nekuda Yehudit* group in Bat Ayin. She chose the name because she believed (and still believes) that the theater she creates connects people to that special point—their Jewish point. The decision to perform a women’s play and to use a story by Rabbi Nachman again was made in response to an appeal from nine women of Bat Ayin who had heard about the play she had produced in Safed and seen a play that she had directed for the school on the settlement. The community center in Gush Etzion offered her a modest salary so she could establish a community theater, and she adapted the story by Rabbi Nachman called “The Story of the Wise Man and the Simple Man,” again as a pantomime. Once again she combined recorded narrative with live narrative. Since she had to serve in many capacities—as playwright, director, narrator, “the one that gets everybody out of the kitchen”—and she was also pregnant, she chose to “link up with something familiar.” The play was first performed at the end of 1994 and performed around ten times over roughly a year. The women appeared in different combinations—depending on who was pregnant—mainly for ultra-Orthodox women throughout the country, but it also was performed for women from the national religious sector and residents of Gush Etzion.

**Daniella Dvash**

Daniella Dvash, who was born in Switzerland, is a convert to Judaism. She is the second actress in the *Nekuda Yehudit* group. She says: “I always felt foreign... That’s apparently been with me all my life.” She tells that when her mother was pregnant with her, she felt that her daughter would follow a different path. Indeed, Dvash
has undergone many changes in her life, beginning with a clerical job in Switzerland and leading to the raising of her six children and supporting the family by herself. Before their marriage, Dvash and her husband-to-be lived on Kibbutz Revivim in the area of the Dead Sea, went to Switzerland, and traveled in Europe. When they returned to Israel, they began to study Judaism. After a while she converted, and they went to live among Bratslav Hasidim in the Old City of Jerusalem. They had a lot of difficulties in that society. Dvash began to study nursing, but she had to interrupt her studies after giving birth to her second child, who was premature, “and he needed me.” She was also forced to leave a good job as a translator because the trip to Jerusalem from Bat Ayin was too difficult while her children were small. Today she works as an assistant in the kindergarten in the settlement. Dvash’s husband does not have a regular job. He spends most of the day in study, prayer, and in meditation at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. He believes that God will provide for their needs. Thus, Dvash’s salary is the sole source of the family’s livelihood. Despite the financial difficulties and the complexities of her family life, she is grateful for the great faith which her husband has instilled in her:

He brought home to me very strong faith that there is a One and Only and Unique ruler of the universe. There are hidden things, and what do we understand? … I say: I have no debts. I live simply. I have a car. I have food, thank God. I would like more, but that’s what I have. I try to be happy with it. If there are plays—even better. (Dvash, Interview, 2000)

She describes her friendship with Shohat as a positive and significant factor in her life:

She always stood by me. She never knocks me down, always strengthens me, and that’s important. I feel that we’re connected in our souls. I also
believe that Dina is very talented, and she has a lot of ambition, that maybe I don’t have. (Dvash, Interview, 2000)

**Development of the Nekuda Yehudit [Jewish Point] Group**

After producing two pantomime plays based on the stories of Rabbi Nachman, and in response to demands that emerged from the public, she felt that she had to change direction and produce a play “with speech.” She reexamined the composition of the group and decided to reduce it and leave just three women: herself, Dvash, and another actress, Rachel Parnasi, a graduate of the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem as a musician, stagehand, and public relations person. Shohat took upon herself the task of writing the script, directing, and producing the play. Her reasons for this were financial (“It doesn’t pay to divide the cake up into so many pieces”) and organizational, because gathering the women for rehearsals every week and the improvisation that was needed before every performance because of pregnancies, births, or childhood illnesses interfered with the proper course of the theatrical work. In addition to the change in the composition of the group, a change took place in the choice of the texts for the play. Shohat decided to fulfill her love for the Hasidic stories written by the ultra-Orthodox author, Rabbi David Zaritzky, and to adapt them for a play. She directed herself and Dvash, chose the musical accompaniment with Parnasi, and worked with her in setting up the lighting.

The next stage in the group’s development involved an additional reduction of the team to the two actresses alone. By 2006, when the Hebrew version of this book was written, the group seldom performed.

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86 By 2006, when the Hebrew version of this book was written, the group seldom performed.
responsibility and the need to make do with recorded music rather than live music, the experience advanced them professionally and financially, and Shohat decided she would continue working that way.

In November 1998 the Educational Center of Rachel’s Tomb asked Aviva Karpel, a musician resident in Bat Ayin, to prepare a performance in honor of the anniversary of the matriarch Rachel’s death. Karpel asked Shohat to join her and her friend, Riva Schwartzman, a musician who had immigrated to Israel from the United States, who lived in a nearby settlement called Beitar Elit, to work on the performance. Shohat exploited the opportunity and wrote *Hakhnasat kala* [Bringing in the Bride], a play lasting about an hour. She used the technique of a play-within-a-play. The framework story was a play dealing with the relations between mothers and adolescent daughters, and the core story was a play based on homiletic legends that deal with the relations between the matriarchs Rachel and Leah. Shohat chose Bracha Hevroni, a sixteen year old girl, for the double role of Leah and of the adolescent daughter. Karpel joined Shohat’s troupe and played an “enchanted character,” a kind of human time tunnel who brought the mother and her daughter from the present to the past and back. During these transitions, Karpel sang songs, accompanied by Schwartzman. Shohat thought the songs were “too American,” but they provided an interval between the scenes and symbolized the passage between the present and the past.

After Hevroni’s marriage, Shohat rethought the play and decided to rewrite it. Now it was based “on two adult sisters, different from each other, and the tense relations between them.” This change sharpened the connection between the framework story from the present and the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, and it required Dvash’s participation in the production. Toward

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87 Her father, Yisrael Hevroni, is himself a playwright who became religious and also lives in Bat Ayin.
the summer of 1999 Shohat felt that she had to improve the transitions between the sisters and the matriarchs, and she asked Sonia Suderi—a director who was born in France and a former professional actress—to help her with the staging. This was the first time that Shohat employed a director from outside. Suderi met with the group just a few times, but those meetings were very significant, and in their wake the women changed their use of space and of props.89

Shohat believes that this play was the best that she wrote and directed, but to this day she has not managed to market it to the ultra-Orthodox public, which objects to the representation of the biblical matriarchs on stage as flesh and blood women. Consequently, the potential audience was limited to girls’ schools in the national religious sector.

**Characteristics of the Group**

Shohat is the sole initiator of the group’s theatrical activity. She determines the subjects of the plays, she writes them, and she is responsible for their direction, production, and public relations. At the same time, Dvash’s opinion is important to her, and they cooperate at every stage of preparing the plays. Dvash feels free to express criticism regarding the choice of material for the religious community; she prefers to act in plays that are relatively light and to deal with subjects connected to the ultra-Orthodox or national religious life experience:

> Arranged marriages, aging, and things like that, to make the women happy, that gives me a lot of strength. Sometimes women come and thank us

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88 She is mainly active among Chabad women.

89 The principal change was the use of plaster masks for the girls when they played the matriarchs Rachel and Leah, so that they became sorts of mythological figures, beyond daily reality, by means of the masks, which recall Greek theater and the mythology that figures in it. This matter is discussed below in this chapter.
after the play, because they got something from it, and some even kissed our hands. But if I see that they go out drowsy, I ask myself: what for? (Dvash, Interview, 2001).

Selection of the costumes and props, setting up the lighting and the sound system, and transportation arrangements is all done cooperatively. Shohat is the initiator and the spokesperson, but she is not the star. As Aston has pointed out, cooperation is typical of feminist theater.

Another characteristic common to the Nekuda Yehudit group and to feminist theater is the holding of discussions after the plays: post-performance discussion. This discussion is supportive, non-hierarchical dialogue between the actresses and the spectators about the “political” basis of the play. In the post-performance discussion as well as in the introduction, Dina presents the group and gives a short explanation of the play. Thereby she reduces the natural-traditional distance between actors and audience, which is based on the actor’s control over the silent spectator. In Hakhnasat kala, for example, the discussions with the audience dealt with the innovation of presenting biblical characters on the stage, and the audience–students at a women’s yeshiva–stated that the play had made the biblical text more meaningful to them in their present lives.

Dina’s policy is not to refuse an invitation to perform, even on short notice. She likes the challenge that the theater presents to her, creation itself, and also the additional income that the theater provides for her. Her repertoire includes children’s plays and other stories by Rabbi Zaritzky and Rabbi Nachman, which she has adapted for the theater. Dvash responds to Shohat’s enthusiasm, though short notice and improvisation are less suitable to her, and she quickly gets ready to perform.

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They define their theater work as “amateur”—“an expensive hobby that you’ve got to make some money from, or else it doesn’t justify the many hours we devote to it” (Shohat, Interview, 2002). In an effort to be more professional, Shohat bought lighting and sound equipment, and she introduced a more systematic way of working with regard to organizing the equipment before and after the performances. She became more particular about trying to make the costumes and props appropriate to the depicted times, rather than use what happened to be around the house. She also consulted professionals and the audience in order to improve future offerings. She brought a notebook to every performance and asked the audience to write comments in it about the content of the play and the way it was performed.

Marketing the plays of the Nekuda Yehudit group is not a simple matter. Professionally speaking, the plays are amateurish, so national religious women who are used to seeing plays and films in theaters do not take an interest in them. In contrast, ultra-Orthodox women sometimes criticize them because of the content of the plays and lack of modesty in the language and content. To appear before an ultra-Orthodox audience, Shohat must invite cultural coordinators who organize the leisure activities of ultra-Orthodox women in Jerusalem, Bnei-Brak, Beit Shemesh, Beersheba, Lod, and Safed for a preview to determine whether the plays are “kosher.” The audience before whom the group appears mainly belongs to this sector. Nevertheless, Shohat does not automatically change the plays according to their demands. If it is a question of marginal changes, such as costuming or rewriting a few isolated sentences, she makes them in accordance with the demands of the cultural coordinators. However, she is not willing to accept dictates regarding the theatrical concept or the interpretation of the text, just so that ultra-Orthodox women will come to see her play. Hence, for example, Hakhnasat kala is not presented to ultra-Orthodox audiences, because not a single
cultural coordinator was willing to take the risk of offering a play to their community that depicted conflicted relations within the family, such as envy between sisters or an adolescent daughter who ran away from home, and they certainly would not have wished to draw a parallel between conflicted relations in the present and the relations between the biblical matriarchs, Rachel and Leah. Ultra-Orthodox educators, for example principals of the Beit Yakov girls’ high schools and the cultural coordinators of the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods were not even willing to see a preview of the play:

The cultural coordinator told me that the acting in Hakhnasat kala would be good, and it would be interesting, but “I’m afraid to hire you.” It was the responsibility. They’re afraid to lose their jobs. It’s very simple—they won’t be reliable if they take a problematic subject. (Shohat, Interview, 2001)

For five years Shohat tried to change the play to make it suitable by altering the balance between the framework story and the core story and softening the story of the modern sisters, but she wasn’t willing to give up the theatrical concept of two parallel circles of events. Thus, the most professional of the group’s plays has not been performed for an ultra-Orthodox audience at all but was only performed a few times for a national religious audience.

**The Goal: “To Make Contact With This Side of the Women, With the Motivating Force”**

Shohat’s theater is intended to touch upon subjects that come “from places that are really nearby: of doubts, to express every soul.” Shohat prefers to define her theatrical work as “having a Jewish message,” but in the interview she emphasized the interest she has in subjects that touch upon women’s lives. Thus, her aims are similar to those of the New York Feminist Theater, which was active during the 1970s among middle and lower class women.
Both seek to raise women’s consciousness of the quality of their lives and of the opportunities available to them.  

Issues that are only women’s issues, more inner doubts, *kishkes* [“guts” in Yiddish]... The Jewish side of women interests me a lot. I am interested in joining that side of women, with that motivating force... To approach problematical women’s areas or those that at least require great spiritual labor in order to be successful in them... The power of women maintains the Jewish people. That’s feminism that I understand and see every day: women who run the business... I want to move the women—but not to teach them that they have to leave the house... I want to set out from where they are, to show them that they have to discover more layers. My work in theater comes from what I really believe in: the power of women, and I know that women get through things that a man wouldn’t get through, and they have lots of strength and lots of creativity and lots of patience and lots of everything. (Shohat, Interview, 2000)

Shohat’s subversiveness is expressed in breaking the silence that existed in ultra-Orthodox society about subjects connected to the nuclear family—love between husband and wife, childlessness, and divorce. The segment of one of her plays, “Haisha hatsidonit” [The Woman from Sidon], for example, derives from a rabbinical legend found in *Shir Hashirim Raba* 1.

That legend praises a woman for her initiative in preserving her marriage, which is based on love, despite a rabbi’s decision to dissolve it because the couple was childless. Shohat invested great time and effort to obtain permission to perform the play for ultra-Orthodox women. The

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93 A collection of legends connected with the Song of Songs.
fact that this play came to be in demand in these circles testifies to submission of the ultra-Orthodox establishment to the demands of the audience, which apparently became convinced of the sincerity of its messages and content.

Shohat says that work in the theater demands equilibrium between the creative forces needed to maintain family unity and the creative forces connected with art and making a living. Sometimes work in the theater forces the women to neglect their obligations to their husband, their home, and their children for many hours, sometimes for a day or two, and they feel that this is accompanied with guilty feelings. At the same time, it is easy to see the pleasure they find in the experience of freedom from the framework, even if it is only for a few hours, and from their renewed contact with the “wild” and non-conformist side of their personalities—traveling at strange hours of the day and night, gathering shared experiences, and sometimes even dangerous ones, acquaintance with new people, and meeting old acquaintances:

- On the way back from Safed we stopped at the tomb of Shim’on bar Yoḥai (Telephone conversation, 2001).
- We dragged ourselves to the hotel in Beersheba with all the *shmatte* [Yiddish for rags] from the play, and we looked like ragwomen (Telephone conversation, 2001).
- We’re the only ones driving on the Jordan Valley highway: just us, the sky, and the Holy One, blessed be He above us (Telephone conversation, 2002).

**Theatrical Techniques**

Shohat wrote the text of each play, but they were improvised in part. Improvisation on stage, “the anarchy of live performance,”
gives the performance the quality of “renewal and spontaneity,” and it adds an atmosphere of “intensity and magic,” which is different from the technical perfection of movies, for example. The paradox of improvised live performance is that everything appears to be done by chance, but in fact everything that happens on the stage is done with control and focus. Dvash admitted that at first the improvisation made her tense: “If we deviate from the text to be a little spontaneous, I think: what kind of foul-up am I doing now?” But over time she got to feel more comfortable on the stage and to derive enjoyment from the improvisation. Improvisation allows them to make the play suit the national religious or ultra-Orthodox audience and emphasizes the warm connection between the characters by means of humor and the use of Yiddish expressions.

The theatrical techniques used by the group—for example making the narrator visible and thus turning him into an actor in the play, or the technique of a play-within-a-play—create Brechtian theatrical estrangement. The audience is distanced from the action on the stage, which represents the conventions, values, and tradition by means of which the society constructs its world. Therefore, these techniques embody the danger to the established social order entailed by the use of drama and theater, because the dialectic challenges life lived by juxtaposing it with life performed, and life lived does not always have the upper hand. By viewing a play in the theater, the women in the audience commit themselves to a process of reflection, because the theatrical adaptation frames the world of the audience and turns it into an imaginary world. On the stage, the women can see patterns of behavior characteristic of their society and criticize that reality. The events on the stage are the actresses’ interpretation—a meta-message—of reality. The cultural coordinators of the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods sense

95 Ibid., p. 24.
the danger in criticism and subversion of social reality, and for that reason they examine the content and techniques very thoroughly. They do not evaluate the performance according to aesthetic standards, but in a rational manner connected to their values: by estimating the influence it would have on the audience.\footnote{Bailey (1996), p. 11.}

The \textit{Nekuda yehudit} group does not seek to innovate in the area of theatrical genre but prefers the framework of domestic realism: the presentation of a familiar environment, characters, and events as the background of the actions on the stage. They also touch upon popular culture, and the reality on the stage appears natural. According to Wandor, this has a positive political aspect, because it enables the audience of ordinary people to feel comfortable in the theater and to be open and attentive to ideas and social behavior that they would otherwise avoid.\footnote{Wandor (1993), p. 55.} In our case as well, marking the women as ultra-Orthodox, raising many children, and subject to the pressure of earning a living allows the ultra-Orthodox spectators, who are not used to going to the theater, to shed possible resistance to certain aspects of the play, which are inconsistent with their Orthodox religiosity. It also permits them to be open to social messages and behaviors that would put them off in everyday life and be rejected immediately. The goal of \textit{Hanekuda hayehudit} is to show the greatness of women as spouses, as housewives, as businesswomen, and as mothers. The women presented on the stage have traits familiar to the main intended audience of the plays: ultra-Orthodox women, almost always dressed simply, with head-coverings like those of Meah She’arim (the main ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem), who are busy with housework. Usually they are poor women with large families. Characters who deviate from this category—such as the main protagonist of “Haisha hasidonit” or Tamar, one of the sisters in Hakhnasat kala—appear in clothing different from the norm.
in that society. They are more elegant and more eccentric. Their most conspicuous trait is childlessness, yet they stand out in their resourcefulness and independence of thought, and they restore the family order. Shohat endows these exceptional female figures, who do not live according to the accepted norms of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox society, with the strength to effect change on the personal and social level. Most likely these characters are based, consciously or unconsciously, on women whom she knows.

Another technique that the group uses is that of narrative theater, the presentation of stories on the stage by means of a narrator who preserves the original text and the representation of the scenes in realistic manner. Sometimes, instead of a live narrator, a recording of the text is played. Another technique they use is the presentation of the original text as the internal monologue of one of the characters, giving the audience the status of an omniscient narrator and implied partner in the action on the stage. Sometimes the gap between the knowledge of the audience and that of the characters creates a comic effect.

The Modular Play: Bina Yetera [Excess Wisdom]

This play is usually performed for ultra-Orthodox women. It is made up of several stories written by Rabbi Zaritzky, which Shohat adapted for the stage. Another story, “Haisha hatsidonit,” taken from Shir Hashirim Raba 1, was also adapted and added to the play. This addition was a “step upward with respect to the subjects we deal with” because of its content and message. They used to change the name of the play depending on the event for which it was intended. Among those names was Bina yetera, which is what it is called here. It is a modular play in which the narrative elements can be changed according to the wishes of the audience that orders the performance. There are three stories in every performance, and

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usually one of them is “Haisha hatsidonit.”

These stories deal with crises in the lives of ordinary people whose lives are hard: a wagon driver, the owner of a small shop, a housewife with a lot of children. The elements of religious life—synagogue, learning in the House of Study, doing acts of kindness, and pilgrimage to the Land of Israel—are the background of the characters’ actions but not the central axis. The messages of the play are intentionally connected to relations among people and to the importance of interpersonal bonds and concern for others. According to Carol Gilligan and the feminists who emphasize the differences between the genders (difference feminism),\(^{100}\) these subjects are central and primary among women and particularize their moral concepts.\(^ {101} \)

The Stories

“Hadema’ot” [The Tears] is the story of a poor and simple wagon driver who is tormented because he does not know how to recite the prayers in Hebrew. In the end a great rabbi recognizes his righteousness and explains to him that just like any member of the Jewish people, he, too, was present at Mount Sinai and received the yoke of the commandments, and that his level as an innocent, righteous man is very high.

“Shutfut shel emet” [True Partnership] deals with the close relations between an elderly, childless man and wife who own a store. The peace between them is disturbed when the wife begins to suspect that her husband is keeping separate books, suspicion

\(^{100}\) The validity of Gilligan’s research and conclusions on this subject and her methodology have been attacked on academic grounds, and because, according to more militant feminists, her conclusions lead to perpetuating the inferior status of women. Her emphasis on a “different”—sensitive and nurturing—moral system is seen as diminishing the possibilities for women to integrate into every area of society and to reject prejudices about femininity.

\(^{101}\) Gilligan (1982), pp. 22-23.
that is aroused when she overhears him while he is studying. In the end she discovers that the account books he was talking about to himself were a record of the commandments that they kept so that he would know how to present himself and his wife when they reached the heavenly tribunal.

“Shtei nashim yerushalmiot” [Two Jerusalem Women] presents the strong partnership between two elderly and unfortunate women of Jerusalem. Despite their economic hardship, they contribute to charity and try to make life easier for one another.

As noted, “Haisha hatsidonit” is adapted from a story that appears in Shir Harshirim Raba 1, and for the ultra-Orthodox audience, this is the story’s seal of kashrut. A married couple decides to heed the voice of the rabbi and divorce after ten years of childless marriage. The husband offers to let her take the most valuable thing in their home to her parents’ house. The wife decides to act in order to cancel their joint decision. She induces him to get drunk at their last festive meal together, and while he is asleep she takes him to her parents house. In the last scene the woman is hugging a baby that was born to the couple after long years of barrenness, and she recalls the way she acted against the decree of separation.

The Most Professional Play and Its Silencing: Hakhnasat kala [Bringing in the Bride]

In the flier that Shohat sends to Orthodox educational institutions (both national religious and ultra-Orthodox), she describes the play as follows:

A dramatic-musical journey to the tent of the matriarch Rachel.
How did Rachel feel at Jacob and Leah’s wedding?
What did Leah feel? Whose idea was it to switch the brides?
Are mandrakes for sale?
An original encounter with the matriarchs Rachel and Leah. Dramatic scenes accompanied by song and instrumental music based on the biblical story and on rabbinical tales.

As mentioned, Shohat’s drama makes use of the technique of a play-within-a-play. The core story is a collection of rabbinical legends about the relations between Rachel and Leah. There are two versions of the parallel story. The differences between the versions are mainly in the characters of the framework story: instead of a mother and an adolescent daughter, two adult sisters, very different from each other. Nehama is a mother, a pressured and irritable housewife, and Tamar is a “nature woman,” a traveler, interested in medicinal herbs, a bit childish and full of the joy of living—but unmarried and childless. The parallel between the framework and core stories in this version is much closer. Hence, dramatic tension is produced that adds to the meta-drama. The canonical text about the matriarchs, which is sacred, becomes an illusion that the characters of the framework story witness. The staging is also changed: every time the matriarchs appear on stage, they press white plaster masks to their faces (at first they held them, but later they attached them with rubber bands). These masks conceal their humanity from the audience. The characters appear to be taken from the classical Greek theater—mythological, not human figures: “It adds height and royalty, the way you should with characters like the matriarchs” (Suderi, Interview, 2002).

The Problem of Reception

Ultra-Orthodox society, which is a self-segregated society, withdrawn into itself, appropriates various phenomena from secular culture in order to cope with changing economic and political conditions. In so doing, it permits practices that had hitherto
been unknown in it, such as theater, to develop and challenge the hegemony within it only until they pose a threat to the values upon which the society is based. At that point these practices are attacked and silenced.\textsuperscript{102} The play, \textit{Hakhnasat kala}, demonstrates this process. In this play, the relations between Rachel and Leah, sacred biblical characters, are placed in parallel with a story that takes place today by means of the theatrical technique of the play-within-a-play. In this technique, the frame story is a meta-drama and gives a modern and current interpretation of the canonical text. It makes possible public discussion of problems connected to the biblical and midrashic text and makes it relevant to the present by the theatrical representation of feelings, doubts, and solutions to the problematic triangle of relations among Rachel, Jacob, and Leah. Through the group’s work, the frame story about the sisters in the present becomes equal in importance to that of the biblical core story that deals with sacred figures. According to Hornby, the use of this technique blurs the boundaries between the two plays and expresses our indecision regarding the importance of each of them. He states that this technique is used in periods when people are not optimistic, and it expresses the radical cynicism of our age.\textsuperscript{103} This being the case, it is clear why the cultural coordinators and the ultra-Orthodox educators of the Beit Yakov schools rejected the play without further ado, even without seeing it. The very use of the theatrical technique of two circles of narrative, one sacred and the other secular, subverted the sanctity of the biblical story, and therefore it was unacceptable:

\begin{quote}
Rachel and Leah doing laundry? That’s not conceivable! You can’t touch education, and you can’t touch the figures of Rachel and Leah. If I put on that play, they would have hanged me on a tree! (Ribis, Interview, 2001).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{102} Reinelt (1996), p. 2.
\textsuperscript{103} Hornby (1986), pp. 46-47.
In contrast, the criteria for acceptability of plays among national religious women are the content and professional theatrical level of the performance. The play *Hakhnasat kala* is not professional enough, so it was performed mainly for girls in state religious high schools, but not for adult women. Nevertheless, the play has a didactic character, because it connects the biblical past with the complex present, making the canonical text relevant to our lives and thereby emphasizing didactic messages of devotion, concern for others, and consideration of the others’ feelings.

**Summary**

Dina Shohat, who became religious twenty-five years earlier, lives on the margins of Orthodox society. The theater that she creates is performed for an audience from various sectors, to which her identity is connected. Despite the pressure exerted on her—mainly by ultra-Orthodox society, which is still suspicious of her—she retains independence and freedom in her art. Living in a settlement where most of the residents are born-again and some of them also work in the arts gives her freedom and confidence to create an original theater that combines art and Judaism at the Jewish Point.

Shohat’s speech is replete with expressions that testify to the influence of all the societies with which she comes into contact: secular society (“I belong to the 1948 generation”), ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic society (“For every pregnancy, I wrote kvitelakh [prayers on scraps of paper]... there were always lots of tries”), and the society of the born-again (“I understood that if I don’t have Jewish connections, then what do I have in this place?”). Like many of her friends in Bat Ayin, she, too, is in an uneasy relationship with the major currents of Orthodox Judaism and finds it hard to find her place within them, because of her secular past, her unique way of life, the critical attitude of someone looking at Orthodox society
from the outside, and her approach to the canonical texts: Maybe I’m an ultra-Orthodox Zionist, because from the point of view of keeping the commandments, I’m as scrupulous as an ultra-Orthodox woman, but I really don’t have an ultra-Orthodox mindset. All of our kids join the army, and even if they have a kind of freaky style, we allow that. Of course we warn them about the danger, but it’s familiar to us, and we’re not panicked, and we make room for it. But in my mind—I’m really not ultra-Orthodox. (Shohat, Interview, 2001)

Criticism of her plays comes from two societies: the ultra-Orthodox society and the national religious society. But each has its own reasons. The national religious audience is more used to the theater, and it enjoyed Hakhnasat kala, whereas ultra-Orthodox society rejected it for ideological reasons before seeing it. In contrast, the play, Bina yetera is accepted by ultra-Orthodox society and rejected by the women of the national religious sector, because they identified the ultra-Orthodox source of the stories, and the technique of the narrative theater did not interest them. Demands emerge from the public, and Shohat takes them into consideration, but she does not submit to the dictates of her audiences. Instead she tries to improve the level of the plays from one performance to another.104

Hanekuda Hayehudit, the group that Shohat established, was of course a supplement to her income, but primarily it was a source of enjoyment and satisfaction, a “place” where she discovered her creativity in the area outside of her family. For her the theater

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104 By 2006 the group had virtually stopped appearing. Shohat runs in-service training sessions in drama for teachers, and she is in charge of the theater department in the Tzveeya School in Jerusalem. She also directs theater groups for women. Dvash continues to work as an assistant kindergarten teacher in BatAyin.
is also a locus of liberation and self-expression: “I want to start out from where they are and show them that they have more, to discover more things. All my work in the theater started because I really believe very much in women’s power” (Shohat, Interview, 2000).

Without doubt Dina Shohat was one of the first Orthodox women to initiate original theater, and she forced the male Orthodox hegemony to acknowledge her exceptional activity. In 1982 she adapted material for the theater that no one had touched until then, such as the stories of Rabbi Nachman.\textsuperscript{105} The other innovation in Shohat’s theater was the inclusion of a rabbi at every stage of the theatrical production. As noted, his inclusion influenced the interpretation, the staging, and even the technical aspect of the production, because he initiated the participation of the husbands in transportation and moving the scenery from place to place.

The theater enabled Shohat to raise consciousness about problems that until then had not been discussed openly in Orthodox society, especially in ultra-Orthodox society: problems within couples, childlessness, and contempt for ignorant people.

\textsuperscript{105} To the best of my knowledge she is the only woman who received written authorization from the high religious court of the Eda Haredit [the ultra-Orthodox umbrella organization] that women could work in theater and perform, before women of course, a play based on the stories of Rabbi Nachman. Receiving this authorization was an achievement, because there had been efforts by reactionary Hasidic circles to boycott the performance and excommunicate the women who participated in it. Posters were printed stating that the women were “\textit{makht thiater}” [lit., “doing theater” in Yiddish, but meaning making a joke] of the stories of Rabbi Nachman. A Bratslav Hasid whom I interviewed on the subject claimed that the theater group had also aroused a tempest in ultra-Orthodox circles because of the backing they received from their rabbi. He remembered very well that there was tension between Bratslav Hasidim, who were in favor of the women’s initiative, and the others, who wanted to forbid it in any way possible (Eliezer Hashin, Interview, 2001). The efforts to ban the play also continued after the group began to appear throughout the country, and the written authorization and the seal helped them to continue to perform.
and for women. As she said, “I think that they sweep a lot of problems under the carpet and don’t take care of them” (Shohat, Interview, 2000). In the compartmentalized artistic framework created by the Nekuda Yehudit group, the voices of women were heard, as they freely expressed their religious feelings, their interpretation of the canonical text, their opinions about the power of women and the importance of mutual respect between husbands and wives, between a simple worker and his rabbi, and between women, in order to create a better society, a society connected to the “Jewish Point” within it.
Chapter Five:
Emunah Teachers’ College

The Emunah Teachers’ College and the Background for the Opening of a Theater Department

“In this place we create a theater of our own.”

This chapter deals with the new theatrical activity by Orthodox women in the heart of the national religious establishment, under its supervision. The opening of a theater department in Emunah College was a landmark in the appropriation of the art of the theater in national religious society. Viewed in retrospect it has proven to be influential with respect to the changes that have taken place in that society in recent years, especially among Orthodox women. The college supplied various materials for examining the central questions with which this study deals: how does the appropriation of theater influence national religious society? How does the lack of a theater tradition in national religious society and its unique characteristics influence the creation of theater within it? How is the theater received within the national religious community, which is unfamiliar with the conventions of this art form? Other questions also arose: how did the national-religious establishment, which mainly consists of men, deal with original

106 Quotation from a statement by the head of the college.
107 This chapter is based on observation, interviews, questionnaires, and assignments submitted to me in the course, “Observation and Criticism of the Theater,” which I taught at the Emunah College between 1997 and 2002. I am grateful to the institution for enabling me to carry out my research within it during those years, and to the students for their cooperation. For various reasons, not all the people are mentioned here by their real names. I will indicate pseudonyms by placing them in quotations. The names of all the students whose works I have quoted have been changed, but they have given me permission to cite their work. It is important to point out that this study was made during the first years of the department’s existence. Since then many changes have taken place in the student body and the staff, changes in both personnel and in ideology.
women’s theater? How did it cope with productions that it regarded as subversive? This chapter also deals with the problem of giving institutional legitimacy to work in theater and analyzes the connection between artists who are not committed to the messages of the institution (secular and born-again directors) and the student actresses.

**Emunah College and the Background Behind the Opening of the Theater Department**

The Emunah College, an institution for training teachers, was founded in Jerusalem in 1971 by the Emunahh religious women’s organization, and it is ideologically and politically affiliated with religious Zionism. This organization “took up the goal of advancing the education of girls and not of boys” (emphasis in original, Interview with the late “Arieh Caspi,” the first head of Emunah College). Its purpose was “to enable religious women to acquire a useful professions, suitable to the modern age, including the aspiration for self-expression and fulfillment based on the values of Torah and service to God within a religious Zionist educational framework” (From the program for the production of Ruth, 2000). In the late 1970s, the college trained women to work as preschool teachers in the movement’s daycare centers. In the 1970s, “Caspi” decided to develop additional courses of study in subjects that had hitherto been studied only in secular institutions: graphics, art, and technological subjects such as training dental hygienists, technicians of various kinds, as well as business management, marketing, and computers.

According to “Caspi,” the opening of the theater department in 1996 was accompanied by “certain resistance” on the part of the administration, because it regarded study of this kind as “a kind of avant-garde and a luxury—something inappropriate for religious girls” (“Caspi,” Interview, 2004). However, in the light of
the success of the The Religious High School for the Arts [Ulpana Toranit Leomanuyot], which was established in Jerusalem with the support of the Emunahh organization, demand for Orthodox teachers of these subjects was created. Rivka Manovitz, who was to become the head of the Theater Department at the college, convinced the administration to open a department, which would train students to become drama teachers. In fact, Manovitz hoped that the broad professional training they were to receive would encourage them to create original Orthodox Jewish theater.

Today about three hundred women students are enrolled in the departments of graphics, art, and theater. All the students, even those who are studying graphics, receive training in elementary education: courses in psychology, education, and methodology. They also receive practical training, working one day a week in schools. In addition to studies for a teaching certificate, they have eight hours a week of religious studies as well as specialization in one of the fields of art. In “Caspi’s” opinion, since the original intention behind opening the departments was to give the women a profession and develop their creativity, the entire matter of teacher training “was a problem, in retrospect and to this day” (‘Caspi,” Interview, 2004). In contrast, Manovitz argues that the college never spoke about establishing a theater in its premises, but it encouraged the students to move in that direction. In her opinion, the students should study for teaching certificates so that they can make a regular living in the profession. The teaching certificate is a kind of “economic, ethical, and creative insurance policy.”

The Theater Department Is a Different One— “Radioactive” (“Hagai Boker,” the Director of the College)

Almost all the students are graduates of Orthodox high schools and have a full matriculation certificate. Most of them have done
two years of national service (instead of the army) and studied for at least a year in a women’s yeshiva, before or after their national service. Only one or two women in each year had studied in a coeducational religious high school or had served in the army. The students come to the college from all over the country: from the settlements in Judea and Samaria (and the Gaza Strip, before the evacuation), from the Golan Heights, and the north, and also from the center of the country. The students choose to study in the theater department because they have “natural talent,” which was discovered in school plays and the youth movements. Some of them took part in drama classes, but most of them had seen hardly any plays in the theater or read any plays except those included in the high school literature curriculum.

The number of students in the Theater Department increases from year to year. The students in the Theater Department have a powerful drive for self-fulfillment, especially in the field of acting and directing, and they dream of working with psychodrama and of appearing in plays of their own. Indeed, many graduates do continue in the field and establish small theater groups. At the same time, most of them are realistic enough to understand that their dreams will be hard to achieve, and therefore when they are asked how they regard their future integration in the profession, they usually answer that they will be high school drama teachers or teach in extracurricular drama classes. Every year some of the students find it hard to adapt to the study of Western theater, past and present. Some students find it difficult to open up psychologically to their fellow students or to the professional people who teach acting and psychodrama. The head of the college, the rabbi, and the head of the department all express apprehension

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108 For example, ancient Greek theater, which is based on pagan mythology, or medieval European theater, which is connected to the history of Christianity.

109 Like many Orthodox institutions in Israel, Emunah College has an official rabbi on its staff.
lest the studies “destroy” the girls’ innocence. Therefore, they show
great sensitivity for girls who express reservations about the plays
for performance, and they are considerate of them. To reduce the
students’ difficulties as much as possible, the college maintains an
open door policy, and students are encouraged to discuss issues
about combining the arts with Judaism with the director of the
college or with the rabbi. The involvement of the administration
is meant to reduce the number of complaints from students who
feel that reading, analyzing, and seeing these plays harms them
morally and in terms of their values. Thus, the college wants to
accommodate the most observant students in the national religious
sector, even at the expense of the level of their studies. In fact,
the composition of the student body is similar to that of national
religious society, and tendency of the latter in recent years toward
increased insistence on women’s modesty and on halakha is also
notable in the students:

Girls who come after a year in a women’s yeshiva,
of “fortifying their belief” and all that, are far more
dependent on the rabbis of the yeshivas and their
wives, and they come up with all sorts of rulings
of various kinds. Every time a question arises, they
go and ask the rabbi. A dialogue is created, either
open or private, between us and the rabbinical
community. (“Boker,” Interview, 2003)

The entry examinations for the Theater Department include
written examinations on theater, literature, Judaism, and English
as well as an audition that includes group improvisation and
the delivery of a prepared monologue. The candidates are also
interviewed by the head of the department, by the rabbi of the
college, and usually by one of the directors as well. During the first
years of the department, the students took many courses connected
to practical work in the theater as well as theoretical courses. “To
learn how to do good theater, you have no alternative but to get
to know the vehicle at its best. We’ll go to see artistic plays, we’ll learn about the medium, we’ll get to know the forms that have developed over the generations in Western culture, but we’ll know that these are not our own.” For the purpose of gaining academic recognition of the program, it was necessary to change the curriculum to adapt it to the demands of the Council of Higher Education, and to offer specialization within the department: acting, directing, and theory. By 2006 every student who fulfilled the requirements was entitled to a teaching certificate and an academic degree in education.

The Ideology of the Planners of the Department

Manovitz, the head of the department and the main proponent of advancing the theater in the state religious school system, has well-worked-out ideas about Orthodox theater. She regards it as a “counter response” to secular repertory theater, which is headed by “a secular, leftist group that constantly attacks our camp” (Manovitz, Interview, 2002). She maintains that theater is not a place for revealing the problems involved in Orthodox religious life—questions, pains, and social criticism. She regards theater that deals with these subjects as “dangerous”; its proper place is the psychiatrist’s couch, and it is appropriate for “another,” secular, public. She insists that theater depicting such things is “contrary to the spirit of Judaism and gives an opportunity to secular people to attack Orthodox Jews—and Orthodox Jews also see that there’s something wrong with that kind of Judaism” (Manovitz, Interview, 1999). She regards the theater as a didactic tool in the service of religion, an engaged theater. She also speaks in terms of the “subjection” of art: the relation between art and Judaism is not

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111 The college is subject to the regulations and supervision of the Council of Higher Education and received full academic accreditation in 2008.
112 Manovitz (1993), pp. 18-32.
one of partnership or combination, but one of subjection. Art is supposed to convey political and religious messages, to preserve what exists, and not to subvert it. In her capacity as the head of the department, and during the years when she was the chief national school inspector for the teaching of theater in the state religious school system, she repeatedly invited rabbis to come and observe the plays of the department and to participate in study sessions and steering committees, but they did not respond: “Two hundred letters were sent to rabbis—asking are you willing to help with questions? She got zero answers. Rabbis run away from this!” (“Tovalah,” a student, at a meeting between the students and the administration, 2001). In 2001 Manovitz organized a conference on the subject, “Theater in the Orthodox Community,” and there, before an audience of rabbis, educators, and theater professionals, she laid out the important characteristics of Orthodox theater as she conceived it:

Orthodox theater will not be an imitation, but rather something essentially different!
Orthodox theater will not sculpt in pollution, but rather raise up the answer and the hope!
Orthodox theater will not evade deep questions, but it also will not be embarrassed to speak its truths, which are, “I do desire this,” but I have chosen freely not allow it for myself. This is the basis for activity in the theater in the coming decade.
To go in the opposite direction, not downward but upward.
Not to the id but to the alter-ego.
Not to the alienated soul but to the divine soul, and everything within the medium of a different kind of theater. And we have to educate for pride, for erect stature with this difference... We have to
create young flowers of art, infused with faith and with pride in being people of a different, Orthodox theater.

In her opinion, creation of a new, modest theatrical style is appropriate and vital to the national religious community, so that women can perform before a mixed audience of men and women: “In this genre, not everything is said on stage. Not everything is shown on stage. In this genre you do a dance that doesn’t expose the hips or other things even more...” She maintains that performing only before women has no influence and relegates the activity to the margins of the society. Therefore a unique style for women’s theater should be encouraged, which would receive the authorization of the entire Orthodox community, men and women, for the daring deed of appropriating an alien cultural form into Judaism. This act has a political character:

How can you put on a great play only for women? The world is built of fifty percent men! So you can’t get anywhere if you want permission from rabbis and if you want people to recognize you. You have to get to rabbis, who have to come and attend the play. (Manovitz, Interview, 1999).

The rabbi of the college, Rabbi Haim Fogel, a graduate of the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva, was also among those who set policies in the college. The rabbi’s presence at all the meetings of the department testified to the institution’s commitment to act according to the normative standards of halakha in the national religious community, with awareness that dealing with this profession was a deviation from the fields of study and occupations common in that society. After several crises connected to the productions, the students themselves asked to apply “censorship to the course materials, and to attendance at and reading of plays, in the Theater Department according to halakha.” (Letter to the administration from the students, 1997). Hence, the rabbi’s
involvement in the department and in the material studied in it was vital for its continued existence. He took part in discussions that were held with the head of department and lecturers about the content of the courses\textsuperscript{113} and about which plays the students were going to see in the theater. His contribution was mainly focused on clarifying questions of halakha that arose in the departments, so that the institution would function according to halakha and thus be suitable for a strictly observant community. In his opinion, obedience to the codified, written halakha is the way to create art “that advances the Torah.” Rabbi Fogel maneuvered between the strict exigencies of halakha, for he wanted the college to function in accordance with it, and the need to be open and original in deciding about new problems connected with art. In his view, a problem in halakha demanded not only examination of the sources and consultation with authorities but also understanding of the area in which the problem arose, the context, and he said that there is no need always to be stringent. An example of his approach is a temporary ruling that he issued, permitting a male director, Barukh Gotin, to work with the fourth year class on a final production, when no female director could be found. However, this authorization was accompanied by a list of restrictions, which was formulated in cooperation with Rabbi Spektor. These were presented both to the director and to the students:

1. Dance movements are to be studied and directed by a woman most of the time, and the students must wear modest clothing that does not emphasize their bodies.
2. Women must not sing in front of the director.
3. It must be stipulated in advance with the director that he must refrain from touching the

\textsuperscript{113} For example, the students protested against reading Aristophanes’ \textit{Lysistrata} and asked the rabbi to change the curriculum that required them to read and see plays that violated their modesty, even if they were central to the study of the history of the theater.
actresses even for professional reasons such as placing the characters in one place or another on the stage.

4. A pious woman (either a teacher or an additional director) must accompany the studies and be present most of the time. This will assure focus on the professional and serious side of the production without slipping into personal relations.

5. At every stage and in every situation, proper speech must be maintained as well as a serious atmosphere of study, avoiding an atmosphere of levity and laughter.

6. Whenever any doubt arises in the mind of the director, the students, or the woman accompanying the production, a question must be directed to a rabbi. Thus everything will be done fittingly and modestly, with respect both to halakha and to education. (Rabbi Fogel, 2000).

Although Rabbi Fogel did not know a great deal about art or theater and had little experience in these areas, he showed confidence and determination in his understanding of Judaism and halakha, and he insisted that he was the institution’s sole authority in this area. He rejected criticism by the head of the department or by the students, who sometimes demanded explanations of his rulings or complained about the absence of a clear policy with respect to halakha in the institution: “Regarding my decision to agree to hiring a male director, I’m happy with it. I’m the head; when I decided, it was a Torah decision, not a technical one. I issued many restrictions because I understand that I’m educating a generation.” (Fogel, Interview, 2000).

Another important factor in the discussion of the emerging
Orthodox women’s theater was the head of the college, “Hagai Boker,” who came to the institution a few years after the theater department was opened. He was leading the institution toward academic accreditation as well as laying the foundation for connections between the departments of the college, especially between the theater department and the Judaic studies department. His general policy was “maintaining an open and continuous dialogue” with professionals, the lecturers, and with the more observant students who found it difficult to reconcile Judaism with the theater. He believed that the theater department could be:

A meeting place for people from different streams, something that is so lacking in our country. We are divided into in camps, but there are ways to speak with one another. You don’t have to strip yourself naked, but it is possible for me to explain myself so that the Other will see me, and in that way we can create dialogue, and not necessarily between secular and religious people, but also among ourselves. (Interview, 2003).

Crises

All of the final productions in Emunah College during the first three years of the Theater Department were accompanied by crises. The problems that arose had been anticipated years earlier in a forum that discussed the possibility of establishing an Orthodox Jewish theater department:

Will the theater be defined as “Orthodox” or as “Jewish”? Will the theater be conscripted by Orthodox society or by the Orthodox school system? What are the materials of the theater? What makes it special? What are the limits of openness to Western culture? To liberalism?
What are the limits to criticism of the Orthodox establishment? What historical, philosophical, and mental obstacles are to be anticipated? What are the practical obstacles? Matters of modesty: touching, contact, relations before and during the play, woman’s voice, body language, sacrilege—the limits of daring in interpreting sacred texts in the theater. (Minutes of a meeting of the team for the establishment of a Jewish Theater Department in the Ma’aleh Center for Religious Zionism, 1993).

Although these difficulties had been anticipated, when they actually occurred they were surprisingly powerful and undermined the complex and delicate relations that had been formed among the playwrights, directors, actresses, audiences, and the establishment. These crises derived from disappointments that each group felt in its interaction with the others.

At that time, a few years after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigael Amir, other artistic initiatives arose in the national religious sector: the Orthodox Ma’aleh School of Television, Film, and the Arts was established; a group of hesder yeshiva student actors from the town of Ma’alot in the Galilee studied acting, as part of the Center for Alternative Theater in Akko, and a similar

114 Artists, academics, and rabbis who encouraged activity in art in Israel were invited to this meeting. Among others, Dr. David Alexander, Rabbi Dov Berkowitz, Rivka Manovitz, Amalia Shaḥal, Rabbi Daniel Tropper, Professor Yehuda Morali, Professor Daniel Sperber, Rabbi Yohanan Fried, Zevulon Orlov, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Adler, Yitḥak Recanati, and Dr. Amnon Shapira took part in the team for establishing the Jewish Theater Department. The meetings were held in Ma’aleh, the Center for Religious Zionism in Jerusalem. Along with these discussions, Manovitz began making practical efforts within the Administration of Religious Education in the Ministry of Education, headed by Matti Dagan to begin activities in the state religious schools and later to establish a program for training women teachers of theater in Emunah College and an acting course for men who had graduated from hesder Yeshivas (which combine military service with yeshiva studies), the founders of the Tair and Aspaklaria Theaters.
course was given in Jerusalem; and Orthodox artists published poetry and fiction and exhibited painting. National religious society was still in trauma following the murder, and it found itself in a period of isolation and self-examination, mainly in the area of education. Work in the theater had the dangerous potential of loosening the reins, and it was important to show that despite its subversive potential, it was possible to enlist art on behalf of society. Though it was difficult for observant Jews to adopt cultural patterns from secular different society, there was faith that the effort would bear fruit and that the projected theater would be of a higher moral and educational quality than the existing theater.

“Ruth”—Masterpiece or Failure?

The first production of the Theater Department of Emunah College was *Ruth*, which was based on the Book of Ruth and on homiletic legends connected to it. It was performed more than eighteen times throughout the country over three years (1997-2000). In 2005 people were still asking Manovitz to put it on again. The actresses who participated in the production were students in the first graduating class of the program during their second year of studies. The play sought to create a connection between the biblical past and their lives in the present:

For example: what is the nature of the relations between Elimelekh and Naomi? How did people react when Elimelech and his family leave during the famine? What were relations like within Naomi’s family before and after the departure from Bethlehem? We were forced to seek answers within ourselves, with thought and with our national collective intuition, or how can I as twentieth-century woman connect with these things? ("Margalit,” Course Assignment, 1998)
All the students whom I interviewed stated that the play had been imposed on them, and that they were not pleased with it artistically or with respect to the process of work that preceded its presentation. This was mainly because of faulty working procedures and because the students felt that the play was a collection of the exercises performed in acting classes. They believed that material had been chosen to achieve certain political goals for the institution and not because of its artistic quality.

**Two Versions: a Combination of Styles**

The initial idea was that every acting teacher would base her lessons on the Book of Ruth, and together they would weave a final play after two years of the department’s existence. Although Manovitz had a clear conception regarding the message and the set design, no single director, who would accept responsibility for the entire production, was chosen, so the play that emerged was a kind of patchwork. It was composed of a mixture of quotations from the Book of Ruth, some colloquial dialogue accompanied by original music, and dances. The result was lack of unity in the genre of the play: comedy and standup alongside pathos and recitation of biblical verses. According to the students, “Every teacher pulled us in her own direction,” and the students were forced to make decisions on their own, although they were only in their second year of professional training. A second version of *Ruth* was presented in their last year of study at the college, a year later. It was an improved version, because Masha Nimirovsky, a secular director originally from Russia, who was a teacher in the college, was designated as the director of the play. She looked for a common denominator among the fragments and genres that had composed the first production in order to create something closer to whole. The standup sections, for example, disturbed the pace and the unity, though they also shed new, fresh, and current
light on the relations of Ruth and Naomi with their surroundings. Scenes were rewritten, added or removed, the casting was changed, and the closing scene, which the students had called “infantile” and “embarrassing” was replaced. In the first version, two actresses had given bread to the audience, and the women had done a dance that symbolized lighting the Sabbath candles to the tune of “Woman of Valor” (Chapter 30 of Proverbs, read at the Friday night table in many Orthodox homes). In the second version, a tape was played of the final verses of Ruth (the genealogy leading from Ruth and Boaz to King David), and a baby (the son of one of the actresses) was passed from arm to arm, and all the actresses gave it a motherly smile. This was the director’s decision:

You have to replace the meaningless schmaltz [corny material] with more human schmaltz. If it’s going to be schmaltz, it shouldn’t be fake schmaltz, but real schmaltz. Because schmaltz and pathos are one of the aesthetic factors about which, to my regret, there’s agreement with the people who are involved with this: let’s just say that it’s a factor that’s permitted in “our theater.” [Spoken in a cynical tone, R.R.R.] (Nimirovsky, Interview, 2000).

The Goal of the Play

The declared purpose of the play was to exploit the opportunity to “grapple with materials from our tradition after a year and a half of intense theater study.” In addition, Manovitz formulated a message of women’s empowerment with a kabbalistic air: “In the end, redemption will come... sometimes it depends on a single, small woman who does a very human deed... a very womanly action” (Pamphlet explaining the first version of the play). Nevertheless, the adjective “small” is somewhat patronizing and reduces the power of the character Ruth and her influence. Indeed,
women were not portrayed in a particularly flattering way in this play. The women of Bethlehem and Moab were mainly malicious, and Ruth was weak and failed to show initiative. The characters who were supposed to empower women, like the social worker and rabanit Kook,\textsuperscript{115} were shown to be ridiculous, and Rabanit Kook sounded as if she was out of her mind. On the one hand, the character of the social worker supported women who sought a way out of a framework of violence, but on the other hand, she weakened them: “Did you know? Ninety percent of the women in Israel stay.” The relations between the parents of a girl of Middle-Eastern origin were compared to the relations between Naomi and her husband, and both were permeated with verbal and emotional violence (“He says to her, ‘You’re coming with me,’ and now he says to her, ‘Who needs you?’”). Naomi herself was portrayed as an arrogant, wealthy woman who betrayed her people.

Manovitz insisted on presenting the play, despite all the problems that it raised. She believed that it was an appropriate performance for Emunah College because it was not subversive or provocative. On the contrary, it reinforced the Halakhic authority of men that predominates in the Orthodox milieu. Presenting the play was therefore a decidedly political act, a confidence-building step that was intended to justify the daring initiative to establish a Jewish theater by Orthodox women in the heart of the national-religious establishment—proving that its content would not challenge rabbinical authority but rather strengthen it. Indeed, according to Caspi and Manovitz, members of the Orthodox women’s movement that supports the college changed their attitude toward the department after seeing this play.

\textsuperscript{115} Rabbis’ wives, though they have no official capacity, are referred to in Hebrew as “rabanit.” and they share some of the respect accorded to their husbands in Orthodox society. Rabanit Kook is a real person, an ultra-Orthodox preacher who delivers powerful sermons to all-woman audiences all over Israel. She is known for her dramatic delivery and catchy phraseology in connection to the relationship to God and the necessity to observe the commandments.
Description of the Play (the Final Version)

The dominant character in *Ruth* was actually Naomi, who was strong and stable. She was the center of the interest of the hungry women of Bethlehem, and the dance showed them trying to open the doors of her house by force. After that, each of the women of Bethlehem recited a monologue about the character of Naomi and connected her to current events. One of the actresses imitated Rabanit Kook:

Hi girls. Ah, good evening, my righteous girls. Before we begin our lesson, I really want, ah, you righteous girls, to talk about the one who’s leaving. Now, she was righteous, simply righteous, my pious girls, she finished her task here, and she has one in other places, girls. Now, I really want to talk about this subject: domestic peace, girls, harmony between husbands and wife. It’s an exalted and pure subject and... Girls, it’s forbidden, forbidden to approach, to touch it, you have to be at a distance, like from boiling fire, blazing, not boiling. Not to touch, my righteous girls. Even if your husband says such and such. They... Never mind. Listen, listen, hear. They have books, they know. We... even my husband, girls, even my husband says such and such—not so terrible... In this matter I wanted to touch upon slander: it’s forbidden, my righteous girls, words and gossip, it’s not a good idea, except in the name of heaven, my righteous girls, really.

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116 The actresses switched roles during the play, and every time somebody different played Ruth. This was Manovitz’ way to give the students a chance to cope with as many characters as possible and also to prevent possible envy. Only the character of Naomi was played by a single actress from the beginning of the play to the end.
Now for the subject of domestic peace, I want you to open up, yes, to open up your mouth... yes... about the subject of husband and wife. Before you take on the yoke and, as they say, with God’s help, you should also be scrupulous about the matter of modesty, girls, lots of modesty, for heaven’s sake, and about the matter of domestic peace, for the next lesson I want you to look at it, girls, and really, my all the goodness of God be with you, and bless you!

Another woman of Bethlehem imitated a social worker who dealt with women:

Hey you! Did you ever think about leaving? Yes, yes, I’m talking to you! If you want to, get up and leave. Don’t give in. Don’t let anyone else decide for you. The time has come for you to do what you really want to. Why? Because your freedom of choice is the most important thing in life, even if you’re not aware of it. Think from your gut, listen to your heart, and pick up your feet. Don’t leave anything behind. Take everything. Go, go out to freedom, to the wide open spaces, to the road. Long live abandonment! Did you know? Ninety percent of the women in Israel stay. With one little step you can change the statistics, and, if not now, when? Are you still here? Pick up the phone, pick up the phone and call us. We’ll make you leave.

Another character imitated a little girl with a heavy Oriental accent:

She was so good. She always used to give us money for treats. Every Friday she’d give us a candy, and once, when Judith’s mom left the house because her dad... she fixed things up between them. And now
my mom is crying and crying and crying at home, and my dad tells her, “Shut up, shut up,” and I’m really sad, too, because who’ll give me candies on Friday?

These comic monologues were repeated with some changes in the content at the end of the play, when Naomi comes back from Moab with Ruth:

- Great, she finished the job there, too... girls.
- You! When you want to come back—you can come back, I told you, ninety percent of Israeli women come back.
- Ah, great, my mom will be happy, she’ll be happy, and my dad will tell her, “Shut up, shut up!”

Until the scene where she chose to remain with Naomi, Ruth appeared as a pale, silent figure. As staged by Nemirovsky, this scene took place on a railway platform, and the props and the costumes of the two women alluded to the Holocaust period. After that scene, the character of Ruth became submissive again: “The series of actions obscured Ruth, and those actions made Ruth into a confused person, suffering, stubborn, and hard, not the way she would like to be—confident, believing in her path, and striving for truth” (“Sagit,” Class Assignment, 1998). Ruth’s life in Moab before and after her marriage and her struggle with barrenness, based on homiletic legends, was described by means of a community of Moabite women who had modern traits: their children played in the playground, they ate snacks and wore paper diapers. The women used contemporary slang when they gossiped about Ruth, who was an object of their pity. In the third production, the students tried to add a text to make Ruth more “human and pragmatic, and to let her explain her feelings after her husband’s death, Naomi’s son” (“Irit,” Interview, 1998). But, according to the students, Manovitz wanted a silent Ruth (in
contrast to the talkative Orpa), especially in the scene of the night before her marriage, because she believed that silence would be construed as the spiritual strength of a holy figure.

**Reception**

The reception that the play met shows that national religious society was interested in theater of this kind and encouraged it. To this day, despite all the difficulties, *Ruth* is regarded as a “mythological play,” and people still remember it as an achievement, as a first and significant step in establishing women’s theater within the national religious community in Israel. One of the students mentioned that women whom she met a long time after the play was no longer performed expressed enthusiasm about it and told her that they had seen it several times, and even cried with emotion. These encounters were embarrassing for her, because in her opinion the only thing about the play that could arouse a positive resonance was that it was the first to be performed. She said, “We don’t stand behind that play,” and another student had reservations about the appropriateness of the play from a religious point of view. In her opinion, giving rabbinical approval to the play because of the length of the actresses’ sleeves and skirts was a mistake. She felt “sensuality and beauty” on stage, “and that was marvelous, but if you’re proud of your modesty, you’re taking pride in a ‘crown that isn’t yours,’ because every effort to wear wide pants that look like tents achieves the opposite goal: you’re a lot more erotic” (“Margalit,” Interview, 2000).

**Conclusion: Ruth—a Gap between the Actresses and the Audience**

The gap between the actresses and the audience in evaluating the play was reflected in the gap between the types of texts that
were chosen for the play: those taken from the Book of Ruth were emphasized by repetition and chanting, “like a magic charm, a kind of magic whisper that brings the audience into the period, and lighting that creates a mysterious, unrealistic atmosphere” (“Tami, Class Assignment, 2000); other texts were original—comic monologues anchored in current Israeli life: the character of Rabbanit Kook; a gossipy, envious neighbor; a girl from a deprived background, enthusiastic and innocent; a social worker knowledgeable in statistics; and even “anti-Semites” such as the Moabite women who made fun of the custom of the Jewish customs of circumcision and ritual immersion. Perhaps the mixture of styles and the parody helped the modern audience relate to the biblical story, giving the viewers a new way of looking at the elevated biblical text. On the other hand, the frequent alternation between quotations from the Bible and current monologues as well as in the roles played by the actresses confused the audience. The play addressed the lowest common denominator of the national religious public rather than being an eclectic, post-modern experiment. It was intended to gain political capital and actually succeeded: thanks to the conformism of the theme of the play, during the following years the Theater Department survived, although some plays did not fit into this spirit at all.

Bi’ur hametz [Burning the Unleavened Bread]: Is This What We Prayed For?
Background

In 1998 “Shoshana Ben-Nun,” an actress and acting teacher, arranged an evening of monologues for the final performance of the first graduating class of the department. The college administration defines “Ben-Nun” as secular, whereas she regards herself as a “spiritual person, a Jew.” As in Ruth, this play was also based on exercises on personal subjects presented by the students
in the acting class. She claims that the exercises were adapted and woven together into a presentation “with great responsibility” and with Manovitz’ knowledge. “Ben-Nun” states that the quality of the fifteen monologues that the students produced surprised and moved her, and she did not want to “ignore this kind of ‘super-feminist’ material that emerged before my very eyes.” When Manovitz came to observe the rehearsals, the group was already at an advanced stage of preparation. Despite the subversive character of some of the scenes, she decided not to cancel the production, mainly out of consideration for the students.

It would have been very bad to stop it. The atmosphere was... the girls had such a huge desire to present it. I would have had to “give it to them” really hard, hard—and this was a compromise: that it would be in a closed place. They were guided by Masha and Shoshana [the two secular drama teachers, R.R.R.], two women from “another sphere—and they come from another place—and they taught them what they knew... In any case I was at odds with that class. I also had problems with Ruth, and I myself didn’t understand it, I wasn’t sure where I was, what I had to do, how to guide things. Look, Shoshana also figured it, only later. (Manovitz, Interview, 1999)

Throughout the rehearsals “Ben-Nun” made it clear to Manovitz that she was willing to stop the work immediately if the production was found unsuitable for the college: “I told

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117 The directions for the exercise were as follows: think of where you are right now in your love for the theater. Prepare a dramatic scene from your personal life in a way that will define the inner essence of each of the artists as she feels herself in present reality. The questions that the scene was to answer were: (1) the thing that must disturbs me today is... (2) That I most want to be ... (3) that I will be on stage. The search for the inner thread that guides the three answers was meant to guide us in our inner quest and lead us to creativity. (“Margalit,” a student, Class Assignment, 1998).
her: Rivkele, come and say ‘niet’—I say ‘ahalan wasahalan’ [“Greetings,” in Arabic]. You’re right! I won’t have this in my school!” (“Ben-Nun,” Interview, 1999). Instead of stopping the work, Manovitz tried to censor it, but “Ben-Nun” refused: “Manovitz got nervous and said, ‘this scene can’t go that way–you have to make a change. Go and tell them, that’s the way it has to be.’ I told her: ‘I won’t do anything against my conscience.’” “Ben-Nun” felt that although she had been given permission to continue working on the production, she was jeopardizing her job at the college, so she kept saying, “Don’t put my head on a tray.” She even wrote a letter to the administration pointing out the problems that were liable to arise because of the production. The administration’s solution was to invite a small number of carefully chosen people to attend and to make the evening a “closed women’s evening.” To “Ben-Nun’s” astonishment, the handful of women who were invited included the inspectors of the college and teachers from the Jewish Studies Department. At that stage “Ben-Nun” felt “cheated... that evening I felt like a ‘shabbos-goy.’”

This play was a formative event for the department. After it was presented, the goals of the department and its manner of administration changed. It was decided that the head of the department must supervise every production closely, and the staff of the Jewish Studies Department and the Rabbi of the College would be involved in everything that was done in the department, even in the choice of the content of the studies and the plays to be seen together.

The Name of the Play and its Main Subjects

The name that had originally been chosen for the evening of monologues was “Nothing is more whole than a broken heart.” In the end, however, the name chosen was “Bi’ur hamets” [Burning

118 A gentile hired by Orthodox Jews to do things that they are not allowed to do on the Sabbath.
unleavened bread]. The director felt that the name was appropriate because the theatrical event was presented around Passover time (when unleavened bread is removed from the home and burned). The women in the audience, who were shocked by the content of the monologues and the way they were presented, saw the name of the production as a metaphor for what was happening on the stage, and the name merely reinforced the shock they felt after seeing it. In their opinion, the name was an improvisation on a metaphor familiar from ethical literature and the kabbalah—burning the unleavened bread in one’s heart—emphasizing what was happening on the stage in the college auditorium: the removal of religious and moral values from the students’ hearts. Echoes of the production reverberated for a long time, making the name even more significant. Rather than being removed and destroyed, the unleavened bread remained in every corner of the house—the college: “We removed the unleavened bread, but we’re still dealing with it! Instead of finishing off the unleavened bread—we’re eating rolls on Passover!” (Rabbi Fogel, Teachers’ Meeting, 1998).

The monologues that were presented touched upon two main circles of reference: the nuclear family, especially relations between daughters and their parents, and the second circle, connected to social and religious norms. The monologues were set in the home and also in the work space, impersonating a kindergarten teacher and a secretary. The outstanding ones demonstrated rebellion: destruction of the Sabbath table, the crumpling of rabbis’ hats, throwing head-coverings onto the ground, wild dancing, walking on runways like fashion models, and children shouting at their parents, “Shut up, already!” “Zvia doesn’t want to be a good girl!” At the same time it is important to emphasize that not all the monologues were subversive in nature. Some of the monologues emphasized acceptance of the national religious life cycle: a young mother repeated her own mother’s words while taking care of her daughter, a young mother consoled herself for covering her own
curls while combing her daughter’s pretty hair, and a woman who danced madly finally joined her friends in fervently singing psalms after washing her hands according to the ritual and opening a prayer book. There were scenes in which the young women expressed feelings of isolation, bitterness, anger, and helplessness through movement and speech. The most penetrating subversive scenes ended with a gesture of support for the “rebellious” actress from the other members of the group with movements of inclusion and consolation. That gesture can be seen as an effort to restore the “rebel” to the bosom of the loving community despite her effort to break out of it. However, some observers translated the support of the group as a cynical act, adding to the subversive message:

She throws her head-covering off, and the other actresses are something like puppets, and then she picks it up again. They hug her and sing, as it were: “Well, you put the head-covering back on, and you’ll be like all of us—marionettes, and you’ll keep on submitting to this stupidity. (Manovitz, Interview, 2001)

The Mise en Scène—a Hint of Subversiveness

The performance was held in the college auditorium. It was set up like a café and lit with candles. Each table was covered with a cloth and had a vase of flowers, a candle, a plate of leavened food such as crackers, pretzels, and cookies, with soft drinks and wine. The actresses sat at the tables with the audience. Thus the arrangement of the space changed the theatrical event into a social event and imposed unexpected intimacy on the audience. When each actress’ turn to perform came, the spotlight landed not only on her but also on the other women sitting next to her at the table, and it followed her as she moved into the open space in the

119 Married women in the Orthodox community cover their hair as an act of modesty.
center of the hall, where she continued acting. This arrangement of the hall indicated symbolically that the evening of monologues would be different from what is expected at an ordinary theatrical performance. Sitting with the actresses around tables arranged as in a café undid the separation between the audience and the actresses, and it might have added to the feeling of discomfort that some of the spectators felt at the play. This seating arrangement imposed participation in the play upon the audience, without asking their permission. Since none of the spectators expressed opposition, left the hall, or interfered with the performance of the play, sitting with the actresses could have been interpreted as passive agreement with the content of the monologues. Some members of the audience reacted positively to the arrangement of the space: “the arrangement gave a feeling of intimacy, a kind of ‘support group’ that made it possible for the girls to perform everywhere in the hall” (“Liza,” Class Assignment, 1999). The choice to set up the hall like a café must be seen as a clear declaration of the group’s intention to engage in unconventional theatrical activity.

Autobiographical Confessions

*Bi’ur hametz* opened up the possibility of dealing with basic questions connected to Orthodox women’s theater as well as broader subjects connected with the lives of national religious women. In retrospect, the play reinforced the suspicions that the establishment of an Orthodox women’s theater in the heart of the establishment, had dangerous subversive potential. The personal confessions brought up the students’ subjective experiences: their desires, the wish to fulfill their obligations along with the desire to rebel and seek an independent path, different from that of their parents. It reflected complex mechanisms that influenced women’s cooperation with their oppression and their ambivalent relations with control and oppression, desire and rejection.\(^{120}\) The

involvement of the professional, secular director heightened the subversive and rebellious character of the play. At the same time, the actresses regarded *Bi’ur hametz* as the high point of their studies and were not aware that their play was “political.” Thus they were surprised by the sharp criticism leveled against them. Manovitz phrased her opposition to the content of the monologues this way: “The statement isn’t personal–it’s a general statement, a statement that has a symbolic character... Someone who sees one of these monologues won’t see it as a personal story but as something about Orthodox society, that it isn’t in good shape. That’s something I don’t have to do here–because that’s what the secular world does” 121(Manovitz, Teachers’ Meeting, 1999). The representatives of the establishment spoke out against the evening of monologues quite sharply, because they understood that the subversive monologues represented what was really happening among young women in national religious society.

*Bi’ur hametz* was composed of fifteen monologues. I have chosen to present a semiotic analysis of the monologues that aroused the strongest reactions. I will also describe several other monologues briefly in order to demonstrate the power of the production.

**Description of the Play**

The evening began with a song sung by one of the students, accompanied by a piano. At the end, the voices of mothers were heard from every corner of the hall, calling out to their children to pick up their toys, to brush their teeth, and to close the shutters.

“Is This Naomi?”

This scene aroused the harshest criticism from the representatives of the establishment. There is hardly any speech in the scene, but throughout it, the actress hummed the melody of

121 She was referring to Israeli plays depicting Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox society, which were performed at that time, such as *Shaindele*. 
the song “Woman of Valor” (Prov. 31). The actress was in her last months of pregnancy, and she wore a tight black dress with a white buttoned shirt over it, and she covered her hair with a white scarf. From an old fashioned wooden cupboard that was standing next to a wall of the hall she removed the items needed to set the Sabbath table: a white synthetic tablecloth, pretty plates, shining glasses, a small vase with flowers in it, challahs, an embroidered napkin, a bottle of wine, a pair of tall silver candlesticks, and thick candles. She then set the table at the front of the stage with very stylized movements. Throughout the entire scene she hummed the song, as she smiled slightly and sent meaningful gazes to the audience. The expression on her face showed that she knew she was being observed by an audience familiar with the preparation of the Sabbath table. Awareness of the presence of the audience and the connection created between the actress and the spectators had a Brechtian distancing effect, which expressed the hidden opposition of the woman to the familiar actions dictated by social convention and connected to preparing the home for the Sabbath. As soon as she finished setting the table, she began to destroy what she had done: she turned the cups upside down, she cut the Sabbath candles to different sizes, she lay the bottle of wine and the candlesticks down, and she sprinkled salt over the whole table. She took off her white scarf, revealing her short hair, folded the scarf, and placed it on the corner of the table. Then she unbuttoned the white shirt while looking slyly at the audience and smiling with a mischievous, even sexy air. She took off the shirt and tried to fold it nicely, but she soon lost interest in being “neat” and let the shirt fall onto the floor, shrugging her shoulders with a movement of, “okay, never mind.” She went back to the cupboard and removed a thin vase with delicate artificial flowers in it. She

122 This is a song sung in many Orthodox homes on Friday nights before the blessing on the wine, a song of praise for the woman who fears God and does housework, gives to charity, and does acts of kindness.

123 On Brecht, see the note on page 48 footnote 43.
placed it in the center of the table and threw the flowers onto the floor. She examined the table again, and, humming pleasantly, she tied the corners of the tablecloth together, completely destroying whatever order remained the table. Still humming and smiling, she went back to the cupboard with decisive haste. She looked at her reflection on the shining cupboard and turned to the audience with anger and bitterness, asking a rhetorical question taken from the Book of Ruth: “Is this Naomi?” The lights dimmed, and in the background the song, “Woman of Valor” was heard, sung by a woman’s chorus with a rich musical accompaniment.

**Analysis of the Scene**

This scene had almost no verbal text, but it was rich in movement and gesture. The choice of body language instead of verbal language contains subversive potential, because in the national religious community great emphasis is placed on physical modesty. This scene derived its meaning from the gazes, the smile, and the seductive movements of the pregnant woman. The actress coaxed the audience to participate in the secret of the “game of opposites” that she was playing: engaging in normative behavior in order to prove that it contained subversive behavior and rebellion, and for that purpose the actress made use of the tension between the opposing components and circus-like performance, forcing the audience to become accomplices/witnesses of the subversion, while embarrassing it at the same time. The feeling of embarrassment grew stronger toward the end of the scene, when the actress quoted from the Book of Ruth, thereby alluding to the “kosher” production of *Ruth*, in which she had played a central role. With this statement she was both challenging that play and addressing the audience, which had probably seen it, too, summoning them to choose which of the two plays and the two characters was more authentic: the character of Naomi who had appeared in the

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124 An echo of the play, *Ruth*, that had been presented a year before.
establishment play or the rebellious and contentious character in the present one, based on personal material. This scene was an example of the tumultuous but silenced inner life of Orthodox women who live according to the accepted norms but find it hard to continue to do so without protest. According to the feminist theory advanced by Gilligan in *In a Different Voice—Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, over the generations women have listened to men’s voices and to theories of development based on men’s experience, and only recently has women’s silence aroused attention, as well as the difficulty in listening to what they have to say when they do speak.

The framing of the routine and familiar activities of setting the Sabbath table through stylized, theatrical gestures transformed the actress from a private figure to one that represented all Orthodox women: a prototypical “woman of valor,” who, in this case, disappointed the audience’s expectations and, by extension, those of Orthodox society. The scene represents a hidden and unknown aspect of the Orthodox woman’s life: despite what is commonly thought, an Orthodox woman has the potential not only to be a “woman of valor,” but also rebellious and destructive. Setting the Sabbath table according to a fixed pattern took on a new aesthetic form and also a new meaning, because it presented the two possibilities in parallel fashion, and both the setting of the table and its destruction were performed at the same tempo and accompanied by the same wink of the eye, smile, and humming. By giving identical status to the two possibilities, the actress showed that the desire to set the table and the desire to destroy it existed side by side—two sides of the same coin. The rhetorical question posed to the audience left it to determine which of the two women was the real “Naomi”: the woman who built or the women who destroyed, and it enabled the audience to see that the two exist side by side. To be more precise, one is wrapped in

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the other, just like the tablecloth that wraps the Sabbath objects. It should be noted that the actress chose to wrap the overturned objects in the tablecloth instead of throwing them onto the floor. Perhaps the wish to wrap up the destruction of the Sabbath table in the tablecloth conveys a message that the Sabbath can contain both types of emotions: the positive feeling (satisfaction and comfort in performing a familiar ritual) and the negative one (frustration and anger at the monotony of routine). The rhetorical question also deals with the complex identity of the actress (an explanation that is corroborated by her own statement):

When I said, “Is this Naomi?” I also asked whether the woman who set the table so nicely for Sabbath was really me. Do I do it joyfully? And, “Is this Naomi” also the woman who throws off every yoke? The one who sets the table or the one who destroys it—or both?... It was a kick and a slap in the face to the whole play of *Ruth* that we put on. As for my view of life and of the theater—life isn’t so marvelous. With all the beauty that it has, you have to pay attention to both things, otherwise you aren’t dealing with them, otherwise you’re living in an illusion. (“Irit,” Interview, 2000)

She said that in retrospect she understood that the scene represented her parents’ divorce, which had taken place around the time of the performance. For her, working on the monologue was a form of therapy:

Because in that scene there were all the symbols of a peaceful home, and that was just after my parents got divorced, so my mom told me that the scene reflected the home that had fallen apart... I didn’t know, but after she said it, I said, “Wow!” (“Irit,” Interview, 1998).

Despite the criticism that the actress received because of the
scene she presented, she was not sorry she had presented the scene, because it enabled her to look inward at heretical thoughts she had about her functions as an Orthodox wife and mother, and about “my return to the Sabbath and to setting the table, which was not something to be taken for granted,” and about “how much is it an integral part of me–striking out at conventions.” She claimed that the scene was intended to ask probing questions: “Because a believer is someone who asks questions.” In her opinion, the anger of the women from the Emunahh movement stemmed from the instability of their own faith. The theatrical presentation of her doubts as an Orthodox woman, wife, and mother touched upon one of the central symbols of Judaism: the Sabbath table. This scene, which undermined that symbol, was the focus of many discussions within the teaching staff and with the students about the function of art in religious society and about the complexity of a religious woman’s life.

“Do You Want to Be a Woman?”

In this scene as well, there was extensive use of movement and very little verbal text. The actress portrayed several characters. In the beginning of the scene she entered, dressed in black with her hair drawn back, holding a valise. She said, “Wait a moment!” She leaned over, covered her face with her hands, and then she assumed the character of an old woman, a gossip, with a dark and ugly facial expression. That character kept repeating the words, “Poor thing!” with a constantly more strident tone, and while speaking she turned her head in every direction, as though she wanted to share her gossip with the audience. She went on: “Alone! After three years! Anyway, if only there was somebody... but she’s left alone, poor thing! Poor thing!” Her facial expression aroused disgust and aversion. The sound of drumming was heard in the background, and once again the character changed. The actress began dancing
in the rear area of the stage to the rhythm of the drumming, with broad, circular motions. Every few seconds she stopped dancing and addressed the audience directly: “Do you know what it means to be a woman? To be a woman means that everybody has to be pleased with you.” “To be a woman is a serious matter.” “A woman—it’s suffering, it’s pain... A woman bears the whole world on her shoulders.” Afterward, she froze in place and in a pose like that of Atlas bearing the globe on his shoulders, she said: “And always... Always [shouting] s-i-l-e-n-t!” She started dancing again and, while dancing, spoke with emphasis: “Woman—it’s space; it’s self-fulfillment; a vessel; power.” The dance grew swifter until the dancer fell to the floor. She lay there for a while, panting, and, in a kneeling position, she turned to the audience and asked a rhetorical question: “Are you sure you want to be a woman?” She covered her eyes with a black shawl and started to scream hysterically, repeating the word “woman” in increasingly hysterical tones. At the height of the hysteria, she stopped, turned to the audience with her eyes blindfolded and asked, quietly, in a bitter tone: “And where is happiness?”

**Analysis of the Scene**

The beginning of the scene emphasized the misery against which the scene wished to protest: the woman abandoned and alone. The definitions of the concept of woman were not always compatible, and the different attitudes toward woman created a feeling that there was no basic truth about body and identity behind the concept of woman, but rather there were various possibilities that were the products of the imagination.\(^\text{126}\) This scene also suggested a variety of definitions. In the end it turned out that the “good” woman—the sympathetic and nurturing woman—was not happy.

character, from a weak voice to a strong one, and from movement to speech. The verbal text was accompanied by the bodily text—by dancing. At the beginning of the scene there was a parody of the concern and empathy of the gossip toward the abandoned woman. This conception of the misery of the single woman, with no spouse, has been discussed extensively in feminist literature and recently articles have been written about the particular situation of the unmarried woman in national religious society.\textsuperscript{127} The ideal woman is one who “has a man.” Bordo, the feminist theoretician who deals with body image in the theater, points out that it is customary to think that a woman who has a male partner is happy in her conjugal life and in the area that sets its boundaries: the kitchen and the bedroom.\textsuperscript{128}

Dance served as a pause between one section and another and also to exemplify the verbal text. After the presenting an individual case, the actress turned to the audience directly and tried to define the female gender. The definition was composed of a series of nouns, almost all of them with negative connotations: pain, suffering, responsibility, silence. The actress chose to scream out the word “silent” as an introduction to the hysteria that broke out after mentioning the silence and the pain that she experienced. The shout followed a whisper, and it was a violent vocal protest. The word “woman” aroused hysterical laughter in the actress. Hysteria is thought of as typical female behavior, and at the same time feminist theoreticians such as Clement, Cixous, and Bordo see it as exemplifying the female power to protest. They argue that hysteria is one way that conventional women can express dissatisfaction with one or several aspects of their lives, even without being aware of it.\textsuperscript{129} Screaming and hysterical laughter strengthen the negative image of woman as lacking self-control. And yet, the unbridled and surprising scream had a liberating and empowering effect here,

\textsuperscript{128} Bordo (1997), pp. 94-95.
because after it the character managed to dance without stopping, her movements became broader, and she chose more positive nouns to define woman: space, self-fulfillment, a vessel, power. The noun “power” came last, perhaps because self-fulfillment and bearing a child require strength. According to feminist theory, women have intuitive powers to identify with others and to feel sympathy for them, and therein they lose their selfish identity and are emotionally strong.

The rhetorical question addressed to the audience, “Are you sure you want to be a woman?” was presented as if your sex could be a matter of choice. If sex and gender can be chosen, perhaps there is no reason to accept femininity as such, especially the femininity of misery and suffering presented at the beginning of the scene. The question contains a rich and open sub-text: “Perhaps you don’t want to be a woman? Perhaps you want to be a man? Perhaps you want to be a different kind of woman?” The question of identity as a construction or a choice is the focus of much research. In this case, the actress addressed the audience as a community with which she had a common connection of gender, and the space in which she appeared became one of oppositional discourse that united all the participants—spectators and artist.

At the end of the scene, the actress chose to perform a self-inflicting gesture; she tied a thick black blindfold over her eyes so that she appeared to the audience to be blind. This act recalled Oedipus, who blinded himself when he learned that he had sinned and lain with his mother. The word that she repeated over and over again, “woman,” reverberated in the room while the actress lost visual contact with her surroundings. When she knelt on the floor, she was in a position of physical inferiority. Her posture, her movements, and her voice cast doubt on the possibility of happiness. Here, too, there was a possible sub-text: “It is impossible

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130 The construction of identity is a broad topic that cannot be discussed here. Among others it is treated in Foucault (1978); Judith Butler (1990); Kevin Hetherington (1998).
to find happiness this way, but if the situation changes, happiness will be within reach.” However, that sub-text was not strong enough to cancel out the principal text, which emphasized the woman’s barren search for happiness. The audience remembered only the verbal protest accompanied by the body text and actresses’ hysterical shouts.

“The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want”

At the beginning of the scene, the actress wore a colorful mini-dress with a plunging neckline, her hair was gathered in two pigtails, and she was playing hopscotch. A man’s black coat was hanging on a hook on the wall behind her, high above her head. In the background a familiar pop song about sexual contact was playing. The little girl with the pigtails then became a woman, put on makeup and high heeled shoes, and she started walking on what looked like the runway in fashion show, while displaying coarse sensuality. Immediately afterward she began dancing wildly and tempestuously like a pop star. In the background colored lights were flashing. When she fell on the floor, the music turned into a song that the students sang, with words from Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” She rose and slowly walked toward the black coat, slipped her right arm into the right sleeve so that she was enveloped in the coat and caressed her right cheek. Her facial expression showed that she was enjoying the contact. The hand in the sleeve of the man’s coat dipped into a small bowl of water and then groped in the coat pocket and removed a small prayer book. She opened it, and while she reading the prayer book she joined in the singing of the psalm.

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131 Samantha Fox, “Touch Me–I Want to Feel Your Body”
Analysis of the Scene

The student explained that the scene she presented shows the process of becoming Orthodox again, after abandoning that way of life for a few years:

The scene came from a powerful and genuine [emphasis in original] desire to rebel, and later on it took on its religious character... I was truly considered, to put it crudely, the secular girl of the class: I wore pants, smoked. It’s not yet the exact opposite, but it’s on the way there. The girls didn’t accept my change to observance with love, and that really bothered me, because I said: It’s me, the new me, the old me, doesn’t matter. It’s me, period. I’m comfortable with it, and if you accepted me when I wasn’t comfortable with myself, and didn’t feel good about myself, and I was fighting with myself and with my evil impulse, so accept me when things are good for me. If I had brought material that I would have defined as “perfectly Orthodox,” the girls wouldn’t have accepted it. There would be chuckles, talk like, “Okay, she’s just...” I don’t know, my closest friends did respect my change. As a matter of fact, my exercise got a lot of reactions. A lot of people came up to me and said they cried and were moved, and I also heard people crying in the audience during the performance. (“Arza,” Interview, 1999)

The actress’ clothing and actions were a coarse violation of the rules of behavior acceptable in Orthodox society. She showed enjoyment, perhaps from being an object of observation, the focus of people’s gaze, which, in this case, was not male, but it was probing. In contrast, the song, “The Lord is my shepherd,”
expressed the spiritual desire to be close to God. The text of the female body in the first part of the scene gave way to a liturgical text. After slipping her arm into the sleeve of the man’s coat, her body’s range of action was limited, and her body lost its outspoken femininity. Merging with the black coat was a visual representation of merging with Orthodox patriarchy and authority. At first the actress did not seem to merge with it but to be taking refuge under its wings. The short, flowery dress was partially covered by the man’s coat, and the woman became androgynous, a creature without a defined gender. The arm in the sleeve of the coat attached to the wall by a nail was physical affirmation of the transition from wild sensuality to Orthodoxy limited in contact, content with a mere pat on the cheek. Nevertheless, the caress caused pleasure—resembling that of a little girl, perhaps that of a woman—and the gaze was directed upward, toward the bodiless being that the coat represented (father? man? rabbi? God?). The stroking of her cheek connected the eroticism of the first part of the scene to the sensual religious devotion of the second part. It opened up endless possibilities for interpretation of the essence of becoming religiously observant. It appears that the pleasure from religious experience had auto-erotic characteristics, because the stroking, pleasure-giving hand was the actress’ own hand. That hand in the black coat aroused a connotation of ultra-Orthodox men or of rabbis, who are sometimes called “black” in Hebrew slang, because of their clothing. This figure was presented as being exalted over everything, lacking a body and sexuality but still pleasure-giving. What then was the nature of the actress’ resumption of Orthodoxy? Perhaps it was a substitute for the sexuality that was emphasized in the first part of the scene? It should be pointed out that religious devotion is accompanied by particular ritual actions that are not tied to gender, such as washing hands and reciting psalms.
Other Monologues

Come Back, My Lost Curls!

In the darkness a voice was heard saying, “I—I photograph everything!” When the lights went on, they were focused on the actress, who was leafing through a photograph album and telling the story entitled “Odelia and the Curls” based on the photographs in the album. Now and then she showed the audience pictures appropriate to the story. “One morning after the wedding—the curls disappeared! She was very sad. ‘Come back, my lost curls!’ she cried out. One morning she felt something very strange, she got up and saw a baby with lots of curls. Odelia was happy,” she showed the audience a picture of her baby.

I Don’t Want to

This was a cyclical scene that started with the actress kneeling with hands raised and elbows bent. She was speaking in a babyish voice and telling what the baby was experiencing (“Dad and Mom help Tsvia to walk”), and she demonstrated the first step that the baby took and her success in freeing herself from their grip, though she was frightened by her own daring. Then the actress presented herself as a teen-aged girl: “Tsvia is a good girl: polite, clean, brings home boring report cards.” She smiled and added, “Everybody looks at Tsvia, but nobody sees her.” She rumpled her hair, put on makeup, and spoke at a rapidly increasing tempo: “Tsvia is a bad girl. She doesn’t want to be clean. She doesn’t want to be polite. She doesn’t want to bring home boring report cards. She doesn’t want to fulfill expectations. She doesn’t want to keep silent. She doesn’t want to lie to herself.” The actress began to run in a circle in the empty area, some of which was in the back of the hall, and finally, out of breath, she said, “Tsvia wants to be Tsvia,” and she
returned to the position that began the scene—kneeling with her hands raised toward invisible parents.

**My Hat**

Six young women stood in a circle, frozen like statues or mannequins in a show window. They represented different generations in style of dress, in their posture, in their hair style, their hats, in the expressions on their faces, in their makeup, and in their accessories. The actress sat in front of them at center stage. She was wearing a hat and singing, “My hat it has three corners,” as if she were teaching the song to children. She stopped singing and declared happily, “I got married!” The statues behind her answered, “Mazel Tov, Congratulations!” She went on with a little girl’s smile, “Now I have to buy hats! What hat is right for me?”

She got up, went from statue to statue, and tried on the hats: a narrow brimmed straw hat, a pink cloth hat with a broad brim. She stacked the hats on her head, pointed out that it was hard to stuff all her curls under a hat, and spoke to an imaginary figure—her husband—and asked coquettishly: “Maybe I should have my hair cut?” The actress moved wildly to the strains of happy music. Her main gesture was an imitation of cutting hair with a scissors, accompanied by sibilant puffs (“che, che, che”).

She stopped suddenly, looked at the floor, and cried out in alarm. The statues imitated her like a chorus. She wrung her hands and said in panic and sorrow, “All my curls are on the floor!” But she recovered immediately and consoled someone, perhaps herself, perhaps someone imaginary next to her, “I have no curls, but I have hats!” With a mischievous smile she went from statue to statue, taking four hats and putting them on top of each other, to

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132 In Orthodox society married women cover their hair in various ways—with berets, caps, scarves, or hats—and every style of hair-covering conveys a message about the stringency of a woman’s observance and the stratum of Orthodox society to which she belongs.
the accompaniment of happy music. She sat down on the chair again and said emphatically, “It’s summer. Hot.” She suggested to the invisible figure of her husband, “Maybe I should have my hair cut? Do you mind?” Once again the happy music was heard, and the actress imitated the cutting of hair again, with exaggerated, wild movements, accompanied by the sounds of cutting. Suddenly she stopped, looked downward, and cried out again in panic. The statues imitated her. She said, “I have no hair,” in a reconciled tone, “but I’m not hot anymore!” She sat on the chair again and said to the audience, “But sometimes, because I really love having short hair...” She got up, to the sound of rock ‘n roll music, and started to gyrate wildly, while the statues imitated her movements with smaller motions of their upper bodies, as though they were rooted to the floor. The actress threw the hats off and shouted a liberating, “Wow!” She played with a black felt hat that was still on her shorn head until it fell off. She clearly felt good until she noticed the severe and disapproving gaze of the statues, who had stopped moving. She leaned over and put the black cloth hat on and started walking among the statues with her head slightly bent, in sorrow. The statues followed her off the stage, supporting her and slowly humming “My hat it has three corners” with her.

**Whence Will Come My Help?**

This monologue was the final scene, and it was longer and more complex because the actress portrayed three characters: that of an ultra-Orthodox girl; her father, the head of a yeshiva; and her big brother, an arrogant and unsympathetic yeshiva student. To portray each character the actress changed her voice and used various props. For example, she used a necktie and two black fedora hats for the characters of the father and the brother. These had been placed on two chairs at the side of the stage. A white sheet was stretched on the wall behind her. The shifts among the
characters were quick and frequent, and to make it easier for the reader to understand, they will not be described in their order. Despite the many transitions, the actress succeeded in presenting the picture of the life of a girl maturing into womanhood in ultra-Orthodox society.

Scene One: The girl was wearing a black jumper with a white shirt under it; her hair was carefully combed (gathered to the back with a part in the middle), and she sang the song with words from Psalms 121:1, “I raise my eyes to the mountains—whence my help will come,” while playing hopscotch. Then she put on a hat and spoke in a man’s voice, “What’s the matter? Did you fall down? By the time you get married, it will pass!” She became a girl again and played with her necktie and then started to jump with an imaginary rope. Each jump was accompanied by a description of her family’s impressive genealogy: “Four and two, and Dad and Grandpa, the Vilna Gaon and the Hafetz Hayim.” She threw down the necktie and with every jump she mentioned one of the important rabbis among her ancestors, with growing anger.

Scene Two: The brother commented to her in an unpleasant way while looking at himself in the mirror: “The king’s daughter’s honor is inside the house. You’re singing off key.” Every time he finished his lines, he straightened his hat, cast an arrogant glance to the audience, and said: “Okay, I’m going.”

Scene Three: The actress was wearing one of the fedoras and dancing with joy as if taking part in Simhat Torah celebrations, singing, “Moses is truth, and his Torah is truth” with

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133 The Vilna Gaon (Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1797) a towering intellectual figure in halakha; Israel Meir Kagan (1838-1933) was an influential rabbi and the author of several important religious works, and he is known by the title of the one dealing with avoiding slander, “Hafetz Hayim” (He Who Desires Life).

134 This is the last day of the holiday of Sukkot (Tabernacles), celebrating the completion of the past year’s cycle of Torah readings and the beginning of a new one. The Torah scrolls are removed from the Holy Ark, and the congregation dances with them.
a conspicuous Eastern European accent. The little girl said that she was sitting on her father’s shoulders and had a bird’s eye view of all the Simhāt Torah dancing. She put the hat back on the chair and showed that her father left after being invited to carry one of the Torah scrolls in the dancing. She was sad and felt that her father was neglecting her. She shouted and cried, saying she wanted to go home. She put on the other hat and with a low and serious, man’s voice, like that of the rabbi, she quoted, “The celestial court and the earthly court are the same thing!”

Scene Four: The girl’s dream. The actress stood close to the wall on which the white sheet was spread. The melody of a birthday song was heard. She thanked her mother for working so hard for her fourteenth birthday party. After that a nightmare began, which she was supposedly dreaming. During the dream she mumbled: “atonement,” “heavenly tribunal,” “guilty.” She moved from side to side, using the tie in her hand to choke herself. When she emerged from the dream, she played the part of the father: “I just want what’s for your own good.”

Scene Five: The actress played a drunk yeshiva student and a girl who shouted, “Don’t touch me, you drunk! You aren’t allowed!” Then she portrayed the father, who scolded her for provoking the boys who came to the house: “Why do you look them straight in the eye?” And for her clothes: “It’s too revealing.” She spoke the words of her brother, who made fun of her because she didn’t want to wear stockings with holes in them, and then the girl crumpled her brother’s hat, shouting at him, “You don’t know me!” Meanwhile, she threw the crumpled hat onto the chair.

Scene Six: Arranged Marriages: The actress imitated the boys she met: a boy sat with his back bent and his legs spread out and tested her: “So how do you explain, ‘and he will rule you’?”135; a boy whose legs were together and trembling said, “You’re a bright

135 Genesis 3:16, the verse on the punishment of Eve in the expulsion from the Garden of Eden.
girl—I’m not attracted to you!”; a boy who sat frozen said, “I live next to the cemetery.”

Conclusion: The actress approached the chairs where the hats lay and turned the hats over. She recounted an old dream she once had: “I marry myself and give birth to my own child, and people call me a whore.” She ran and fell down several times until the other girls gathered around her, supported her, and supported each other, and they exited, singing the song sung at the beginning.

**Reception and the Response of the Actresses**

When the performance was over, the actresses stood, hugging one another for a few minutes, and then they walked to center stage and bowed twice. After the applause died down, there was silence in the hall. Women were crying in some corners of the room, and some of the actresses’ relatives gathered around and hugged them. There was an atmosphere of shock, excitement, and tension. It was clear that all the women in the hall had undergone a deep experience. When the women in the audience slowly began to stand up, circulate, and talk, Manovitz went from one to another to examine their responses. At the table where women from the Emunahh movement were sitting with “Bilha Shemesh,” the wife of an important rabbi in national religious society and a veteran teacher in the institution, a discussion of the performance commenced. When one of the actresses addressed them and asked to hear their reaction, they responded with aggression and hostility.

The day after the performance it was decided to postpone the meeting between the students, the director, and the college administration until after the Passover vacation. The students did not understand the significance of this delay. Behind the scenes, the administration was busy making efforts to calm things down during the few days that remained before the Passover vacation by convening small informal discussion groups with the students.
to talk about the production and its meaning for the college, for the students, and for the emerging women's theater. At the same time they dealt with the dissatisfaction of the representatives of the establishment that provided financial support for the institution and of the rabbinical staff, who learned only then about the subversive content of the performance.

We felt that we had distanced the texts from ourselves, and at the same time we had expressed ourselves fully on stage and created intimacy. But the criticism leveled against us confused us professionally: there was a catharsis—it was clear we had touched the audience and our truth satisfied artistic criteria. But instead of praise, we were told that it wasn’t Jewish theater. (“Margalit,” class assignment, 1988).

That evening didn’t block or discourage us. It was a special experience because of the collaboration between us in the staging and our connection with the scenes. I wasn’t disappointed by the audience but by the establishment. If this is really an artistic institution, it shouldn’t be surprised. (“Arza,” class assignment, 1998).

The Crisis—Confrontations Among the Members of the Team

One of the most important meetings in the history of the Theater Department of the college took place about two months after the production, after the Shavuot vacation. At that meeting a sharp confrontation took place between “Ben-Nun,” the director, whom the institution regards as a secular woman, and representatives of the team of the Jewish Studies teachers: “Bilha Shemesh, “Rabbi Levine,” and Rabbi Fogel. Manovitz, “Boker,”
and two Orthodox teachers from the Theater Department also took part in the meeting: Sara Morali and I. The tension between the Jewish Studies teachers and the professional theater teachers showed that each of the participants in the meeting had a different outlook on the emerging theater. The meeting was part of the process of establishing an Orthodox women’s theater, a unique path-breaking project: “We’re pioneers. This is an entirely different course of action, like ‘draining swamps.’ It doesn’t matter what people say in downtown Tel Aviv or in ultra-Orthodox Meah Shearim. We’re trying to create something new that belongs to God and to the improvement of the whole world... The question is whether we have the strength to start something new, to create a course of action?” (Rabbi Fogel, Teacher’s Meeting, 1998).

Manovitz expressed reservations about the production, and the director of the college, “Hagai Boker,” tried to mediate between the secular theater directors and the Jewish Studies staff, who considered the performance as “heresy, pure and simple!” in the words of “Bilha Shemesh.” He proposed that the Jewish Studies staff should be more involved in the Theater Department so it could influence the content of future productions and avoid repetition of this situation.

The sharpest confrontation broke out between “Ben-Nun” and “Shemesh.” “Shemesh” insisted on absolute separation between the Orthodox and the secular faculty—“us and them.” She called the theater “pollution,” an “alternative religion,” “slightly heretical, slightly secular, slightly anti-national and pro-Palestinian.” She tried to undermine the department’s right to exist:

We have a world of Jewish values that is not subject to compromise... And it can’t contradict... If art was to say: I won’t get involved in the content, I just want to teach you how—then we could live in peace and use your help in publicizing the marvelous things that we have within us. But you,
in the Theater Department, pretend to touch on an essence, a certain essence that’s in the world of theater, a certain essence that you apparently have, an idea. I, in my innocence, think of theater as an instrument, but gradually I see that “theatrical” actually means rupture, the insertion of question marks, heresy, absurd. Nothing glowing, artistic, motherly! (“Shemesh,” Faculty Meeting, 1998).

In response “Ben-Nun” tried to repel the rabanit’s arrogant attack, but “Shemesh” kept muttering paternalistic expressions like, “excellent,” “fine,” “I knew.” “Ben-Nun” told about her Orthodox past and her difficulties as a woman, as an artist, and as an educator of Orthodox women who wanted to develop their artistic capacities. “Ben-Nun” wanted to do the opposite of what “Shemesh” had done: to share her biography with those present and reveal her emotions regarding the students’ work in order to narrow the gap between their positions. In this way she hoped to create trust in the sincerity of her intentions and abolish the gap between the secular and Orthodox teachers, and also to reject the role that “Shemesh” had assigned her in the “culture war” she had become embroiled in against her will:

Since the evening of the performance I have been totally upset. I am in the midst of a culture war that I didn’t want to take part in. I came to this place with naivety that I’m proud of, and I don’t want to part with it... You say “you” and “us.” Just who is “you”? I don’t represent any theater... I work with people in education and they use the theater as a tool, and it could be that it’s dangerous to look beyond the inner boundaries, but that’s my love, my art. You can either say, “No thanks! Not here!” or you can trust me and set out on an adventure and accept that being Jewish and
believing in Judaism include these things. We aren’t different in our inner world, and believe me, the fact that I’m not Orthodox like you doesn’t make my life immoral. You have to trust me, that I’m responsible in my work, and in my opinion I’m not diminishing the girls’ faith. Actually I’m strengthening it... You have to depend on me to let me work here. (“Ben-Nun,” Faculty Meeting, 1998).

However, “Ben-Nun’s” declaration, “I am a religious woman who feels that she has a Jewish soul,” not only blurred the clear boundaries that “Shemesh” had set between them, but it increased the discomfort of the Jewish Studies faculty. “Shemesh” riposted, “I really can’t sleep at night! How can I trust you? I don’t know your inner world well enough, and you’re dealing with inner worlds—you’re dealing with inner worlds that are holy!” Sara Morali, an Orthodox woman of the theater, tried to convince everyone that there was a place for expressing negative emotions and pain and to present conflicts. And at the same time, a way has to be found of expressing them in Jewish sources: “There’s a possibility of using the power of the conflict, the power of Judaism that doesn’t avoid pain,” but her voice did not serve as a mediating force between the camps. Rather, it was swallowed up in the stormy discussion. The Jewish Studies teachers expressed fear about the future of theatrical activity in the college in particular and in Orthodox society in general, and Manovitz joined them:

We’re being swept into the Western world, and we don’t understand the fine line that separates us... The question is whether we have to place it on stage and what we responsibility we have... I’m asking: is this the material we can put on stage as it is, or can I guide that pain to a place where it has “something more”? And that “something more,” despite all the
things that ring false and plastering over and all those negative things—there’s still at the end of the tunnel... (Manovitz, Faculty Meeting, 1998).

During the discussion the head of the college emphasized repeatedly that the college was an important meeting place between different worlds. In response to “Shemesh,” who wanted to close the theater department, he declared that he would do whatever he could “to stride forward and not to shut doors,” and he expressed satisfaction with the cooperative work of secular and Orthodox people in the department: “I think what we’re doing wonderful work here, very important work, that the Orthodox community is thirsty for.” In his strong desire to effect a compromise between the sides—but also with lack of understanding of theater work—he proposed a “separation of powers”: a division between the content, for which the Jewish Studies faculty would be responsible, and the form, of which the team of directors would be in charge. “Shemesh” was in favor of a “divide and rule” strategy and suggested a mechanism similar to dental treatment: the work of the directors would be like that of dental technicians, and the work of the Jewish Studies faculty would be like that of expert dentists. Morali tried to explain that this idea was impossible, because “theater can’t be separated from content. Every time you make a separation, different content comes in, unintentionally, or else you come out with something empty. There’s no separation between content and form in the theater!” She presented some ideas about the connection between Jewish content and the theater:

It’s possible to connect the suffering that appeared in the monologues to the suffering that appears in Hasidic stories. That could be a simple direction: they wouldn’t feel like they had invented the wheel or that if they touch upon suffering—then they’re heretics. These questions exist! (Morali, Faculty Meeting, 1998).
However, this time as well her ideas were swallowed upon in the general storm of emotions.

Conclusion

The uproar caused by the play *Bi’ur hametz* did not die down for a long time, and its echoes were heard even after the students completed their studies at the college. They were quite audible in the corridors, in the classrooms, and also in the staff room: the faculty of the Theater Department held stormy discussions with representatives of the administration and the Jewish Studies faculty regarding basic issues connected with the essence of Orthodox women’s theater. In the wake of the performance of the monologues, everyone involved, within the college and outside of it, had to make a spiritual accounting, all of them together and each on its own, and to think about the direction that the Theater Department ought to take.

The audience that attended the performance was carefully chosen and appeared to be homogeneous in character, but various “exegetical communities” arose within it, and they had different experiences and different understandings of the aesthetic and cultural codes of the monologues. That is to say, the political function of the text changed according to the goals and analytical strategies of the spectators. The responses of the women who saw the play ranged from enthusiastic, positive responses, with praise for the sincerity of the actresses and for the high artistic level, to negative responses accompanied by the demand to fire the secular teachers and even to close down the theater department. Thus the performance revealed a variety of opinions within the national religious community and demonstrated that it was impossible to defend it from subversive voices, which had found a place in the very heart of the establishment.

After three years of the existence of the department,
the difficulty of creating an Orthodox women’s theater was fully apparent. Instead of fulfilling the vision of the college administration, to create a theater for the glory of God, general reform, and unity of hearts, it turned out that what kept people apart was stronger than what brought them together, and betrayal was stronger than trust. After that production, an urgent need arose to keep closer track on future productions, in order to assure the continued existence of the department within an educational institution guided by the principles of the national religious movement. Nevertheless, this production was an important landmark in the official appropriation of a new cultural pattern within national religious society, under the auspices of the establishment. It made it possible for contrarian voices to be heard, and it aroused a penetrating discussion about the meaning of the innovative and daring step that the establishment had decided to support.

Hashaul [The Borrowed One]—“A Classical Example of Mixture of Ideology and Desires?”

Background

In 1999 the college tried to create an original play again with the help of the forces available to the department, one that would be both professional and “arouse faith.” It appeared very likely that the initiative of the students of the second graduating class to produce an original play would succeed. “Eyal Yonatan,” the creative writing teacher was asked to write a play, although he had no previous experience as a playwright. The administration ignored this fact, because they believed his talents as a poet would serve him well in writing a play appropriate to the spirit of the institution, a play in which the students and some of the secular and Orthodox teachers in the department would participate to
a certain degree. After receiving the blessing of the college and financial support, the co-workers—the Orthodox playwright, the secular director, and the head of the department, Manovitz—developed good and productive relations with each other. Nevertheless, the play was never performed.

The story of this aborted production reflects the relations among various sections of Israeli society and the different attitudes of the segments of national religious society toward work in the theater and art in general. The circumstances that led to the failure of the production are a fascinating touchstone for examining the many difficulties confronting the participants in these experiments. Though they shared a common goal, the establishment of a theater “for the glory of God,” that term has several definitions, and there are various approaches to the degree of artistic freedom that should be granted to artists and the means for creating a theater of “belief.” According to one approach, art is a tool meant to enrich and vary religious life. Thus, it is necessary to guide art so that it will be useful in the service of the Creator. This approach guided Manovitz for many years, long before the Theater Department was established in Emunah College: “The theater must be one of piety. Otherwise there is no justification for its existence. My goal is to establish a theater where the artist declares explicitly that the stage is a religious tool and not art for its own sake.” (Manovitz, Protocol of the Staff Meeting for the Establishment of a Jewish theater, 1993).

In contrast to this approach, some people maintain, “there is no place at all for a distinction between forbidden and permissible in the field of literature and art. According to this approach, a person can be an Orthodox Jew and at the same time appreciate a work of art according to aesthetic criteria, and no boundaries must be set to tolerance toward literary art, sculpture, painting, or theater.” 136 The latter approach does not restrict the viewer of art,
nor does it restrict the creative artist:

Theater is impossible without giving absolute freedom to the playwright. There is not one kind of theater or another, there are people who live in a certain reality, and they want to give an expression to their Judaism. If the actors are God-fearing and come from a family background of modesty then a different play will come from them than from Fleischer,137 and there is no need of rabbis or of censorship. (Rabbi Dov Berkowitz, Protocol of the Meeting of the Staff for the Establishment of a Jewish Theater, 1993)

A Play About Complex and Fragmented Identities

The play that “Yonatan” wrote was based on a story of the Ba’al Shem Tov and presented two parallel stories of barren women. In the first one, Rachel, the daughter of Hannah, is barren and decides to ask a great rabbi for help. She gives birth to a son who dies two years later. The second story is about a childless royal family who, upon the advice of the king’s English speaking counselor, pressures the Jews so that they will pray to God for him, in the belief that God will answer the prayers of His people, the Jews, and a son will be born to them. Indeed, this is what happens. The prince is constantly occupied with study, and his venerated teacher turns out to be a Jew. Because of his admiration for his teacher, the prince asks to study Judaism, too, and after a while he decides to leave his nation and his birthplace in order to convert to Judaism and study in a yeshiva. But before he manages to carry out this plan, he dies a martyr’s death as a soldier. Despite his many merits, the gates of the Garden of Eden remain locked before him. At a session of the heavenly court, the fact is mentioned that in halakha,” and in that of Aharon Harel Fish, “Judaism and the Idea of Art,” in “Art and Judaism: a Collection of Articles,” edited by David Cassuto and published in Hebrew by Bar-Ilan University in 1989.

137 A play by Yigael Even Or about ultra-Orthodox society, which many national religious spectators regarded as anti-Semitic.
for two years he drank the milk of a non-Jewish woman. Here the story of the prince joins that of the baby given to Rachel the daughter of Hannah for two years. That baby is the “reparation” of the righteous prince, who wishes to enter the Garden of Eden. The self-sacrifice and martyr’s death of the baby, the prince, and the combat soldier intermingle.\textsuperscript{138}

“Yonatan” emphasizes that he considered the theater as a space for the presentation of fragmented, complex, and doubled identities of religious people, a place to present experiences that challenge faith along with experiences that encourage it. In his opinion, the complex characters that he created reflected the complexity of life, the questions and doubts of the religious person. The identity of the prince, one of the main characters of the play, is composed of the figures of the prince, the gentile, the Jew, the infant, the soldier, and the yeshiva student. Hannah, the barren woman, is also split into three women. Each of them belongs to a different segment of society, and each has her own characteristics of dress and behavior:

Woman #1: very observant, cries a lot. Woman #2: in her forties, at least, with short hair. She smokes, speaks laconically and a little cynically. Woman #3: young, with a pretty, small head-covering in the national religious style. (From the stage directions)

The fragmentation exists not only in the characters but also in the time and place of the action: the king’s palace belongs to the undefined, distant past; the barren woman’s house belongs to the present. Other places in which action takes place are the rabbi’s office and the heavenly tribunal, which the three women observe from the side.

The play is something very modern from the theatrical point of view, very abstract and

\textsuperscript{138} This motive appears in folktales based on the Kabbala that deal with reincarnation. According to “Yonatan,” this motive is troublesome and confusing, but it also arouses “esprit de corps,” and it emphasizes the genetic uniqueness planted in the heart of every Jew.
surrealistic, with very deep elements of faith, which are also decidedly extreme: they take the person apart... and they place everything on individual providence: serious things that could stimulate any intellectual—things that arouse opposition and creativity. I still believe in them... I believe that it has material that can inspire people with thoughts of repentance. Just as I believe that it is capable of upsetting a religious person and making them deeper and more serious. (“Yonatan,” Interview, 1999)

Heading Toward Failure: “Psychology and Philosophy Got Mixed Into This Crisis” (“Eyal Yonatan,” 1999)

From the very first it was felt that the play was problematic. “Yonatan” was aware of that and did everything he could to respond to the criticism of the students and the director, as well as to Manovitz’ requests for scenes dealing with “faith.” The main criticism was that there was too little dramatic action in the play, and the stage directions were too detailed. In addition, the secular director was unfamiliar with the Hasidic and kabbalistic traditions that were the basis of the play, and she also found it hard to establish positive working relations with the students, especially after the roles were assigned. Another complication resulted from the desire of the college administration to create a play that would restore the confidence of the establishment that an Orthodox women’s theater department was justified. Hence it tried to dictate the messages that would appear in the play. At a certain point “Yonatan” felt that these directives were restricting his artistic freedom.

In his opinion, the play failed because of “a classic mixture of

139 The director of this production was one of the secular teachers in the department.
ideology and negative emotions.” The play was anchored in Hasidic thought and national religious life. These elements were unfamiliar to the director, and the play’s ideological components were foreign to her. The negative emotions were those of “Lupolsky,” one of the outstanding directors in the department, who did not hesitate to speak out against the play in public, and in so doing she caused tension among the students. The arena of production became an arena of struggle between the students and the playwright, between the charismatic “Lupolsky” and “Yonatan,” together with the members of the administration who were in favor of the play, and between those among the administration and the students who refused to continue working on the production and demanded a change in direction, despite the financial and psychological investment of all those who had been involved in the production until then. Finally the administration decided to accede to the students’ demands and bury the play, after which a different production, directed by “Lupolsky,” was rapidly presented.

**The Substitute Production**

The play that was substituted, “One, Two, Three... Who’s Standing behind Me?” was based on scenes that were adapted from the books of Yehuda Atlas and Uri Orbach. Unlike *Bi’ur hametz*, this time the administration made sure to supervise “Lupolsky’s” work, because “she has another conception, and she comes from a different world”—the former Soviet Union. The administration wanted to be certain that the play transmitted a clear message of reconciliation and acceptance, though there were scenes that made it understood that parent-child relations are not always perfect and are sometimes tense and problematic. To emphasize the positive message, Manovitz created a motherly figure who appeared several times during the play—picking up things that had been thrown onto the floor, sweeping and dusting with a smile on her lips. That
character’s tranquility was especially emphasized at the end of the play, after the children knocked down the “walls” on the stage that separated the interior and exterior of the house. The motherly figure walked among the pieces and picked them up quietly, with a forgiving gaze. An actress in her last months of pregnancy was chosen for that role. At the end of the play, Manovitz summed up the event before the women in the audience, saying that this character represented the ideal figure of the mother in national religious society, and she was also a symbol of the Theater Department: “After the destruction and the rebellion, we have the symbol of good motherhood, and this is the symbol of the Theater Department. The world is not just evil—there is a mother who is found everywhere. That’s the hope.” Her remarks were intended to soften messages that might have been interpreted in the opposite way: that family relationships are full of tension and difficulty, a message that emerged indirectly from the scenes.

The Reception

The production of the second graduating class was presented twice on a single day in the auditorium of the Nurit Katzir Center in Jerusalem, for women who were invited. The spectators whom we interviewed stated that the acting was professional, and the content was relevant, but the evening was not on a professional level, mainly because the generally accepted norms of behavior in a professional theater had been violated. Women entered and left the hall during the play, because the organizers had neglected to lock the doors. The spectators expressed disappointment because the evening was “closed for women only,” although the play did

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140 A discussion was held immediately after the performance. Randomly chosen women from the audience took part in it, speaking spontaneously about the play. The discussion was recorded and transcribed to provide material for the researcher. This system was used by Sauter for examining the reception of a play.
not deal at all with subjects particularly affecting women, and because a children’s play had been chosen. One of the spectators said, “I expected that some intimacy would be created between the audience and the actors, but there was nothing to bind them together. The message didn’t justify putting on the play.” Some spectators leveled criticism at the words spoken by Manovitz at the end of the play:

Bringing in that messianic message again. I don’t know whether that was appropriate. It was very strange for me when it went from Yehuda Atlas and Uri Orbach to Ashkenazim and Sephardim. They want to do something global, to open it up for the general public. It seems to me that people on the outside who saw it would immediately get antsy.

(One of the spectators, in the Theater Discussion)

The impression that emerged from the Theater Discussion I held was that there is an Orthodox audience used to going to the theater, and that audience expects the college to present productions with serious, high-quality content and to organize a dignified theatrical event. In that year, Emunah College, which had set itself the goal of nurturing a generation of professional theater women and also to attract an Orthodox audience to an Orthodox theater, succeeded only in the second (and secondary) task, and that success was rather limited.

“Here They’ll Make the Rebellion” (“Eyal Yonatan”)

The crises that accompanied the first productions of the college—Ruth, Bi’ur hamets, and Hashaul—challenged the basic assumptions of the college administration, namely that Jewish material, adapted to the theater by Orthodox artists and students, in an Orthodox institution, would naturally give rise to an “engaged” Jewish theater. Manovitz maintained that the
reason for the failures was that secular women had directed the productions. “Yonatan” was of the opinion that the reason lay in the encounter between an Orthodox artist with a liberal view on art, who showed the students that the theater was a space suitable for presenting questions of religious faith and for examining the fragmented identity of a national religious person at this time. “Yonatan” believed that the establishment of a national religious theater would be a long and complex process, and it was possible that immature works would also be produced, expressing revolt, anger, and frustration. In his opinion, works of that kind should be regarded as an integral part of the process, until “the thing that Rivka Manovitz wants,” and that he, too, desired, could be attained: authentic Orthodox creation.

Absolute freedom will bring a very great result.  
To put it simply [he laughed], I believe in absolute freedom, because I believe that when you give a person absolute freedom, he will make his way to what we dream of attaining when we’re old.  
Nothing can be built artificially from shortcuts if a person wants to experience everything he can.  
Just the full completion of human processes will ultimately bring about what Rivka Manovitz is dreaming of. (“Yonatan,” Interview, 1999)

“Yonatan” hoped that Emunah College would be the arena for a primary theater, “seeking its way.” Within the Orthodox framework of the college, led by the proper people, it would be possible in his opinion to stand before these works and examine their meaning. However, he expressed doubt whether the college is capable of accepting this approach:

The question is whether the institution is prepared to digest the products of Orthodox education and offer them an arena or whether it wants to continue imposing itself the way their high school imposes
itself. (“Yonatan,” Interview, 1999).

At a meeting after the collapse of the third year production, an event was mentioned that had taken place in the Ma’aleh School of Television, Film, and the Arts as a “warning signal—because we have the same problems.” The administration decided to change the direction of the Theater Department because for the moment they felt that the path toward the creation of an Orthodox Jewish theater was unclear, and they did not yet have the “internal” human resources to guide the process:

The goal of the program is to prepare a creative Orthodox teacher, and the goal of creating an Orthodox theater must be postponed for the moment, until our path is clearer. At the same time, we will continue to search for a path, but on a smaller scale, and only by means of Orthodox theater teachers. All the exercises and work will be done around religious materials and with the aim of guiding and leading the students with a consciousness of the mission of creating a unique theater of sanctity. (Decisions of the Curriculum Committee, 1999)

Thus today in the Theater Department emphasis is placed on teaching drama and on academic studies. Although the administration tried to produce high quality productions, the declared position of the college is the training of teachers in the field of theater.

**Conclusion: “The Dream Did Not Expire, It Was Merely Postponed”**

The failure of the production of Hashaul was the result of different ideologies operating next to one another in national

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141 See above, n. 97 on p. 74, on the crisis in the Ma’aleh School of Television, Film, and the Arts.
religious society. It also reflected the influence of the secular Other on Orthodox theatrical art. The statements by Manovitz and “Yonatan” represent opposing views of the theater as a place “to arouse thought about why we live here, and what it means to be a Jew... to reopen once again all the questions that we haven’t really asked for a long time” (“Yonatan,” Interview, 1999). From his words and from an examination of the complex and fragmented characters he created in his play, one may infer that he is not deterred by pluralistic and carnival elements in theater, which make it possible to see the world “turned upside down,” and to challenge authority and hierarchy by presenting plays. According to “Yonatan,” the Orthodox theater will be created in stages: first in bringing out the pain, frustration, and denials of the actresses by creating “muck,” and in the end by presenting a deep and interesting Orthodox play out of “choice” and spiritual conviction.

In contrast to this open and pluralistic approach, the college administration, which until then had opened the gates to artists with different ideologies, felt that the openness it had experienced during two years of productions was disappointing and did not achieve the primary goals that had been set. On the contrary, the Theater Department had been swept into a whirlpool of theatrical activity of the very kind that it had criticized and sought to replace. The administration admitted that it had not prepared well enough for the large task of establishing an acting school within an Orthodox women’s college, and it was afraid that the situation that had emerged was actually a threat to the students’ Orthodoxy.

We have to lower their expectations. To be satisfied with less professionalism and to emphasize the value of teaching religious drama... The dream did not expire, it was merely postponed. Until we have Orthodox male and female teachers on a

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142 Bakhtin dealt with the challenging aspects of the carnival in relation to the establishment and civil authorities.
professional level, and until we clarify for ourselves how one does Orthodox theater. (Manovitz, Meeting of Curriculum Committee, 1999)

The solution found by the administration to fill the vacuum that was created was to direct women who have the talent and potential to become actresses to a profession more acceptable in Orthodox society: teaching. Placing the emphasis on teaching was a turning point in the Theater Department and hinted that the implicit direction of training Orthodox women to work in theater professions was perhaps premature.

**Dema’ot hashoshan [The Tears of the Lily]**

**Introduction**

The fourth and last play with which I deal, *Dema’ot hashoshan*, was presented three times by the third graduating class in the Gerard Bachar auditorium in Jerusalem to an audience composed of the actresses’ female friends and relatives together with women connected to the college. It was also presented once in Binyanei Hauma during a conference held by the Binyan Shalem Institute. The message of the play was the spiritual devotion of

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Binyan Shalem [Complete Building] is a Zionist ultra-Orthodox organization that offers lessons in Judaism during the year, and once a year during the summer it holds three concentrated days of lessons and workshops in Binyanei Hauma in Jerusalem, and these are attended by thousands of women from all over the country. It also holds workshops on family, education and children, and marital relations throughout the year. Someone from the organization had seen the play and invited the students to perform at the summer session of Binyanei Hauma on a giant stage that was not at all appropriate to the character of the play. The directors did not intervene or change the positioning of the actresses, their makeup, their costumes, or the scenery. According to Manovitz, that was why the play was a failure. Three thousand women came to the play, but most of them began to leave the hall in the middle. Manovitz called that a “terrible failure” and attributed it solely to the technical problems of the production on the gigantic stage of Binyanei Hauma.
Jewish women. This was decided in advance with the director and playwright by Manovitz, who hoped that the play would be based on material written by the students, perhaps also in cooperation with the Orthodox faculty members of the department. However, “Tamar Sa’ar,” a born-again theater director, chose to write an original own play in collaboration with her friend, “Irena Hazani,” also born-again, who had taught in the college the year before. Thus “Hazani” joined the production team.

The administration praised this production mainly because of the relaxed atmosphere during the rehearsals and the good relations between the directors, the students, and the administration. The process of creating the play was positive and experiential for everyone I interviewed as well as for the college administration, and this seemed even more important than the play itself. Nevertheless, the conclusion that emerges from this test case was that the gap between the ideology of the newly religious women and that of “Orthodox from birth” does not permit collaboration.

The Three Circles of the Plot: “Happy Is the Nation That Is So”

The play was composed in three circles: that of the narrator, Grandma Rokhele; the circle of the school, “Light to the Gentiles,” which was about to be closed; and the circle of a play, based on a folktale, that the faculty of the school decided to produce.

When the play begins, the Third Temple already exists. We see Grandma Rokhele with her grandchildren, dressed in white clothes, and the boys wear large cotton skullcaps (like those of the Bratslav Hasidim). They ask her to tell them about life before the Third Temple existed and about her part in its rebuilding.

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144 This expression refers to people who were brought up in Orthodox homes, received Orthodox educations, and continue to belong to the normative Orthodox community.
Rokhele is the narrator, and as the plot develops, we learn that she is the motivating force, the intermediary between present and past, between teachers in the school and the women in her family, though she is only present in two scenes, at the beginning and conclusion of the play, for which they provide the framework.

The second circle is the Orthodox school called, “Light to the Gentiles.” Rokhele’s father founded it, and after his death her mother, Tsipora, became the principal. Most of the teachers are Tsipora’s Orthodox daughters. Only one of the teachers is secular, and during the play she becomes observant. The name of the school reflects the superior attitude of the religious family toward its students. It brings “light” to secular girls, whom it regards almost as gentiles. According to Goodman, who studied the phenomenon of the born-again, the tendency to regard secular Israelis as a substitute for the Eastern European gentile in forming their religious identity is very common among the born-again.145

The school is in danger of closing because of financial difficulties. The mother, Tsipora, decides to produce a play in order to raise money to cover the deficit, and she asks the entire staff of the school to pitch in: the teachers who are her daughters and the secular teacher, the school psychologist, and even the cleaner, Aunt Devora, a limited, depressed woman whose husband left her a short time after they were married. The ultra-Orthodox grandmother, who does not believe in the school’s ideology of bringing secular and Orthodox people together, secretly plans to sell the neglected building, but she, too, is enlisted to act in the play.

The third circle is the play that the teachers present, in which familiar motifs appear, taken from children’s fairy tales: a dying kingdom, a foolish ruler, stupid counselors, a beloved flower (a lily), which is fading, the ruler’s spoiled only daughter, who becomes a heroine against her will, and a frightening monster that guards the “hidden light” in a distant forest, which will revive the dying wife.

In a study of the rhetoric of adopting Orthodoxy in Israel, Eli Yasif noted that those who seek to bring people to adopt Orthodoxy make use of elements from the general culture to convey Jewish messages, so that they will reverberate in the deep, familiar level of the cultural past common to all: “The emotional response aroused in the listener is a kind of déjà vu. The story is new, but it seems to us that we have encountered it before.”

So, too, in this play, familiar elements from fairy tales were included.

In the seam between the second circle of the school and the third circle of the plot—the fairy tale—the teachers’ difficulties with theatrical work became evident: the actor’s difficulty in identifying with the character, the influence of the theater on the actors, and the complex relations between stage reality on the stage and the reality of actual daily life. This is reminiscent of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* As in Pirandello’s play, the meta-text is a discussion of the process of creating in the theater: by means of a play-within-a-play, a discussion is held about the creative process in the theater and about the connection between character, playwright, and director, and between reality and illusion. As in Pirandello, the characters in the fairy tale have no first names. They are set types, familiar from fairy tales, without individuality; they live in timeless time and deal with their experiences as if they were fictional characters. In *Dim’at hashoshan,* the ruler’s daughter, played by the secular teacher, Rinat, is sewing the dress she will wear when she meets the monster. Suddenly she steps out of character and expresses her frustration as an actress:

> Enough! I just don’t have it! I can’t find that place

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147 This play was written in 1921, telling about a group of actors who are rehearsing a play by the playwright Luigi Pirandello. Suddenly six people walk onto the stage and ask the stage manager to find them an author who will finish their story. The director tries to get rid of them, but they insist on telling their story until the tragic end. The director does not know whether this is truth or fiction, and he has the stage manager lower the curtain so he can continue working with his troupe of actors.
of spiritual devotion within myself, completely nullifying myself so I can reach the truth. The truth is hidden from me. It’s too much for me!

(From Dim'at hashoshan)

This stepping out of character, from the role of the ruler’s daughter to that of the secular teacher, enables the audience to examine the meta-text that is inherent in the contact between the plots; it presents both the characters and joins them together. The audience understands that the message the playwrights want to transmit indirectly is that the secular woman does indeed find it difficult to attain the “light,” but in the end only she has the spiritual strength to succeed, and so she is the one who saves the entire kingdom.148

The Characterization

Like “Yonatan” in Hashaul, here, too, the playwrights created characters of women from various streams: ultra-Orthodox, national religious, modern Orthodox on the verge of abandoning Orthodoxy, and also secular women. The characterization was effected solely by means of outward signs: dress, style of speech, accessories. The “modern Orthodox” girl used a mobile phone, spoke in Italian, and knew how to drive. Hannah, the ultra-Orthodox girl, wore a wig and looked frumpy. Her characteristic sentence was, “What will people say?” “The ultra-Orthodox grandmother was characterized by typical ultra-Orthodox costume and a grumpy way of talking. She was an unpleasant character, constantly plotting. The negative depiction of the ultra-Orthodox figures disturbed the students. All of them stated that they felt

148 “Hazani” denied the meaning I attributed to the two characters and claimed that the reason for connecting the secular teacher and the ruler’s daughter had to do with casting and the ability of that particular actress to play those particular roles. However, as a researcher, I found it difficult to ignore the choices made by playwright or the meanings they implied.
that this characterization was exaggerated and strengthened the negative image of ultra-Orthodox society that existed in their community in any event:

   The ultra-Orthodox character was frightening in every sense of the word... She had to be sloppily dressed, mixed up, ridiculous, hysterical, and, mainly, annoying. There was the feeling that the matter was too exaggerated and even became anti-Semitic. (“Orna,” Class Assignment, 2000)

Perhaps the negative portrayal of the ultra-Orthodox figures reflected the playwright’s criticism of ultra-Orthodox society, although the newly religious women were affiliated with it. In an institution identified with the national religious stream, the newly religious women apparently felt comfortable enough to reveal their reservations about ultra-Orthodox hegemony. According to Goodman, newly religious people have created a new religious identity in Israel: they do not entirely identify with ultra-Orthodox society and add new elements to it; thus they challenge it by combining the influences of the dominant ultra-Orthodox world that they want to join and the secular world they are seeking to leave behind.149 “Hazani” points out, “Outwardly we have connections and habits from the secular world, together with the secular body that once existed” (“Hazani”, Interview, 2000). Thus there is a new model of religiosity, which expresses criticism of ultra-Orthodoxy, of the influence of the secular world, and of the traditional world from within.150

Sarai, the second daughter, is a “pretty young woman with a fashionable head-covering, dressed well and giving an impression of frivolity.” Rockhele, the third daughter, is the young reincarnation of Grandma Rokhele, whom we met in the beginning of the play. She represents the ideal national-religious figure. She writes the

150 Ibid., p. 15.
play and listens to the characters with empathy, and she is the one whom the characters turn to when they want to make changes in the text or when they encounter difficulties in acting. One of the most interesting passages in the play concerns the protest of the ultra-Orthodox figure, Hannah, against Rokhele, because she let Rina, the secular teacher, whom she calls the “dirty laundry,” act in the role of the governor’s daughter, who saves the kingdom.

Hannah: Excuse me, Rina. This isn’t anything personal, but I don’t agree that in a representative play with such an important message, a teacher...

Leah: Secular. Say the word “Secular.”

Hannah: Yes, secular. Sorry, Rina. It isn’t personal, but it isn’t proper—what will people say?

Rina: I have to go to the bathroom for a moment.

Leah: What will they say? Once more with that “What will they say” of yours?

Hannah: Yes, right. You don’t hang dirty laundry out to dry. Aren’t I right, Sarai? Say something! Aren’t I right, Grandma? Am I right or not? ... It doesn’t look good, it isn’t respectable.

Leah, the youngest daughter, represents the young, rebellious modern Orthodox woman, who is testing to see how far she can rebel without breaking with the family or Orthodox society. The signs of rebellion are expressed in her tight, fashionable clothing, her use of modern technology, such as the cell phone, a car, fluent speech in a foreign language (Italian), and a romantic attachment with a man from abroad, Bruno, who arouses great curiosity. She has no patience with the Orthodox women’s community around her and criticizes it severely. For example, she reproaches her ultra-Orthodox sister: “That’s what’s important to you?—What other people will say?! Let them talk! Do you hear me? Let them talk! I can’t hear sentences like that anymore!” Her mother, Tsipora, is careful not to reject her: “You have to be gentle with
her, Mother. She’s going through a difficult time. She’s in doubt. We mustn’t reject her.” In the end Leah proves to be the agent of redemption, for she saves the “Light to the Gentiles School.” Her Italian boyfriend, a male figure hidden from view, solves the family’s problem and makes it possible to continue educating for co-existence between religious and secular students by buying the school building for an exorbitant price. Thus he serves as a *deus ex machina*\(^\text{151}\) and is also dual in character. In the beginning of the play Leah calls him Bruno, but when he signs the contract to buy the building, he uses his Jewish name—Baruch Singer. The girls in the family, who were worried about their sister’s relationship with a foreign man, sigh in relief upon hearing his Hebrew name. Other characters who appear in this circle of the play are the depressed Aunt Devora, the psychologist Rakefet, who tries, among other things, to treat Aunt Devora and deal with the problem of Rina, the secular teacher.

“A Journey to All Sorts of Messages”

_Dim’at hashoshan_ was laden with mystical and New Age messages: cultivation of morality, spiritual devotion, and building the Third Temple, as well as social messages such as the unity of the Jewish people. It also touched upon the nature of theatrical work and the influence it has on those who are involved in it. The national religious audience felt that the messages were appropriate for people who are trying to bring Jews to take on religious observance but not for them.\(^\text{152}\) In interviews before

\(^{151}\) This Latin phase means “a god out of a machine” and refers to a moment in a story or drama in which the author inserts a surprising element into the story in order to solve plot problems and end the play.

\(^{152}\) For example, the message of “the unity of the Jewish people,” which, according to Goodman, is “an effort to create a cultural melting pot. The preachers try to blur the boundaries between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews, because they are speaking in the name of the identity of an objective truth, in the name of halakha and of Judaism as opposed to folkloric and ethnic
the production most of the actresses expressed reservations about the messages of the “born-again women,” explaining that those messages dealt with subjects connected to Judaism: Utopian ideas like building the Third Temple and the steps that must be taken so that it will be built soon, steps that require a change in behavior and in way of life. Messages such as these characterized only the radical wing of national religious society, and at first the students could not identify with them, convinced that they were appropriate for the born-again but not for them—Orthodox from birth.153

Reference to the effect of the theater on the lives of the actresses took place on the seam between the second circle of the plot—the teachers of the school—and the third circle of the plot—the fairy tale. Most of the actresses did not understand the theme that established the secular teacher as the redeemer and savior—“No one thought about that!” (“Yonit,” Interview, 2000) and none of the spectators with whom I spoke during the Theater Discussions mentioned it.

The playwrights used the connection between the members of the faculty of the “Light to the Gentiles” school with the figures in the fairy tale to express indirect criticism. From the connection that the authors made between Tsipora, the mother and the principal of the mixed religious and secular school, and the character of the foolish governor, whose kingdom has sunk into benighted decline, a clear message emerges: the effort to bring secular and Orthodox students together is foolish and entails existential dangers to the nation. Another example is the figure of the ultra-Orthodox grandmother, who represents authoritarian ultra-Orthodox society, zealously preserving the “light,” a common expression for the Orthodox way of life—she receives the role of the monster. In contrast, the secular teacher, who changes her way of life and dress code, is chosen to portray the daughter of the trends.” (Goodman, 2002, p. 33)

153 This is my term for women who grew up in national religious homes and attended state religious schools.
governor, the most prominent positive character. Her role is to save the people by seizing the light from the monster. Thus we find that the woman who eschews a way of life regarded as empty by the ultra-Orthodox succeeds in overcoming their authority and brings salvation to the community. This idea is common among born-again people and is expressed, among other things, in the book by Motti Karpel, a resident of the Bat Ayin settlement in the Etzion Bloc. Karpel writes: “The meeting between talents, especially those found in secular society, having the values of developed openness and creativity, which gave rise to most of the nation’s creativity in recent generations, and the content of Jewish sources—the Torah, the tradition, and historical Jewish culture—this encounter is about to produce a true innovation. It will bring about the appearance of a new stage in Israeli culture, a stage that can only be properly called the ‘Culture of the Third Temple.’”\textsuperscript{154} From a personal search and concern for the nation, the secular teacher who portrays the governor’s daughter demonstrates what Karpel, in his book, calls “the process of synthesis of ideas until the consolidation of a ‘consciousness of belief.’” This consciousness, in his opinion, will replace Zionist consciousness. According to Karpel, the “consciousness of belief” uses two components of historical Judaism: that of traditional principle and that of innovation and creativity. The basic faith that dwells in most people becomes legitimate when it becomes rid of rigid traditionalism, on the one hand, represented by the figure of the grumpy grandmother and the ultra-Orthodox daughter, and also frees itself from the denial of the tradition developed by Zionism, which, in this play, is represented by the kingdom of sleepers, enveloped in darkness.\textsuperscript{155} The princess, who seizes the hidden light and thus rescues the kingdom represents this power. This faith is one of the central messages of Dim’at hashoshan. It serves as an alternative social

\textsuperscript{154} Karpel (2003), p. 72.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., pp. 64, 100.
model, which the playwrights placed on stage for a national religious audience, using national religious actresses.

The Students’ Response to the Text

Almost all the students reported that they were astonished the first time they saw the text. They stated that it was very difficult for them to connect with the characters and to the tendentious message of “returning to religion.” They all argued that the subjects with which the play dealt were not relevant to their society, and they expressed apprehension lest the national religious audience that would view the play would not accept it. Talk about the “hidden light” and “spiritual devotion” seemed strange to some of them, reminding them of Christian preaching. “Spiritual devotion has something of a Christian character. Also the princess who sets out to search for the hidden light and doesn’t go through an clear enough inner process” (“Orna,” Interview, 2000) “Sa’ar” ignored the students’ protests and refused to surrender. She made it clear to them that if they wanted to work in a professional way, they had to know that actors do not always connect with the characters they have to play. She proclaimed firmly that the text was not subject to discussion, and they would have to cope with it. Nevertheless, to calm them down, she declared that she would take full responsibility for the text and for the directing–demanding that they should be responsible solely for acting. The students understood that they were dealing with a director who was very self-confident and sure of the play’s messages, and they had no choice but to cooperate with her.

“They want the light–why shouldn’t we want it?”

The “Sa’ar’s” charismatic character provided a feeling of confidence, and together with “Hazani” she created a good
professional atmosphere during the rehearsals, which took place regularly. “Sa’ar” emphasized that they had to learn from secular theatrical professionals how to relate seriously to the theater and how to meet their professional obligations:

Once she threw that at us: we came late to a rehearsal, and she said to us: “What do you think, that secular people are late to rehearsals? Do you think they’re bohemians and have no responsibility? Is that what you think about them? (“Tovalah,” Interview, 2000)

“Sa’ar” did not conceal her excitement as the play proceeded. The long rehearsals caused the students to respect her and her world view. She made the students want to imitate her and also become involved in “self-improvement” and in altering their attitudes toward the concepts that the play dealt with. All the students were impressed by the good relations between her and “Hazani,” but they were mainly impressed by “Sa’ar’s” self-awareness, by her moral qualities, by her restraint even when she was confronting other tense situations, such as delays, failure to coordinate with the college administration, and difficulties with the actresses. One of the students described “Sa’ar’s” “work on her ethical qualities” with great admiration:

She was dying to get angry at her, and rightfully so. One of the other students didn’t come to a rehearsal and didn’t say so in advance. “Sa’ar” was annoyed. For the first time she started shouting and then she calmed down and said: “There’s some good in everything.” And there was something true about that. She said something like, “Okay, let’s build it up from here. I have to work on my moral qualities!” Something like that, full of power, and so true. I’ll get angry. I’ll let it all out, but that’s not the right thing... It was amazing—to see
how a person could control herself... it was really beautiful. (“Orna,” Interview, 2000).

Yet there was also some criticism because the lack of tension led to “a kind of standstill, that things weren’t moving fast enough, that there was a huge amount of work and not enough time. The costumes still hadn’t been sewn two days before the production, and until the last week one of the actresses went around with the feeling that she didn’t know what she was going to be doing on stage” (“Orna,” Interview, 2000). However, this, too, did not spoil the excellent relations that had been formed between the directors and the students. Several of the students stated that they expected good working relationships of this kind in a Jewish theater: “In my opinion, in a Jewish theater—it’s also relations between the actors and all the people who work on the stage, from the stage hands to the director” (“Orna,” Interview, 2000). Until the last minute she believed that by virtue of the excellent relations, the production, too, would have a special power of sanctity.

As the rehearsals advanced, the students’ attitude toward the play changed. Some of them said that when they became familiar with the text and the characters, they regarded the play as a deep work of genius. Others said that in response to the emotional responses of “Sa’ar” and “Hazani,” the message became significant to them in their own lives as well. They did not deny their initial negative reaction to the play, but they attributed it to their aversion to messages they had already dealt with for many years in the framework of the Bnei Akiva Youth Movement: “It’s the kind of thing... I don’t want to insult Bnei Akiva, but at least in dealing with the Torah, Israel, and national unity it’s a kind of cover-up” (“Ilana,” Interview, 2000). But after a few weeks

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156 During that year I interviewed a group of seven students three times: at the start of rehearsals, during the process, after I noticed changes in their way of talking and in their relation to the play, and after the performance. I am grateful to the seven students who were willing to give their time so that I could follow closely the process they were undergoing.
of rehearsals, the play that had initially seemed confused and incomprehensible became “deep” in the opinion of the participants. The stereotypical characters that had aroused connotations of familiar works took on new meanings, and that convinced even the skeptical actresses to be attentive to the messages and to try to connect with them. One of the students admitted:

Everything is connected to everything else. There are reasons for everything, and behind every sentence there’s a whole world. You saw it in their eyes: every time we got to that light, there were tears in their eyes. [Thoughtfully], a whole world... For me that was... okay, so maybe I’ll listen, maybe there’s something here, and it comes from a true place inside the person... And that gave me a desire to understand, to listen, to try to get in deeper too. And it was fascinating. (“Yonit,” Interview, 2000)

In addition, the actresses felt that their participation in the play was a mission (“They gradually brought us close to the idea that we have a mission,” “Ilana,” Interview, 2000). They envied the excitement that seized the directors when they saw their ideas about building the Third Temple presented on stage, and they came to want to experience religious fervor, too. The “Orthodox from birth” began to view the born-again as an “elite” who managed to live a more experiential and emotional religious life than they did, and they attributed that to the more rational character of national religious society:

It’s hard to ask “Tamar” and “Irena” because they very much live the matter from here [points to the heart] and we live it from here [points to the head]. “Tamar” lives it. Both of them. “Irena,” too. Because they came from a place entirely without light. Although there is a light there–but not this light. And they had a kind of “zzzzzz,” and they
woke up! It’s very hard for them to talk about it, they feel it, and they cry during the rehearsals, why do they want it, and I don’t? (“Orna,” Interview, 2000)

The meeting place between the born-again and the Orthodox from birth became a religious arena with an “arousing” charm,” formed and defined by the born-again. They also created a “rite of passage” between the rehearsals and the performance itself. This religious ceremony was appropriate to the definition of the anthropologist, Victor Turner as “moments in and out of time,” and it brought the two groups together, though beforehand there had been status differences between them. According to one of the students, the ceremony, which they held before going on stage, gave the play a religious character, because “we were full of sanctity just as we were full of theater” (“Oshrit,” Interview, 2000):

A moment before we went on, we held a prayer. We held hands, and “Tamar” said a prayer to the Holy One, blessed be He, saying that we weren’t doing it for our ego but to glorify His Name in public. And “Irena” spoke to the Holy One, blessed be He, calling him “Father.” It was a powerful spiritual experience... A prayer that created silence and love among ourselves. (“Tovalah,” Interview, 2000)

The excitement connected with the mystical religious messages made the group into what Turner calls a unique “spontaneous community,” and therefore transitory from a social point of view. To paraphrase Turner: in such a community a type of enchanted, transformative behavior is produced, reaching into the root of each person’s essence and finding something in that root that is communal and shared. This development stunned the students (“Something astonishing happened to the girls,” “Tovalah,”

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158 Ibid., p. 138.
Interview, 2000), enabling them to undergo a liminal experience for a certain time.\textsuperscript{159}

Because the students identified with the directors, the discourse prevalent in this religious community was replaced by messianic-religious discourse that was not typical of students who were “Orthodox from birth.”\textsuperscript{160} They adopted the idea that is prevalent in radical circles of national religious society and among the newly religious, about the ability of a person to have active influence on the advent of the messiah and building the Third Temple. Their feeling that this was imminent and immediate mirrored the director’s feeling. Building the Third Temple became a relevant subject, almost like the situation of one’s bank account at the end of the month, if not more relevant:

We are in danger of mutual hatred among ourselves, a danger of quarrels, of actual extinction!
“Scoring a goal against ourselves!” And we’re not aware enough that a tide is taking us to other places every day, and we’re not involved in our own truth... It's strange that a question like, “How can we make it through the month?” is more interesting to us than rebuilding the Temple. The play shows that building the Temple is very, very close... We’re missing the light in our daily lives. We have to do more good, and from that good we will get to the Temple. Let everyone look into himself and into his

\textsuperscript{159} According to Turner, liminality shows that what is high cannot be high without the existence of what is low, and one must personally experience the meaning of being low. The transition from low to higher status passes through a limbo without status. In such a process, polar opposites as such underlie one another and cannot be separated, pp. 89-90.

\textsuperscript{160} In my opinion, several years afterward this difference in discourse would have been less conspicuous, because today messianic-religious discourse is more common among many young members of the national religious sector. The adoption of a rhetorical practice as part of a process of conversion is studied in Tamar Elor’s book. \textit{Mekomot shemurim}, pp. 90-92.
fellow for the good. It’s so true, simple things that people don’t think about. (“Orna,” Interview, 2000)

Indeed the playwright-directors saw the play as a spiritual religious experience, and after a time of intense rehearsals the actresses felt that too. Most of them were swept into the whirlpool of religious fervor: to make a “correction,” to work on one’s moral qualities, to change one’s path and to undergo deep religious experiences—all of those seemed possible and attractive to them. “Hazani” and “Sa’ar” therefore managed to create an alternative community to the national religious community, different in its characteristics from the actresses’ community of origin: a “different” world, where ecstasy and mysticism, “the mantras... the charm... the enchantment,” were an essential part of the person’s experience (Theater Discussion, 2000). It was an existence entirely different from the religious Zionist existence from which the actresses came. A space was created in which the students could express criticism of their society of origin, and for some time undergo moving religious experiences and continue the “rebellion” against the state religious education their parents had provided for them:

I studied at Ma’on\textsuperscript{161}—and I’ve changed. I’m different from my parents. I made a switch... Your generation didn’t absorb so much Torah, and you lack a lot. We have to fill ourselves up... I definitely have become truly religious, but not like “Orna” and “Tamar” who were secular. (“Tovalah,” Interview, 2000).

The students admitted that they experienced an extended process “from the time the play didn’t appeal to me at all to a situation where it really did... They put everything they believe into it. Before that I didn’t connect to it” (“Tovalah,” Interview, 2000).

\textsuperscript{161} In Moshav Ma’on in the southern Hebron Hills there is a religious college for women who have finished national service or military service, and it offers a course of study concerned with faith and creativity.
Neither the students nor the administration noticed that the “light” of the born-again directors was brought to people whom they regarded as “gentiles”—young women who were Orthodox from birth.

**Reception and Criticism**

At the end of the first performance, the head of the department spoke, emphasizing that the production was “another course of stones on the bumpy path toward influencing the cultural life of the country by combining professional and spiritual quality.” Despite her warm words, the audience did not appear to be enthusiastic about the play. Moreover, many of the spectators said that they didn’t understand it even on the most basic level—the plot level. The actresses expressed frustration at this lack of understanding, mainly because by then the messages had become important to them. The response of the mother of one of the actresses shows the gap between the national religious audience’s way of thinking and that of the born-again playwrights-directors and of the students who had been influenced by them. The actress knew from the start that her mother, who was also “Orthodox from birth,” would not understand the play:

She told me: “Yes, it’s written in the program... and that really helped me.” I didn’t know what was written there. It turns out that only the cast of characters was written there, and she told me: “Without that—I wouldn’t have understood. Then she said: “But I didn’t understand the idea about the Third Temple so well.” I said, “Mom! We’re talking about spiritual devotion here!” And she said to me, “Ahh, Ahh.” (“Yonit,” Interview, 2000)

These words show that the mother did not understand the play at all, and because she was familiar with the artistic medium,
she looked in vain for an explanation in the program, but only the names of the people connected with the production appeared there, without any explanation of the play. The mother did not admit to her daughter that she had not understood. Although she tried to figure out the message of the play, not even her daughter, the actress, was able to explain the idea to her. Instead, she floated a different idea, “spiritual devotion,” as an answer to the mother’s question about the message. The answer and the “explanation” reflect the mother’s and daughter’s lack of understanding of the message of the theatrical production, for they had not grown up on messianic, mystical ideas. This conversation exemplifies the failure of the play to communicate with the intended audience. The failure to connect with the audience made it clear to the actresses that in the end “the play is not appropriate for Orthodox girl’s schools and certainly not for junior high schools, contrary to what we thought at first. Today it’s clear that it was a play appropriate to people over the age of eighteen and there, too, they’ll hardly understand it” (“Tovalah,” Interview, 2000). It was clear to the actresses and the playwrights that the audience had rejected the play because of the subjects it treated. Members of the audience objected to the “conversion” of the characters to Judaism and to “the unity of Israel”:

A lot of the girls from the college, from the other departments, said that it was a play for the born-again–horrible! Every name had some religious overtone [she made a gagging sound]... The ultra-Orthodox woman comes out so stupid, and the secular woman is the one who brings the light... Everything is deliberate. Somebody said after the play that Bruno supplied everything–so what’s the point?... He became observant, that isn’t unity. You made him into an old man wearing ritual fringes! They talk about unity, so why didn’t they accept
Bruno the way he was? ("Yonit," Interview, 2000).

My sister says we made them all into Orthodox Jews. Everybody went over to “our side”: the secular woman, the one who was doubtful about religion, and Bruno. Did everybody have to become Orthodox and accept the light? The answer, that it was a problem of casting, is ridiculous. It was a problem in this whole play. The directors were so pleased that the secular woman brought the light. ("Tovalah," Interview, 2000)

Criticism was also voiced about the large quantity of speech in comparison to the rather limited amount of action on the stage. Members of the audience reported that the action on the stage did not appear at all convincing to them—neither the “spiritual devotion” nor the “unity.” One of the students who came to see the play summed up her feeling afterward in vehement criticism mingled with a prayer:

The program had all the kitsch imaginable in it: pictures of hands, a lily, without leaving any room for the imagination, and in the end, after seeing the play, I was aware that the declaration was about what was going to happen ... I expected to see women in all their beauty and power, but again I met them in modesty, speaking in cliches, and acting out flat biblical characters. God, I thought, God would be so happy if we were in that marvelous present of ours, full of His glory and directing the world from that place within us... Is there any beauty greater than that? Is there anything more marvelous than to be moved by young actresses who seek the path to their God? Let’s be simple, let’s be “ourselves,” for God’s sake, let’s be “religious”! ("Yael," Class Assignment,
This student expressed reservations about the kitsch and the shallow aesthetics of the program and the play, and she was sure that it was preferable to express authentic searches for a path to “that place of our own.” That was how she distinguished between the world of the directors who were new to observance (which was simplistic, kitschy, heavenly, artificial), to which the play gave expression, and the complex, introspective national religious world view. She hoped strongly that the image and the label of “religiosity” in a general and simplistic way would not guide the theatrical work, but rather a true, theological inquiry, unique to the national religious community. Thereby she attributed strength to national religious women as possessing unique inner and outer beauty.

The college administration and the faculty praised the process of work, but they, too, criticized the content of the play. The college rabbi argued that one should not deal with such elevated subjects in a play written in just a few months. His conclusion was that it would be better not to produce original plays for the end of the year production, because this was already the third disappointment that the Theater Department had suffered. He proposed concentrating on choosing an appropriate play from the existing repertoire and presenting it “in a special way that characterizes the Orthodox audience” (Rabbi Fogel, Interview, 2000). Some faculty members responded much more vehemently and criticized the play as “brain-washing by the born-again,” “Christian idol worship!” “Not representative of the place where the girls stand today and where Rivka [the head of the department] stands, and certainly not where ‘Hagai’ [the head of the college] stands.” The only positive conclusion was that it was possible to work in theater in a relaxed atmosphere, even if the art was sub-standard—one should not belittle the educational process involved in presenting the play.
Orthodox from Birth and Newly Religious

The work with the students at the college strengthened “Hazani’s” theory about the advantage of religious women in the theater:

The young women can take shortcuts because they’re religious, with material from the Torah, and Torah is embedded in their soul, and they’re the closest to it. Because at the point of connection they can go very far. But they don’t have the drive, so it’s hard to understand what kind of Jewish theater they’re talking about. (“Hazani,” Interview, 2000)

“Hazani” corroborated what is implied by the words of the students about their high status in Orthodox society in contrast to that of the born-again. In analyzing the words of the students, the distinction was repeatedly made between “us” (the Orthodox from birth) and “them” (the born-again). The feeling of superiority of the young women who were observant from birth was expressed in the repeated use of expressions indicating a patronizing attitude: “babies... everything is new for them. It’s beautiful” (“Orna,” Interview, 2000). The comparison of the born-again women to children was repeated in several interviews, revealing the common attitude toward born-again people in national religious society:

I feel sorry for the newly religious. My husband’s parents always say, “Ah, that crazy guy—well, he’s new to religion.” But now I feel sorry for them: the secular people hate them and the Orthodox don’t accept them. (“Tovalah,” a student, Interview, 2000).

Nonetheless, the students absorbed messages from the encounter and learned “to pray with joy, to improve ourselves, and to maintain the atmosphere in the production,” and also to
be active for “the reality of the temple, a total reality, and for good among people, the end of days” (“Orna,” Interview, 2000). The experience undergone by the Orthodox from birth was an effort to make art into a mystical religious practice. Another student explained that this was because the playwrights related to those subjects sensitively, “from the heart,” and the students related from their heads—intellectually. This dichotomy between the groups and the representation of national religious society as a rationalistic society, which did not deal with subjects such as “the unity of Israel,” the building of the temple, and “improving ethical qualities,” raised a question about the self-image of that society. Although there are central movements within that society, such as the people connected with Merkaz Harav, for example, who base their educational and political activity on messianic expectations and on the demand to act for the advent of the messiah, the messages formulated by the newly religious directors encountered rejection and repudiation from that society in particular. Many members of national religious society believe that the time has not yet come for religious redemption, and in that way they distinguish themselves from Christian consciousness by teaching their children “to find religious meaning in the pre-messianic world as well... It is a society that views the present return to Zion as an ‘hour of grace,’ but we have not yet reached full messianic ‘redemption.’”

Another explanation for rejecting “Sa’ar’s” and “Hazani’s” messianic ideas is that many members of the national religious society cut themselves off from messianic ideas in response to the change in the focuses of power within Israeli society, especially after the Camp David Agreements. Yair Sheleg, a journalist who covers all the segments of religious society, argues that it has become clear to many members of this society that cultural and media figures and not settlers and security people were setting

the tone of public discourse, and that the central battle was no longer for the Whole Land of Israel but shaping Israeli culture and society. Therefore, they had to internalize areas of the general culture, toward which national religious society had hitherto turned its back.\footnote{Sheleg (2000), p. 52.} This argument explains the actresses’ return to normative national religious life after hearing the negative reactions of the audience, which did not share the wave of emotional and psychological enthusiasm that developed from the work with the charismatic “Sa’ar.” The charm faded, and the actresses returned to their liminal status, which enabled them to examine the play as an event representing the opinions of the playwright-directors. They then experienced disappointment and frustration:

It didn’t come through. There’s a very big problem with the text, and it would be hard to present it again, because cosmetic changes won’t help.... I came in order to communicate something, and it didn’t come across! I didn’t come to change my own life. I want partners here, do you understand? I can stand here all night and shout, “Ga, ga, ga!” It will mean a lot to me, but other people will say, “What does she want from us?” (“Orna,” Interview, 2000)

In the interviews after the performance, the actresses spoke in a practical way about changes that have to be made in the text so the play would be clearer. They did not use the discourse they had employed during the rehearsals but reverted to the critical attitude they had held when they first received the text, at the beginning of the process. The talk about “unity” and “improving ethical qualities” disappeared, and in their place they made paternalistic comments about the playwright-directors and their “beautiful” and “childish” religious attitude. They were convinced that the failure of the play derived from the impossibility of an encounter between
the world of the born-again and their own world.

Summary

In Dim’at hashoshan it appeared that the newly religious playwright-directors and the national religious actresses were engaged in art within the framework of their own religious practice and were influenced by New Age culture, which seeks to overcome the alienation of daily life and to turn toward religious culture to fill in the lack of meaning with the fullness of the experience of awareness. Religion took the place that had previously been occupied by education, and it is a collectively transformative social practice. The experience that the born-again playwright-directors gave to the students was not only a process of what Wexler calls “resacralization” and “communion,” but an educational experience. Using their charisma, the directors tried to revive theoretical and educational cultural forms of thinking about concepts such as the Temple, religious devotion, and mission—concepts that had previously been merely abstract terms for the students. It appears that the directors tried to endow the young women who were Orthodox from birth with values they regarded as eternal by canceling the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. The boundaries between these two domains were erased, and in their stead were placed mystical feelings about the infinite renewal of the instant, raising up “sparks of sanctity” and spiritual exaltation.

However, after the failure of the effort to make the religious experience into a communicative theatrical experience, the enchantment of the intimate encounter and the experience of religious renewal faded. The gap between the two groups became visible to all, and the actresses abandoned the New Age experience for the normative position of the central stream of national religious society, which regards experiences of that kind

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as deviance and almost craziness. The audience might have wanted unconsciously to undo the effect of religious revival that the actresses had experienced, and by so doing to express opposition to what had happened in the closed rehearsal room. Maybe it understood that a religious world was presented to them, which was undermining the existing cultural edifice of the national religious stream. The critical audience restored the actresses to their sources—to the questioning national religious position, inquisitive and eschewing absolute solutions that demand a radical change in way of life.

The administration had not been aware of the mystical, religious aspect of the process that was taking place in the closed rehearsals, and for that reason it did not view the process as having an unsettling potential and enabled the directors to work without intervening. Moreover, the administration felt that excellent working relationships were being formed among the students and between them and the directors, and it welcomed this in the light of the problems that had arisen during the previous year. It thought that a play dealing with values such as spiritual devotion and the unity of the Jewish people would necessarily lead to a play with a unique religious character, providing a stable foundation for strengthening the Theater Department and enabling it to recover from the traumas of the earlier years. Not until after Dim’at hashoshan was performed publicly did the administration understand that the play was not at all appropriate to its intended national religious audience.

*Dim’at hashoshan*, the play presented by the third graduating class of the Theater Department, was an example of the search for communicative tools, on the one hand, and an innovative spiritual experience, on the other—and all of this in the arena of the theater. The experience of search was intended both for those involved in the play and for those who viewed it. Hence, the play must be viewed as merely a partial success, for while it did
provide the actresses with an arena for action and for undergoing a moving and significant experience of religious revival on a small scale and for a short time, yet the spectators remained unmoved. The play showed that the newly religious artists were unable to contribute to the consolidation of the Theater Department or to theatrical productions sponsored by the college. It exposed yet again the split personality of national religious society. Using that term, Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz explain the situation of that society: in its daily life it participates in the ideological and cultural infrastructures of the secular world; however, at the same time, it clings to a messianic religious utopia. Therefore it not only suffers from a split personality, but it also represses the messianic hopes and expectations: “The utopias are swept under the carpet in hope that the day will come when they will emerge in their full power, but meanwhile they are exposed prematurely in times of crisis.”

Therefore, these ideas are not alien to the students, but they are placed at a distance and repressed, heard only in the most radical stream of national religious society. The New Age way of life removed the Utopian ideas from their ordinary place, and the intimate encounter with the repressed and distanced ideal temporarily strengthened the sense of a united and chosen community within the participants, a community in rebellion against normative national religious society–that of their parents’ generation and that which the college represented.

**Emunah College: Summary**

Emunah College is a unique institution for Orthodox women in Israel. It is defined as a college for training educational personnel, but it also seeks to train Orthodox women to be artists

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167 By 2006, with the strengthening of radical trends among national religious youth, it seems to me that the play would have been received with more sympathy by this community.
in the plastic arts, in graphic design, and in theater. The college attracts students from various streams of national religious society, who have proven their absolute commitment to that society and wish to continue living within it: they have studied in the educational frameworks of the state religious system and taken more advanced Jewish studies in women’s yeshivas. They come to the college with their parents’ encouragement, and their goal is to fulfill the natural artistic talents latent within them without deviating from religious frameworks or beliefs. Many of them openly express a desire to find a way of combining their religious world and their world as creative artists and to express their feelings as Orthodox women by means of art. The college shares these desires and defines itself as an institution that allows its students to develop in two spheres: the spiritual world, by giving many classes in Jewish subjects and the Open Door policy of the administration, and the creative-artistic world, with the guidance of well-known artists, most of them secular.

Each production was accompanied by a drama of its own. *Ruth* is thought of as the most successful for the college and the audience, but for the actresses it was a disappointing experience, on a low artistic level. In contrast, *Bi’ur hametz*, which the students regarded as the peak of their studies in the college, was suppressed, and several important figures in the institution defined that play as subversive and even heretical. The last two productions were mounted with a new approach and a change in the institution’s policy: it abandoned its original intention of being a bastion of original religious theater and directed itself toward training the young women to be teachers. The effort to enlist creative forces from within the extended religious community as a basis for the theater was unsuccessful. On the one hand, the college administration showed great openness toward artists from various streams, but on the other hand it showed determination to retreat from that step after an engaged theater failed to emerge, one that
would convey the messages of the central stream of the national religious community. Along with the cultural openness that characterized it, it was also afraid of the negative consequences of contending with the types of secular culture that were developing around it and with which it came into contact. The change in the goals of the program was deliberate, intended to be a compromise: assuring the continued extraordinary theatrical activity that was undertaken in the college while limiting its character and reducing negative influences on the students and the audience. Thereby the institution gave up on its status as an initiator of a daring course of action in establishing an Orthodox women’s theater within its walls and turned toward maintaining Orthodox norms.

The events that took place during the first years of the Theater Department in the college reflect the special dynamics within the national religious community, a society that shaped itself according to its place between the conservative ultra-Orthodox society and liberal, Western, secular society. National religious society had set its goal as reaching a synthesis between a way of life guided by halakha and openness to the influences of Western culture; however, the path toward achieving that goal was full of potholes. As we have seen, this Orthodox educational institution encountered many difficulties in mounting theatrical productions, and after several years of failures it understood that it was difficult to predict how this art would develop. It was panicked by the subversive and carnivalesque character of the theater. Even when the institution determined the message it desired in advance, there was no guarantee that the message would be conveyed or accepted as it had been envisaged because the directors and the actors were the ones who interpreted the message with their bodies and souls.

During these cultural experiments, the dynamic that exists in national religious society was revealed against the background of the crisis after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. National religious society wishes to be an integral part of Zionist society in
Israel and to contribute to the state in every area of life: politics, security, communications, art, policy, and the law. The isolation imposed upon it after the assassination of Rabin and the “self-examination” it was forced to perform led to a process of inner searching and liberation of creative forces in various areas of art. Those involved in developing a new area of art in that community—the theater—hoped that “an Orthodox genre would emerge, a different genre” (Manovitz, Interview, 2001), one that would vie with the existing genres and replace them. Up to now this dream has not been fulfilled.168

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168 Since I completed my research, several plays have been produced at the college: At Sea by Sławomir Sławomir Mrożek, directed by Barukh Gutin, Kindertransport by Diane Samuels, directed by the late Bilha Feldman, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, by Bertholt Brecht, directed by Sela’it Ahi Miriam. Original plays were also produced, such as “Hakhamam, pikhit ve’armomit”, a collection of folk tales about women directed by Masha Nimirovsky, and Naomi, a musical drama about Naomi Shemer that also dealt with the withdrawal form Gush Katif. That play was directed and produced by Rivka Manovitz and Iris Shavit. Today quite a few Orthodox women are active in theater groups and even manage to make a living from their art.
Chapter Six:
The “Dosiot” Group

The Dosiot was an Orthodox women’s theater group that was active from 2000 to 2002 and produced two plays. The first play, *Bat-Mitzvah: halom veshivro* [Bat-Mitzvah: Dream and Disillusion], was performed three times in the summer of 2001 at the Center for an Alternative Theater in Akko for a small, invited audience. This was a final project after a year of work with the directors Moni Yosef and Haled Abu-Ali. The second play, *Al tagidu “mayim mayim* [Don’t Say “Water Water”] was presented at the Alternative Theater Festival in Akko in 2002, directed by Miri Lavi, and it received a citation in the festival competition. However, this play disappointed most of the members of the group, which disbanded immediately after the festival.

The composition and character of the group, its organization, its way of working, its unique theatrical language, and the content chosen proved the existence of a trend toward professionalism and seeking a new, daring—even subversive—and original style in the emerging movement of Orthodox women’s theater. The group’s plays demonstrated a new stage in the efforts of Orthodox women to establish a different kind of theater, serious and original, that would express their spiritual outlook, a theater which, despite the critical attitude that characterized it, was not cut off from religious life. However, the women also sought to fit into the institutional framework of the secular theater.

Until the group appeared in the Akko Festival Competition in 2002, it had no name, but in the explanatory leaflet they

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169 The permanent members of the group who took part in both productions were Orly Alufi, Rachel Keshet, Tova Birnbaum, Hadas Gal, Rachel Getz, Nirit Neumann. Alufi and Gal established the group, and Alufi was the motivating force and organizer. As mentioned earlier, the self-ironic name “Dosiot” is the slightly pejorative Hebrew slang word for Orthodox women.
prepared for Al tagidu “mayim mayim,” the name “The Dosiot” was added. That is what the people at the Center for Alternative Theater had called them the year before, and the administrators of the festival adopted the appellation. Several members did not even notice they had been called that, and others did not protest against it vigorously enough. It was clear to them that the name did not represent their real selves, and they did not fit the ordinary definition of dosiot as the term is used in Hebrew slang. Hence they saw the name as a kind of self-irony. By adopting it the members of the group removed the sting of the pejorative connotations of the epithet, proving the superficiality of the ideas of secular society about Orthodox women in general. Use of the name “Dosiot” by a theater group that produced fringe theater in unconventional theatrical language implied criticism of the secular, artistic community, which judged religious society on the basis of stereotypes: “Dosim” [the masculine plural form of the word] are all supposedly right wing, conservative, and also artistically inferior. At the same time it was also meant to shed the light of ridicule on the superficiality of national religious society as an all-encompassing community that chose to ignore the subversive elements that emerged within it and preferred to embrace anyone who called himself a “Dos” and had the outer trappings of a “Dos,” even if he was undermining the establishment. Thus the irony of the label “Dosiot” was aimed at both societies.

The group’s name and the explanation that the members of the group gave to it show the group’s importance and uniqueness. Although the members of the group lived an Orthodox lifestyle, they refused to identify themselves with the national religious community in which they had been raised. While they did express the desire to deal with the religious aspect of their lives, and they knew it would influence their art, none of them declared that she wanted to create a “kosher,” modest, or engaged theater like other theater groups.
The Establishment of the Group—a Corrective Experience

In interviews the group members expressed the difficulty of contending with the secular theater and a kind of esprit de corps that they wished to nurture by establishing an “Orthodox” group and performing in the well-known secular, non-establishment framework of the Alternative Theater Festival in Akko. The group was meant to be a kind of response and corrective on the part of women who had studied theater in secular settings like the Beit-Zvi or Nissan Nativ theater schools or in the theater departments of the Hebrew University or Tel Aviv University. Some of the women had been traumatized by the gap between the demands of the profession and the religious education they had received and internalized. They reported that directors had required them to display sexuality, to undress, to hug and kiss men on stage—demands that they found hard to fulfill. While they did want to be accepted and become professional in the secular theater, they found that difficult to do, and they encountered lack of consideration and sensitivity on the part of theater professionals. The story of Tova Birnbaum, who was raised in an ultra-Orthodox home in Bnei-Brak and studied theater at Beit-Zvi is the most extreme:

I felt that things were happening to me, and I had to face conflicts in order to do things. They didn’t really see the process I was going through, the absurd situation I was in, because they didn’t really know my world fully; they knew I was religious, exactly how much—that during my whole high school I never touched a boy... even my best friends there who also... had some kind of connection with me, but they didn’t take in really, really what was happening to me when I kissed a boy on stage. They ought to have understood that it was
something major for me! … Maybe from that point of view I felt that kind of isolation, the isolation of pointlessness... After two years I really got to the point where I was starting to lose out, and I wasn’t gaining anything, really my gain evened out with my loss, and I felt that I wasn’t myself anymore, so I just left. (Birnbaum, Interview, 2001)

Another example is the delegitimization on the part of the teachers and the alienation that Rachel Keshet felt when she tried to connect her religious life with the theater in acting classes at Tel Aviv University. When she was asked to prepare an exercise on the subject of Parting, she chose the subject, “A Farewell Letter to God,” a subject that had concerned her for some time. The teacher rejected the subject, arguing that it didn’t have dramatic material that was worth working with:

   It was very strong for me. I prepared it to the words of the song, “The voice of my beloved knocks” [from the Song of Songs], and I was very moved. It was so significant for me. I wrote it. Then the teacher said to me, “Shit!... A shitty exercise!!!” I was in shock. Afterward he apologized and asked for my forgiveness, because even if he thought that, he shouldn’t have said it... And I was... Apparently it wasn’t good enough from the point of view of communication... But I showed it to one Reform Jewish girl and to one Orthodox girl. They liked the exercise a lot. At Tel Aviv University, nobody understood what I was talking about, and what that song was about. They didn’t know it and what it stands for at all... All my things were so laden and so important for me, and then he said to me, “Look, what are you talking about?! What’s God?” Later I understood him. The other exercises dealt
with women, men, infidelities, and divorce. In the next exercise, I played an officer who committed adultery with my brigade commander, and that was it. It’s not interesting to talk about a woman officer who has an affair with the brigade commander. That’s so stigmatic. I don’t commit adultery. That’s not my world. But I got 100% at the end of the year, and the teacher liked me a lot. To this day he’s crazy about me. (Keshet, Interview, 2001)

For Hadas Gal, the initiative in establishing a theater group on an Orthodox basis derived from a desire to examine her own religious identity within the religious social sphere from which she had been trying to distance herself for a long time. She stated that in fact in her work in theater with secular people she had not encountered any problems or confrontations because she was Orthodox: “It could be because I was in the community theater section [of the Theater Department of Tel Aviv University]. There they had a lot of respect and room for our being Orthodox.” From her words it is clear that she felt more comfortable as a religious woman in secular social and professional settings than as an Orthodox woman active in Orthodox society:

To this day it’s hard for me to be in absolutely religious place! I don’t know... there’s something that makes me “anti.” That was just the reason why I wanted to be in a group of religious girls, so there was nowhere to run away to. It’s something that’s part of me, and I sort of define myself as Orthodox—so at least to contend with those things and not to run away from them. From my point of view, it was a confrontation. I wanted to examine the Orthodox woman, Hadas, with reference to religious people. (Gal, Interview, 2002)

Thus the motivation for the formation of the group was double
and touched upon the two societies, secular and national religious, in which it was active. On the one hand, they sought a safe space, protected from the secular outside, which denied their cultural and religious world and was alien to it. On the other hand, they wished to examine the inner religious dynamic and to ascertain whether it allowed for the freedom necessary for creating an original and professional theater that would express their world and their liminal position between the two societies with sincerity. Formation of the group enabled the women to express subversive and critical views about Orthodox society in public. It was not possible to include secular women or other Orthodox women who were graduates of an institution like Emunah College, for example, in the group. Their Orthodox background and their “Orthodox” experiences in secular artistic frameworks were a vital common denominator for the establishment of the group, which was organized informally, with one friend bringing another. This produced inner support, which empowered the members of the group and enabled them to work in the face of outside forces:

We allowed ourselves to break through lots and lots of boundaries as a group, so that was very... Lots of things that were connected especially to the social question, the Orthodox-social question. We were against the squareness and the very, very stifling definitions in the religious world, but also with a lot of smiles, and it was a lot of fun for us to work in the group, because everybody knew everybody, and everybody had gone through the same things. (Birnbaum, Interview, 2001)

The anthropologist Victor Turner dealt with, among other things, the way in which a consolidated community is formed. The “communitas,” because of pressures exerted on it from the outside, becomes a protected and protective society for a while. Turner explained that the etymology of the verb, “to entertain,”
means to treat in a certain way, that is, to create a space beyond the
boundaries of the existing social structure, posing a challenge to
that structure by leveling criticism and suggestions for change.170
The Center for Alternative Theater in Akko provided such a space
for the women, a place and the means for creating a community
that enabled each of them to deal in her own unique way with
subjects connected to their identity as women and as Orthodox
people, in the existing social structure, and with its principles.
Although the group was not homogeneous in its opinions,
nevertheless it was a supportive community because its members
learned to respect the differences among them. Nevertheless,
two years later, most of the members indicated that the common
denominator was precisely the reason why the group fell apart
(“a very flimsy common denominator,” as Birnbaum put it).
In retrospect, a shared interest in the theater was the basis for
the organization of the group, but in the end the Orthodox
background separated them, because in their opinion the
differences among them on matters of religion and faith not only
prevented the consolidation of a clear and uniform message for the
play, Al tagidu: “mayim mayim” but they even had an adverse effect
on the relations among them:

There is no uniform message common to everyone,
because there simply isn’t any such thing! There’s
no such thing in this group! Ask anyone, you’ll
see that you’ll get completely different messages!
About what she thinks about Orthodox society,
about faith–so it was impossible to bring out a clear
message in the play. It could have been a lot sharper
if there had been a single message for all of us. A
lot of people asked us: what’s the message? But with
the composition of this group, it was necessary
to make that split among us... Everyone is a

completely different world, and what we really had in common was our involvement in theater. And even not that completely. (Gal, Interview, 2002)

The Religious Background of the Members of the Group

The group was composed of Ashkenazi women in their twenties. They were born in affluent homes and defined at least one of their parents as “Orthodox.” During the first year some members of the group left and were replaced, but the kernel of the group—six women—remained stable. Except for one of them, they all had studied in state religious educational institutions and served in the IDF or in national service before their academic studies. All but one of them stated that the households where they grew up had been liberal and had encouraged them to develop their talents in acting and dance, and that the children and adults in their families ranged from secular to ultra-Orthodox. Their way of dressing was not appropriate to the conventions of national religious society. They stated that they were autonomous in their decisions regarding the observance of what they thought of as a social convention and not a religious principle, such as their way of dressing:

My brother was in a panic because of me, and everyone was in shock because I decided I was allowed to wear pants. I didn’t attract a single man because of my pants, nobody tried to pick me up in the street because of my pants. I didn’t walk around in undershirts. Then I found out that some rabbis allow women to wear pants. So why did I have to wait for rabbis to allow it? I gave myself the permission. The same goes for covering my hair—I’ll decide for myself. (Keshet, Interview, 2001)

Instead of defining themselves as national religious or modern

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171 Most of them wore pants rather than skirts, and the married women did not cover their hair.
Orthodox, the members of the group found original definitions for their social affiliation and religious identity: “Orthodox lite,” “Orthodox-Conservative,” “Orthodox in a slightly different way,” “observant of the commandments.” They differed from one another in the stringency of observing the commandments, and this was expressed mainly in observance of the Sabbath and in the place of religion in their daily life: one of them was willing to rehearse on the Sabbath because that was not a technical violation of the Sabbath, while another was not willing to give up the religious atmosphere of the Sabbath, so she did not participate in any activity that took place in Akko on the Sabbath: “Forget it, I sort of said to myself: forget lights, music, traveling or not traveling. It just wouldn’t be a Sabbath, and that would really be too bad” (Keshet, Interview, 2001). Some of them mentioned that they had worked for the Conservative movement in Ramah and Young Judea summer camps in the United States. However, some of them expressed quite Orthodox opinions about the kinds of synagogues they attended and opposed mixed seating of men and women in synagogue:

It doesn’t seem that prayer is a place where men and women have to be together, and in some way this can be disturbing. Even now the men are always looking at the women. If they sat next to them, they would do it even more. (Gal, Interview, 2002)

One of the members of the group defined her interest in religion as a process that “comes in waves,” and she alternates between outbursts of emotional faith that sweep over her and “an intellectual approach.” Another member of the group admitted:

I act within the boundaries of modesty that I still accept in everyday life, let’s say, not shorts–long pants. It’s not connected to halakha. It’s connected to its being hard for me, and I don’t want to expose my body. I think that one essential and problematic
restraint is the Sabbath. But even there...I went to rehearsals on the Sabbath, but I didn’t violate the Sabbath technically. (Birnbaum, Interview, 2002)

The Way of Working

The conditions that the Center set for the women were that the members of the group had to commit to come to Akko once a week for a meeting that lasted several hours and perhaps in an even more intensive manner without time limits, until an original play emerged. Moni Yosef, an Oriental Jew who had become Orthodox, and Haled Abu-Ali, a Muslim, divided the training schedule between them: Abu-Ali trained the women in movement exercises, and Yosef worked on staging personal exercises that the women brought every week. They determined that the meetings would take place on Thursday evenings until the wee hours of Friday morning. After the meetings, some of the women went to sleep for a few hours in their parents’ homes in Haifa, and others went right back to their homes so they could manage to prepare for the Sabbath.

These unconventional working hours required physical, mental, even financial effort of the women, some of whom came from Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Beit Shean, and Safed to the Alternative Theater Center in Akko after a week of work and studies. They worked with two male directors on personal and intimate material, and they didn’t see this as problematic from the religious point of view. On the contrary, they found a common language with the directors on questions of faith and religion. Abu-Ali’s instruction was important for expanding their repertoire of movement, and Yosef enabled each woman to develop the personal exercises without much intervention, and without restrictions. Yosef reported that because of their educational and religious background, the work with them was interesting, daring, and deep.
During the year that the group was active, three of the actresses married, one of them had a first child, another became pregnant with her second child after returning from a trip to India with her husband and their baby daughter. Some members left the group, and others took leaves of absence until they could decide whether to commit themselves to attend rehearsals regularly so as to appear in the alternative theater competition at Akko in 2002.

The “Dosiot” Group: Al tagidu “mayim mayim [Don’t Say “Water Water”]
Photographer: Binyamin Hayman

The Unique Content and Theatrical Language

Some of the subjects that the Dosiot presented appeared in the work of other groups as well\textsuperscript{172}: criticism of national religious society from within and issues connected to Orthodox feminism. However, these subjects had never been treated so openly or with so much daring. Subjects that had never been broached were also treated, such as criticism of the superficial state religious education offered to girls. It was shown to be stagnant and irrelevant to Orthodox girls, because it was focused on a single task: preparing the girls for their roles as wives and mothers. Another subject they presented was the high price paid by a community guided by halakha: its lack of flexibility, since halakha determined its way

\textsuperscript{172} For example, in \textit{Bi’ur hametz}, produced in Emunah College, and \textit{Peseq-zman–Isha}, produced by the Mahut Theater.
of life, even, and perhaps especially, in times of distress, such as when a death takes place on the Sabbath. Personal monologues and sacred canonical texts such as prayers, passages from the Bible, citations from Midrash, and discussions in the Talmud all received new meaning because certain sounds and words were emphasized and transposed to the feminine gender. These changes of emphasis caused the estrangement of the familiar content and laid bare new strata of meaning in questions of faith and its absence.

Another important aspect peculiar to the group was the theatrical language it chose. Some of the members had taken a university course in acting given by the founder of the Alternative Theater Center in Akko, Dudi Ma’ayan. They came to the center because they wanted to continue experimenting with that kind of theatrical work. In the words of Dudi Ma’ayan, this is “an original Israeli language, which redefines the theater, in that it gives life to the function of the spectator for the benefit of the play.” This theatrical language was influenced by the well-known director Jerzy Grotowski, and it is characterized by removal of the distance between the actor and the spectator, giving preference to psycho-physical work by means of physical training, use of a wide range of voices, paying attention to the sound of the text in addition to its content, and exaggerating movement. The movements of the actresses’ bodies connected a feminist political message to the religious messages, since they echoed liturgical activities: prayer, ritual immersion, and wrapping themselves in prayer shawls.

The choice of this theatrical language testified to the desire of the members of the group to adopt avant-garde theatrical practices, which not only deviated from the conventions of national religious society with respect to women’s modesty, but it also broke through the boundaries of the conventional theater. The guideline for work in the Center for Alternative Theater, as with Grotowski’s groups,
is that the actor must abandon his normative social behavior and achieve higher self-awareness. In that way the theater becomes what Grotowski calls “holy work,” and the actor’s work becomes self-sacrifice in order to discover the truth about themselves and about their aims in life. Removal of the barriers between the actresses and the audience made it possible for extreme scenes to be acted out before the spectators, and in some cases with their participation. Unlike the other theater groups that I had researched before, these actresses allowed themselves to employ the expressive public presence of their female bodies through dress that was immodest according to the accepted standard of national religious society (ballet costumes, changing clothes in public, and a fashion show); their movements were free; their voices were wild shouts, panting, and moans. The adoption of this method of acting was in itself a protest against a society that is preoccupied almost obsessively with the “dangers” connected with sexuality and the physical side of human existence. By presenting a woman’s body as a legitimate vehicle for expressing spiritual and religious desires, this method demonstrated a different kind of encounter with the sensual and feminine to the audience.

Yet this daring theater group also responded to an inner need to restrict its art, which derived from the members’ shared national religious background. This need was acknowledged as legitimate and equal to the group’s need to devote itself totally to the theater. The community they created in the framework of the Center for Alternative Theater empowered them, but they understood that they were not working in a vacuum. In order to give validity to the subversive messages they needed an audience, and the audience had to be ready to accept them. Had they not taken the audience into consideration, they certainly would have encountered opposition that would have stifled their unconventional activity. They hoped

to receive recognition not only from relatives and friends but also from the Orthodox community at large as well as from the fringe secular theater.

**The First Play: Bat-mitzvah: halom veshivro**
**Bat-Mitzvah Celebration: “A Good Connection to Break and Return”**

The group presented its first play after several months of work in the Center for Alternative Theater in Akko. The play consisted of separate scenes that were autobiographical, intimate, and revealing in character. These were chosen from the exercises on the topic of “Myself” that they had worked on over the year. The framework story chosen to connect the scenes was a Bat-Mitzvah celebration in school, a shared experience from the past, which was engraved in their memory (though they had not attended the same school). The Bat-Mitzvah—a rite of passage from childhood to maturity—is still not fully consolidated among women in Orthodox society, although, as with boys, a girl who celebrates her Bat-Mitzvah is confirming that she has come to the age of responsibility for keeping the commandments according to halakha. The day when a woman receives the yoke of the commandments was regarded until recent decades as a private event, linking the girl’s life in the present to her future life as a spouse, mother, and housewife. Until the past few years, when feminist consciousness began to awaken among Orthodox women, the Bat-Mitzvah ceremony was not consolidated, and in many communities it is still not customary to celebrate the occasion at all. In contrast, the male rite of passage—the Bar-Mitzvah—has been marked for many generations by public ceremonies with a set pattern that included extensive liturgical activity in the community. These ceremonies are connected with the Bar-Mitzvah boy’s becoming a full-fledged member of the congregation: he puts on tefillin, he is called up to the Torah, he
chants the reading from the Torah scroll, and he gives a sermon in the synagogue. From that moment on, the Bar-Mitzvah boy counts as an adult for ritual purposes; he is included in the ten men required for public prayers, and he may recite the initial words for the recitation of the grace after meals when at least three men have eaten together. He may also be the prayer leader and be called to the Torah. The scenes written by the group implied that the Bat-Mitzvah ceremony that the girls had anticipated with so much excitement was merely lip service paid by national religious society so that the girls would feel that the community was aware “of the voices rising from the inner courtyard.” It was intended to silence jarring tones of rebellion and thereby sought to direct the girls’ energies toward “working together and with consideration to design a celebration that brings a girl to serve God and gives satisfaction to her parents, to the girl, and to Our Father in Heaven.”

The name that was chosen for the play is connected to the framework story: Bat-Mitzvah, Dream and Disillusion. In the performance, the actresses mainly returned to the theme of the Bat-Mitzvah celebration during the transitions between the scenes. During that time the audience was asked to move from one space to another, and some of the actresses stood in a row and recited their Bat-Mitzvah sermons simultaneously or expressed gratitude to the guests for coming, as it were, to participate in their celebration. By defining the theme of the play as the two aspects of the Bat-Mitzvah celebration—the dream and the disillusion—the director expressed the fundamental element of the group—their ambivalent attitude toward religious life: on the one hand, an ideal dream, and on the other hand repulsion from it.

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178 Ibid., 83.
179 The Hebrew name is a play on words. “Shivro” ordinarily means breaking, but in Judges 7:15 the word is used to mean “interpretation,” and indeed these Orthodox women give their own interpretation of religious life.
Presentation of the Bat-Mitzvah celebration in a satirical manner was an expression of that ambivalence. For the establishment, the celebration is intended to be an inauguration ceremony and to express the importance of women in Judaism. But in fact it reveals the desire to restrict women’s activities to “feminine” areas and to emphasize the importance of commandments that will be relevant only in the future, especially when they marry (lighting candles on the Sabbath, preparing Challot, ritual immersion after menstruation). The surprising connection between two male directors, a Muslim and a born-again Oriental Jew, and the Ashkenazi, national religious, middle class women created a theater well anchored in religious messages, in the very heart of the secular fringe theater.

The Content and Audience Participation

The scenes dealt with personal problems connected with women’s status in the family and psychological situations: remaining single for a long time, the divorce of parents, a father’s sudden death on the Sabbath, search for connection with God through prayer, the experience of being “good” religious girls brought up in the bosom of the Orthodox establishment. They presented all these situations from a critical point of view, including the audience in the scenes and making unconventional use of the space, of movement, and of voice. Choice of an audience committed to the members of the group—their parents, siblings, and friends—was intentional, because it was important for the actresses to know they could depend on the willingness of the audience to take part in the scenes when asked: to remove objects from their handbags, to disguise themselves as requested, to answer

180 During a woman’s menstrual period and for seven days after it, according to halakha, she and her husband may not have conjugal relations. Seven days after she has stopped menstruating, she goes to the ritual bath, and then she and her husband may have relations again.
personal questions, to stand up and sing, to walk in single file with their eyes blindfolded, even though they knew that not all of them necessarily agreed with the content of the scenes.

David [a relative and a rabbi] was there on Thursday. On the one hand, he was very, very worried, because I had told him, “You’ll see us singing and dancing between one thing and another.” But I think it was important for him to see it, because he’s interested in knowing about more things. Okay, he looked down during certain sections. Really, he said that he couldn’t express criticism, that means, he said that... Maybe not criticism, not anger, he just was very surprised. (Birnbaum, Interview, 2001).

In order to involve the audience in the play even before it began, invitations similar to official Bat-Mitzvah invitations were sent to their homes. Everyone was asked to bring refreshments

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The invitations read: “‘This is the day the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be happy on it’: We are pleased to invite you to celebrate the day of our entry into the yoke of the commandments. We shall gather the sound of timbrel and flute on Thursday, 23 Nissan 5771, June 14, 2001 (in their calendar) at 19:30... Please be on time! You must bring ____” A poem was included in the invitation: “Bat-Mitzvah, how great is the task,/ In studies we must persist./ But you must know that we can also bless/ And make challot. For being a girl of twelve/ Is no simple thing/ It’s separate from the
according to a prepared list—soft drinks, crackers, cookies, fruit. No other explanation was given about the play. Upon arrival, all the guests left their refreshments on a long table covered with a white cloth, which was placed in a shady area in the Center for Alternative Theater in Akko, and the actresses approached their guests and asked what presents they had brought for the event. The audience numbered from twenty to thirty at each performance, which lasted about four hours, ending at around midnight. The first performance lasted even longer:

This also was a filter for the audience we ask to come to Akko... Suddenly you realize who actually will come to all your performances, who will pick himself up at three in the afternoon and drive, knowing that they’ll won’t get home till three in the morning. It was that kind of event, something that was beautiful for me and also the girls’ efforts, because two girls already quit because of things like that. (Birnbaum, Interview, 2001)

Indeed, attending the play was exhausting and demanded great effort from the audience. Some of them came from Jerusalem and the central region. Most of them responded with astonishment, because they were unfamiliar with this kind of participatory theater, where they were asked to go from one place to another, to take an active part, and sometimes even to respond to the actresses and what was happening on stage.

**Description of the Play**

“The Great Day Has Come!”

To actresses dressed in fancy, childish clothes, with sleeves down to the elbow and wide skirts or dresses down to below their age of childhood,/ Many commandments are obligatory now/ Be a woman of valor, daughter of the commandments!”

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182 Only a few scenes are presented here.
knees, greeted the guests. They tried to initiate group singing of religious songs appropriate to the event. When all the twenty or thirty guests had gathered in the open area—all those invited for that evening—other actresses entered the space, dressed in similar style. They sang the opening Bat-Mitzvah song in harmony: “The Great Day Has Come.”

At last the great day has come  
I was expecting it with hope  
With joy will I enter the yoke that the Torah has commanded us  
Light a candle for me  
Make a candle burn for me  
I will preserve its flame with a pure heart  
For a commandment is candle and the Torah is light  
Show me Your way, O Lord, today  
Strengthen me by virtue of the Matriarchs  
Strengthen me and give me courage, You who dwell on high  
So I will have the merit of keeping the commandments.

This song, full of archaic expressions, references to biblical verses and worn out metaphors, had nothing to do with the normative way of life and discourse of the actresses who played excited Bar-Mitzvah girls who wanted to impress the audience with their sensuality, which was obvious despite their modest clothing. They danced to the song, mainly moving from side to side, while they sneaked excited glances backward and to the sides, at the people who were invited to the performance. They were imitating the behavior of excited girls appearing at a well-planned ceremony in school, but the combination of their childish behavior and dress and their womanly bodies emphasized the frozen, conventional

183 According to the standards of modesty required by Orthodox schools.
staging of the scene and its shallow content. This was a theatrical metaphor for the gap between the messages of the establishment and the girls’ real lives, so it was an appropriate opening for the play. At the end of the song, one of the directors indicated to the audience that they were supposed to move on to a different area at the end of the ruined walls of Crusader building called the Knights’ Hall.

The Torch Lighting Ceremony

Each actress entered at a run from various corners of the space to one of the ruined walls with a torch (extinguished or lit) raised in her hand and suddenly stopped and stood at attention and announced in honor of whom the torch was lit in the voice, intonation, and formula familiar from memorial day torch lighting ceremonies on Mount Herzl (“I, such and such, daughter of so and so, have the honor of lighting this torch in honor of… and the glory of the State of Israel”). The actresses chose to honor prominent women from current Israeli life. The reasons for lighting the torches in their honor were: fidelity to their husbands, their
great involvement in the public activities of their husbands, the combination of career, marriage, and motherhood, and simply their celebrity. One torch was lit in memory of Leah Rabin, “who, even in difficult times of controversy, did not allow ‘the unity of Israel’ to cease throbbing in her heart.” The lighting of the final torch brought the audience back to the Bat-Mitzvah ceremony, since it imitated the familiar clichés of the expressions of gratitude recited at such events: “In honor of my Mom, your Mom, everybody’s Mom, thanks to whom we have come to here.” The scene ended with the singing of “Woman of Valor” in harmony. The members of the group stood on the walls, swaying from side to side to the rhythm of the song, waving their torches–both the ones that were burning and those that were not. At the end of ceremony, the actresses climbed down from the wall, and after gathering the torches, they stood in a row and signaled to the audience to walk toward the building.

“She Shall Be Called Woman”

This scene took place in a small room, without ventilation, lit with candles and decorated with black posters on which were pictures of women. The room was arranged like a lecture hall–the audience sat in rows, and facing it was a chair and desk, on which was a bronze statuette of a woman. One of the actresses, wearing a tailored, pastel colored suit, a broad-brimmed white felt hat, and a small backpack, entered, surveyed the audience, and began to hug and kiss all the young men who were sitting in the

184 The criticism of Leah Rabin derived from her insistence that the plaque at the memorial site for her husband in Tel Aviv should state that her husband’s assassin was Orthodox. This matter was discussed extensively in the press.

185 Proverbs 31:10-31. This song appeared in many of the plays by Orthodox women as a motive of provocation or of reconciliation with the status of women in Orthodox society, as we have already seen in the monologues of Bi’ur hametz presented at Emunah College.
first row. Later it turned out that these were her brothers and his friends. When she finished the hugging and kissing, she walked to the desk that was standing in the front of the room and stood behind it like a teacher. She placed the backpack on the chair and took out a white tablecloth. She removed the statuette, spread the tablecloth on the desk, and put the statuette back on the table. Then she took out sheets of paper and, according to the cantillation marks, began to chant the verses from the Bible (Gen. 2:18-25) that describe the creation of woman. She repeated the verses three times. Each time she stopped and look at the audience with a gaze full of significance. The fourth time she took a cookbook out of the backpack, showed it to the audience, and repeated part of Verse 23: “She shall be called woman.” She kept removing objects from the backpack and showing them to the audience—a plastic clog, an oven glove, a comb, a makeup kit—and every time she repeated that part of the verse, “She shall be called woman,” with the liturgical chant, signaling to the audience that they should join in the “chorus.” She left her place at the front of the room and stepped toward the audience, signaling that everyone should take out some object from the backpack and pass it to the person sitting next to him. She organized a chain of action: (1) removal of the item from the backpack; (2) raising it high in the air so that everyone could see it; (3) recitation by the audience of “She shall be called woman” according to the liturgical chant. The actress returned to the front of the stage and directed the audience’s activity from there. Then she turned her back to the spectators and changed her clothes without allowing the audience to see her exposed body. When she turned back to the audience, she was in a freer costume, wearing a long skirt of soft, Indian cloth and a broad white, peasant style shirt. She walked over to the backpack, which was in the audience, took a tampon out of it, held it up so that the spectators could see it, and encouraged them to join in the “chorus.” Then she suddenly left the room. Another actress, with a severe look, indicated to the
spectators that they should rise and go to the next room.

Changing clothes in public without revealing any part of the body is one example of the way the women tested boundaries in their play. This action on the stage questioned the concept of modesty: is modesty an action or merely an appearance? Was the action performed in public immodest, although not a single part of the actress’ body was revealed? Did the final result of the immodest action—the wearing of more modest attire—make the daring deed acceptable? This actress also questioned the opposite norm, which prevails among secular theater professionals, the norm of nudity, the lack of modesty. By testing the concept of modesty in both societies in which the actress functioned—orthodox and secular—she showed how both societies insist on adopting external signs in order to convey social messages: Orthodox society insists on modesty, whereas secular society insists on displaying the naked body. The intermediate solution that she chose neutralized what feminists call the “masculine gaze,” which turns a women from subject to an object of desire. She did this by diverting the audience’s attention from her body, which was transformed from that of a proper, tailored woman to a girl dressed casually.

The next room in which the audience was invited to sit was narrow. A screen was placed at the back, and two wooden benches were arranged perpendicular to the stage. After the audience was seated, the actress who had appeared in the previous scene asked for a woman volunteer, she dressed her in a long skirt, placed a hat on her head, and gave her a text to recite. She instructed her how to stand and how to use her voice in order to transmit messages and emotions to the audience. From time to time she halted the recitation to instruct the volunteer again. She produced new texts and called for new volunteers to read them, dressing them in different clothes and instructing them to read the texts out loud. The texts were real letters written by the actress, which presented her personal story to the audience: born in an ultra-Orthodox
family from Bnei-Brak, a coordinator of the ultra-Orthodox, Zionistic youth movement, Ezra, as an adolescent, pressure on her family from rabbis to dissuade her from studying in Beit-Zvi, the secular acting school, a young woman involved in a romantic relationship. At the end of the scene, the audience was asked to stand at attention while a recording was played of the anthem of the Ezra youth movement.

Rogelakh for the Sabbath

From a distance the audience heard faint screams and shouts: “Let me out! Let me out of here!” An actress indicated to the spectators that they were to enter one of the narrow, dark passages between the theater spaces. Crowded together, in absolute darkness, the audience listened to the shouts of distress. Suddenly a figure emerged from a corner and raced out of the room from out of a kind of sleeping bag, and the audience followed her into the next room, which was lit with bright fluorescent lights. The spectators sat on benches that had been arranged on the sides of the room. On the sill of one of the high windows, above the spectators’ heads, a woman dressed in a white robe with a headscarf sat in fetal position. When the audience was seated, they heard a song to the words of a poem by Leah Goldberg, “I Came, Answer Me—He Did Not Answer Me,” as performed by Ahinoam Nini.¹⁸⁶ When the song was over, the actress climbed down from the windowsill and asked for two male volunteers to sit cross-legged in the center of the room. She gave each of them a long, white candle and lit it, and at their feet she spread a rectangular white cloth that looked like a double bed sheet. Then she asked another volunteer to lie down on half of the bed that the cloth symbolized. If the volunteer moved, he was asked with annoyance to return to his seat, and another volunteer was chosen to replace him. Between one eliminated

¹⁸⁶ A popular Israeli singer known in the United States as Noa.
volunteer and another, the actress ran quickly around the room. After a few vain attempts to find an appropriate volunteer, she left the cloth with no one on it. Once again she raced around the room, which was now lit only by the two candles. While running, the actress told about a Sabbath evening when everyone had gone to sleep: Mom, Dad, her brother, her sister, and she herself. After another turn around the room she sat on the sheet, out of breath, and she tried to shake off an imaginary figure lying on it. She shouted hysterically, “Rafi! Get up!” She did this several times, and suddenly the fluorescent lights came on again. All at once the actress changed the character she had been portraying until then. She stepped over to trays laden with rogelakh [a kind of pastry often served on the Sabbath], which she had prepared, and with a forgiving, soft smile she insisted that everyone in the audience should take a pastry while again and again she recited the halakha forbidding mourning on the Sabbath. After the audience finished eating, other actresses and a few women from the audience formed a circle around the actress and sang a verse from Psalm 93: “The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their waves.” The actress stood in the center of the circle with her legs planted in place and her upper body limp. This position enabled the women around her to move her as if she were an object devoid of life and will. She continued standing that way until she lost her balance and fell to the floor, where she remained supine. The other actresses indicated to the spectators that they were to pass on to another space to see the next scene.

The rogelakh scene clearly presented the price that a life lived according to halakha exacts from a woman whose husband dies on the Sabbath. Postponement of mourning is presented as unnatural, making the woman hysterical, on the one hand, and paralyzing her, on the other. The natural ceremonies of mourning for her husband’s death are postponed until the end of the Sabbath, and until then she must act normally. She is unable to act according to
her own needs or according to those of her family. The theatrical metaphor of a woman moved about by her friends at the end of the scene can be interpreted as the erasure of her independent essence and her delivery into the responsibility of the power-wielding community, which acts according to halakha. The supportive circle surrounding her at the end of the scene was at the same time the circle that deprived her of the power and freedom of action. She was forced to express the spontaneous feelings of loss of control and hysteria in private, in darkness, hidden from view. The screams from the beginning of the scene continued to reverberate in the small room for a long time. Feminist theoreticians like Diana Hunter, Shirley Garner, Catherine Clément, and Hélène Cixous argue that hysteria is a language of protest in which, to paraphrase Bordo, one may see the woman’s body as a surface on which the conventional patterns of femininity are clearly exposed to all.¹⁸⁷ In Rogelakh, aggressive hysteria is gradually transformed into total passivity, while the halakha forbidding mourning on the Sabbath is mumbled over and over again.

**Commandments and Customs**

This passage, on the subject of commandments that girls must observe, was taken from the “Activipedia”¹⁸⁸ and recited together by all the members of the group. The text refers to commandments women must observe such as separating some of the dough when baking bread, ritual immersion following menstruation, and lighting Sabbath candles. They recited the passages at an accelerating pace, mentioning and ridiculing such customs as the number of Sabbath candles lit by women in various communities.

¹⁸⁸ The Hebrew title is “Hafa’alopedia,” referring to a handbook of activities—games, stories, passages to read and dramatize—for children and adolescents, organized according to the holiday calendar and significant events such as Bar- and Bat-Mitzvah. It is used by counselors in youth movements as a source of ideas for activities.
This was their way of criticizing the excessive concern with custom and the study of how exactly to fulfill the commandments that typifies the state religious schools:

A Jewish woman must light two candles on the eve of the Sabbath, one corresponding to [they all shout] “remember,” and the other corresponding to [they all shout] “keep.”

In a number of communities, women are accustomed to lighting according to the number of souls in the household. Those who are especially observant light seven candles corresponding to the seven days of the week. Others light fifty-two, according to the number of weeks in the year. Some light 365 according to the number of days in the year. Others light 613, according to the number of commandments. This year some women lit 5761 candles corresponding to the Hebrew year. And in 1945 the women of Germany had the custom of lighting six million candles to light up their Sabbath.

The group scene about the number of candles customarily lit on Sabbath eve was intended to show that state religious education went overboard in explaining customs (“the reasons for the commandments”) to the point of absurdity. Obsessive preoccupation with the subject ultimately made it unimportant, and in order to illustrate this, the “interpreters” were led to make light of the Holocaust. The final line, dealing with the Holocaust,

189 This refers to a slight discrepancy in the two versions of the Ten Commandments referring to the Sabbath, cf. Ex. 20:8 (“Remember the Sabbath day”) and Deut. 5:12 (“Keep the Sabbath day”).
was added by one of the actresses who was “crazy about black humor” (Alufi, Interview, 2002). The preoccupation with customs and with technical details connected to the commandments—in this instance the lighting of Sabbath candles—was ridiculous and meaningless in their view.

Prayer: Death is Another Stage in the Search

This scene presented the personal struggle of the actress with the experience of prayer. By means of physical work reminiscent of Dervish ceremonies, the actress tried to achieve religious ecstasy and to cleave to God. The spectators were asked to blindfold themselves and hold each other’s hands. They were then led single file to the place where the scene was performed. They climbed the steps to the second story of a narrow structure, and only there did they remove the blindfolds. From there they looked down onto a square space in one corner of which the silhouette of a prostrate person was traced in white chalk, as at a crime scene. A rope ladder dangled from the ceiling, and other actresses stood in the space across from the audience, singing a High Holiday hymn: “Our Father, our King, we have no King but You.” In another performance, the actress’s husband sang the hymn, accompanied by a keyboard. The actress, Rachel Keshet, wearing a long white dress and a white linen scarf over her hair, whirled around like a dervish. From time to time, out of breath, she would join in the singing, but she concentrated her attention on the whirling. The director stood with the audience on the upper level, watching her and giving her instructions such as, “right hand up” and “close your eyes,” as well as theological guidance: “Wisdom is cleaving to God,” “Do you see Him?” “You must vanish,” “Let God come to you rather than going toward Him.” From time to time she stopped whirling and tried to climb the rope ladder and stay suspended between heaven and earth, her face turned upward. At
a certain stage, she fell to the floor, exactly on the chalk silhouette. She lay without moving, and then the audience heard a recorded monologue in which she spoke about her difficulties with prayer and her desire for a Temple:

I don’t manage to pray. Sometimes I manage to play and sing with my husband, but I want to pray by myself! Without my husband and without music and melodies. Just me and the Holy One, blessed be He. But I don’t manage. I don’t know how to pray. I just stand there with my legs pressed together—or not—and recite the words without any special meaning. I don’t succeed in praying. I don’t succeed in singing... I want a Temple, I want to offer sacrifices, I want to make donations. (From Bat-mizvah: halom veshivro, 2001)

Keshet explained this scene as an opportunity to adapt and explore a central area in her life: prayer. She stated that the exercise, on which she worked throughout the year, justified the effort that was involved with being a member of the group. She was the only one who already had a child at that time. In the supportive atmosphere of a group of women who were familiar with the experience of prayer and with the guidance of directors who regarded the theater as an appropriate arena for the quest for spirituality, Keshet devoted herself to the examination and search for a way to cleave to God. Before seeing the scene, the audience underwent an experience parallel to that which Keshet had undergone during the rehearsals: blindness and seeking the way. The spectators were blindfolded and led, while holding each other’s hands, to the place where the scene was performed. The forced blindness, which created instability, was a theatrical metaphor for the way the actress had groped to find a path to spirituality with the help of the group.

The scene changed from one performance to another. At one
performance the director, Abu-Ali, greeted the audience with a blessing when it reached the place where the scene was staged, and he introduced himself as a teacher in a “School of Prayer.” He taught some of the members of the audience how to whirl like a dervish. Keshet took part in a lesson in which he proposed to the spectators that they should recite “Allah Akbar” while whirling, and while this was happening she made comments to him connected with his national identity:

So then I said to him, “When you shoot at us on the roads, do you also think about Muhammad?” And also when you threw a Molotov cocktail at my neighbor, two days ago, did you think about Muhammad?” And he kept on and on, as if paying no attention, and he said: “You are very, very low, climb up, let go, let go, you’re not managing to let go.” And I did succeed. I shut my eyes. (Keshet, Interview, 2001)

After the performance, sharp criticism was voiced regarding the “politicization” of the scene, which was supposed to be dealing with spirituality. Some people were offended by the very connection of the ecstasy of dervishes with the actress’ search for a way of connecting with the Holy One, blessed be He, and they regarded it as “contempt and hatred for God” (Keshet, Interview, 2001). In the performance that I saw, Keshet’s scene was different: the audience was not part of the dramatic action but was placed at the side, next to Abu-Ali on the upper level, and they watched the actress from that angle. The change in the location of the audience and its placement next to the director emphasized the common, inter-religious aspiration for spirituality, which the audience witnessed. Separating the audience from Keshet gave her freedom to act alone in a personal and intimate search, using her body

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190 The performance took place during the second Intifada, when Israeli settlers were attacked on the roads of the West Bank.
in a space free of obstacles. Keshet focused the communication between her and Abu-Ali, who was standing with the audience on the upper level, closer to heaven, only on instructions about how to whirl (“This way, Haled?”). She made certain that at the end of the exercise the audience received a recorded explanation about the reasons that had led her to work on this subject. The explanation was played after the actress crawled into the chalk silhouette, which was like the outline dawn on the floor around a corpse at a crime scene.

Everybody got a space to perform in from the Center. I got a space where they had worked on a play about crime. I performed in that play later. It was called Yareach maleh [Full Moon]. There was a drawing on the floor in that space. That’s what was there. I decided to relate to it that way, and there was apparently a reason for that, but I hadn’t thought about it till now. I could also have played hopscotch with it. But now that I think about it, maybe the reason I decided to come out of it and go into it is the message that in the total closeness to God I was seeking there is a touch of death—and crawling into the silhouette is like dying. Death is in fact another stage in the search. (Keshet, Telephone Conversation, 2004)

“Noigmeru hapilonim?” [No more little elephants?]"

At the start of the scene, the actress, wearing a matching skirt and jacket and with bedroom slippers on her feet scanned the young people in the audience, and from time to time she wrote something down in a big notebook. She was holding a magnifying glass and a ruler, and large, old-fashioned spectacles were perched on her nose. Her hair was gathered on the back of her
neck, and she had a stern expression. She asked several members of the audience to stand in two parallel lines, and she inspected them, like a teacher, or perhaps like a matchmaker, or perhaps like a commanding officer. Meanwhile she asked some of the questions:

– What do you do?
– I’m a student.
– No, what do you do?
– All sorts of things.
– I’ll write down “self-employed.”

The matchmaker wrote the information in the large notebook. She gave the volunteers the feeling that they were merchandise. She examined them from the front and the back, asked them to turn around, measured the length of the skirt worn by one of the volunteers, who was a candidate for an arranged marriage, making a comment like, “We have to make do with what there is.” She interviewed one of the volunteers, and when she heard that her family name was Saban she stopped talking and seemed slightly confused: “That isn’t... That’s not an Ashkenazi....” Finally she said the whole sentence: “That’s not an Ashkenazi family name.” And she immediately sent her back to the line.

At the end of the scene, two actresses dressed the matchmaker in a fancy bridal gown. The hall was lit by candles and a single spotlight. The actress walked to the other end of the room—to the threshold, which was covered with white satin, and on it were baby figurines of elephants made of marble, glass, and wood in various sizes. She leaned over and, using the baby elephants, she illustrated the legend that, since completing the Creation, God has been concerned with “pairing people off, making this one rich and that one poor” (Midrash Tanhuma Vilna, Ki Tisa, 5 fol. 117a). After she formed about six pairs, one baby elephant was left over, and the

191 In the play, *Al tagidu “mayim mayim,”* this character did indeed become an army officer. See below.
actress improvised on the text of the Midrash:

She walked and walked and walked and walked until she met the Holy One, blessed be He. She said to Him: “Oh Holy One, have you run out of baby elephants?” He said to her: “Sorry, I don’t talk with baby elephants, but sometimes I send them a dream.” Someone’s daughter fell asleep, and a dream came before her eyes about the most splendid redhead man she had ever seen: handsome with a sense of humor, and she knew right away, that this was her redhead. The redhead said: “Remove worry from your heart and close your eyes. For I, too, am seeking.”

The light went out, and the actress lit a small candle to illuminate the dark space. Her companions, who were standing at the other end of the room, starting singing “A Woman of Valor” again, this time softly and in harmony, and not as a parody. The actress joined them. The scene ended with harmonious singing, while the actresses stood embracing one another.

Discourse About Censorship: Going (Almost) All the Way

The actresses were aware of the subversive nature of the scenes, and they tried to make some of them more moderate. The discourse that arose within the group dealt with the level of internal censorship that the actresses should exert, so that the invited audience would not be offended by the verbal texts, which dealt, among other things, with intimate family matters, or with the blunt physical action. However, even after applying inner censorship, the harshness of the messages of the play was not mitigated. It should be mentioned that they never consulted an external authority such as a rabbi. They all emphasized their autonomy in making decisions about halakha and about modesty,
and certainly about the content and the form of their theatrical work.

Because the rabbis are chicken, and they don’t dare break out: “I’m little—I don’t have broad enough wings” [spoken in mockery]. I know myself and halakha and Judaism and what happens in halakha, and I’ll decide what to do. No one is going to decide for me. (Keshet, Interview, 2001)

I consult with my husband, who’s a lot like me that way. We depend on ourselves. Mainly I share my doubts with him, but not any authority. (Gal, Interview, 2002)

I don’t remember that I ever consulted a rabbi about anything. I did discuss things with my husband, and we acted according to common sense. He pulled one way, I pulled that way, we had a discussion, we resolved what we wanted to. Just with the wedding we had some doubts about the marriage contract our parents wanted. So we said: “Okay, we’ll go the rabbi who’s marrying us.” Let’s not get into the subject of asking a rabbi, although there are rabbis that I admire or, rather, my husband admires—rabbis who taught him, and whom he respects a lot. I’m willing to respect it if he goes to ask a rabbi, but he also knows that they’re always stringent. I have books, and I know how to open them by myself. (Alufi, Interview, 2002)

Although some of the members of the group decided explicitly that one of the goals of their theatrical work was to be subversive, they respected the others, who didn’t agree with them. So negotiations developed about some of the movements, about the use of blunt language, and about content that could be dispensed
with or modified so it wouldn’t embarrass the audience. A few gestures of good will were made. For example, one actress agreed to not to hug members of the audience, even though they were close relatives, so as not to embarrass people in the audience who had been invited by another actress. Another actress exchanged her costume for a more modest one, although the one she had wanted to wear suited the character she was playing—a twelve-year old girl who was celebrating her Bat Mitzvah. These concessions should be seen as an integral part of the process of consolidating the group. To an outsider, the group might have seemed homogeneous, but the members of the group felt that they were very varied in the level of their observance of the commandments and customs and in the degree to which each of them was connected to national religious society.

The censorship that the members of the group imposed upon themselves was an expression of the actresses’ own apprehensions regarding the theater they themselves were creating—an unconventional fringe theater, blunt and critical. In the transition from an inner, intensive process of work to performance before an audience, they found themselves adopting an Orthodox attitude, opposed to the theater, according to which it was necessary to protect the audience from the negative influence of the theater:

I don’t want to restrict art for the sake of religion, but I myself won’t do anything to embarrass my audience. That’s my goal, and it’s very hard for me. I’m still relatively moderate... It’s important to me for there to be a place where everyone can see. It’s important to me for the people I know personally and also professionally, that none of the people who see me will be offended... It’s very complicated. For example, we all sing, and there are some people who are bothered because we sing, but I’m not willing to give up singing. So I don’t have clear
boundaries. I don’t have clear laws. I’m not a Code of halakha. But I do have some principles—I don’t want to offend my audience. (Keshet, Interview, 2001)

It is possible to see the self-censorship as a victory of national religious education over the principle of total commitment to art. As long as the women were working in theater as part of a work process, they allowed themselves to experience the totality of the theatrical experience. But when they had to appear before an Orthodox audience—even a sympathetic one—they found it hard to continue in that path. In public they preferred to restrict, even slightly, the daring they had showed inwardly. At the same time, the discussion they held before their first public performance influenced the group’s policy and the relations among the members, and later on their relations with the audience. The creative freedom that the Orthodox actresses enjoyed at the Center for Alternative Theater therefore had two aspects: on the one hand, the creation of original and daring theater, but also, on the other hand, a decision to limit the daring and directness by applying self-censorship.

Al tagidu “mayim mayim”

The second play presented by the Dosiot, in 2002, in the Akko Festival contest, was Al tagidu “mayim mayim,” directed by Miri Lavi. The play was constructed on two narrative cycles: one was based on a passage in the Talmud that deals with the encounter of great rabbis with the world of esoteric knowledge, a passage known as “Four Entered the Orchard,” and the second cycle consisted of personal monologues composed by the actresses. When the play was presented a second time in Tel Aviv, only three of the actresses

192 The playwright Danny Horowitz wrote a play based on this passage, but the members of the group were unfamiliar with it and created an original play of their own, which was different in character and content.
who had performed in it in Akko took part, and it changed in character and content. The group had ceased to exist, and all the members had gone their own way. In 2004 three members of the group, Rachel Keshet, Tova Birnbaum, and Rachel Katz, reorganized for the Akko Festival of Alternative Israeli Theater, and they presented a play called *Hatokh dak, dak* [Chop it Very, Very Fine].

![The “Dosiot” Group: Al tagidu “mayim mayim [Don’t Say “Water Water”]
Photographer: Binyamin Hayman](image)

**The Content and Inner Connections**

The personal monologues that were presented by the members of the group consisted of personal interpretations that they gave to the story of the four rabbis: Shim’on ben Azai, “who looked and died”; Rabbi Shim’on ben Zoma, “who looked and came to harm” (lost his mind); Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, “who looked and ‘cut the shoots’” (denied the existence of God); and Rabbi Akiba, “who entered safely and left safely.” The passages were interwoven, and from time to time they were connected to the whole passage, which were interpreted onstage by Keshet, the husband of one of the actresses. The transitions between the monologues and the canonical texts were rapid and generally seen by the audience as random, which added to the difficulty of following the course of
the play and comprehending its messages. The truncated quality emphasized the lack of wholeness of the characters who appeared and vanished during the play and whose repeated appearance intensified the content and the emotion that the characters wished to convey: bitterness, rebellion, expectation, disappointment. The theatrical action took place on different levels of the Burj Courtyard simultaneously, and this caused the dispersion of the spectators’ attention and emphasized a post-modern message: it is impossible to predetermine a single attitude toward any truth; not everything that is visible to the eye is reality; and one must make it possible for many interpretations of reality to exist side by side. This message can be learned from the Gemara, where it is related that on the way to the orchard one passes a place that looks like water but is pure marble. The story is surprising, because it is difficult to confuse these two opposites:

It is a metaphor for the blurring of the ordinary eye. Because there are two poles—stone and water. God says, “When you reach the place of pure marble stones, do not say ‘water water,’” leave your own impressions outside, because everything is deceptive. If you see water—that is not correct, believe me. Leave your consciousness outside. What you see is not reality. Then Orly says, “When you see the play—don’t react, and don’t respond!” It’s very communicative. Here’s the connection between looking at the orchard and looking at the play: telling the audience, “Don’t think that you understand that it isn’t marble—it’s water! Just look,

The director was not happy with the space that was offered to the group by the administration of the festival contest and found the Burj Courtyard, which had many levels, was adjacent to the sea, and also had fruit trees. It was neglected, and for that reason the members of the group also did the physical labor of preparing the place for an audience. The physical characteristics (trees, levels, a half-broken wall) dictated the direction to a large degree.
sit, listen, go home and think. Enter the orchard and don’t “cut the shoots.” (Keshet, Interview, 2002)

Yiftah’s explanations of the passage were presented during the play with interruptions, but in linear fashion. They were based on Yiftah’s existential and personal reading on the subject of the upper worlds and on the associative connections that he created among the sources in which the concepts of “the Orchard” and “rising up” are mentioned: Bible, Mishnah, Gemara, Midrash, and even stories by the great modern Hebrew writer Agnon in which the concepts of “the Orchard” and rising up are mentioned:

We will deal with stories from the Midrash that speak of the subject called “the Orchard” and “Contemplating the Chariot.” The main problem that we have is that we have no text that starts with one, two, three, four, and tells us “the Orchard” is this way, a certain number of men enter it, and there are certain things there... For the moment we don’t know what the “story of the Chariot” is, but the Mishnah says, “One does not interpret it alone.” What does that mean? That even the person who knows how to interpret it can’t teach... It’s something that a person has to know by himself—this ability to interpret has to come from within us.

The program that was distributed before the play emphasized its unconventional character and the unwillingness of the group to commit itself to a uniform interpretation or to a single, clear message. Unlike an ordinary program, that explains the play, this program left the spectators confused even before seeing it:


Twice during the play the actresses became narrators to the audience sitting close to them. In those passages each actress spoke at a different pace, with different intonation, to a different group in the audience. In that way they turned the hall into a kind of noisy Beit Midrash [House of Study] in which people learn in pairs. The study took place simultaneously, but not at a uniform pace, just as in a yeshiva.

Description of the Play

Introduction and Beginning

In response to a signal given by the director, the audience entered a narrow tunnel, lit by candles, and from a distance they heard the shouts of a woman officer announcing a lineup in honor of “the acceptance of the Torah.” She called each of those under her command, the actresses, by name and asked whether she was willing to accept the Torah. Each girl soldier responded positively with a military cry: “Yes, ma’am!” At the end of the lineup, the woman officer announced formally and in a commanding tone, “Soldiers, you have now accepted the Torah. From this moment on you must think about it day and night, is that clear?” They answered positively in a chorus. After that she ordered the girl soldiers to stand at attention and to sing “the anthem.” They sang the religious song, associated with certain holidays, the Sabbath, and Orthodox youth movements, “The Torah of the Lord is

To avoid exhausting the reader, I have not described the play in full.
innocent, restoring the soul,” in three part harmony. This opening might have been intended as a metaphor for the religious tension to which people who have accepted the yoke of the commandments are subject: on the one hand, the Orthodox framework is rigid like a military framework, and on the other hand it is a framework with harmonious qualities, in which many varieties and voices blend in. When the song was finished, the spectators were given a signal to walk through the tunnel, and they found themselves in the Burj Courtyard, where the play took place. They were required to climb high stone steps and sit where stools had been placed.

**Renewed Opening: a Study Framework With a Male Teacher**

The play began again when the audience was seated on the stools that were dispersed on the levels of the Burj. The voice of the male teacher was heard from the branches of a tree on the upper level, near where the spectators were sitting. He spoke about the difficulty of understanding the “Story of the Chariot,” which appears in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, and the passage known as “Four Entered the Orchard,” which is connected to the Story of the Chariot. Both passages deal with the human encounter with holiness and with the upper worlds. The renewed opening of the play, in which the teacher’s voice was heard, although he was not seen, because he was sitting in the branches of a tree on the highest level of the courtyard, created the connotation of the revelation at Mount Sinai, where the Israelites “saw the voices.” Perhaps this opening was intended to emphasize the sanctity of the text and the nearly divine authority of the interpreter. In the

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195 Yiftah Keshet, a musician and rabbi, the husband of Rachel, a member of the group. As asked by the director, he taught the group about the passage in the Talmud during the months preceding the preparation for the competition. She wanted to transmit the experience of studying with Yiftah to the audience and asked him to appear in the play. I discuss this decision at length below.
following scene, the teacher, Yiftah, appears sitting among the tangled branches of an olive tree. Dressed in white linen clothing, with a large, colorful skullcap on his head, and ritual fringes hanging out—a typical New Age costume for yeshiva students—he accompanied the audience throughout the play, deciphering the complex, canonical texts in a calm voice.

The tree on the lower level was illuminated, and among its branches an actress could be seen, dressed in white. She recited verses from the Bible that dealt with the creation of woman (Gen. 2:18-25) according to the traditional cantillation. At the end of the scene, the teacher, who had meanwhile climbed down out of the tree, appeared before the audience and continued the introduction by giving an explanation of the Mishnah (Hagiga, ch. 1, fol. 1) as if the actress in white had not interrupted it.

“All are required to appear”—that appearance is an embrace. What is to appear? It is to come to the Temple three times a year, to look at the House of the King from outside. That is something that everyone can do. But to enter the inner chambers—only unique people can do that.

In a sharp transition, an army officer appeared, dressed in army pants, a long-sleeved army tee-shirt, with an army shirt over it. She had a backpack and a helmet on her back, and a whistle and army dog-tags hung around her neck. She blew the whistle after every sentence and order, and the whole time she ran in place. The actresses ran up and down the stairs according to her orders, as if they were soldiers under her command.

The Shared Study of the Actresses, the Teacher, and the Audience

Yiftah continued reciting the passage from the Mishnah: “All are subject to the command to appear [before the Lord], excepting
a deaf-mute, an imbecile, a child, one of doubtful sex, one of double sex, women, slaves” [Hagiga 1:1]. The actresses repeated each category, but not in a uniform tone or pace. Right afterward the commander’s whistle was heard. Each of the actresses turned to a small group of spectators, among whom she was sitting, and began to tell, at her own pace, Agnon’s story about the Rabbe of Afta, who taught that in order to influence the world, you must first influence your whole immediate surroundings:

Come, let me tell you something fine that the Rabbi of Afta told. This is what the Rabbi of Afta told. One day I saw that in heaven they weren’t obeying me. I was distressed [literally ‘my mind was weakened’], and I was sorry. While I was in that sorrow, I saw that the earth was not obeying me, and not only the earth, but also the people of my town did not heed me. Not even the people of my household listened to me. I began to examine this thing, and I did not move until I restored my wife’s heart to me. Since my wife began to obey me, my son began to obey me, and since the people of my household obeyed me, all the cities and all the places would obey me, and the earth once again heeded me, and since the earth heeded me, they also listened to me in heaven. (S.Y. Agnon, Haesh veha’etsim, p. 120; Mi’atsmi el ‘atsmi, p. 327)

After they finished the story, Yiftah continued explaining the passage about the students of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai–Ben Azai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuya, and Rabbi Akiba.

Now, in the world of the Mishnah and the Tosefta, the name of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai has special meaning. In our language here he is actually the symbol of all Jewish creativity, of all the literature of halakha, of everything that existed
after the destruction of the Temple. In the story that we know from the Talmud, he symbolizes the departure from Jerusalem, acknowledgment that the Temple had been destroyed, and the beginning of something new.

At the same time, the actresses shuffled up to the highest level and arranged themselves on two levels of the ruined building. One actress, Rachel Keshet, wore a reddish-brown Indian cloak, and she wrapped herself in a white man’s prayer shawl from head to foot, the way men do during the prayers on the Day of Atonement. She stood before her comrades, who had gathered behind her. After Yiftah finished speaking, she began to recite the prayer, “Here am I, poor in deeds,” to the traditional Ashkenazic melody, changing the gender of the Hebrew words from masculine to feminine. In the background music with an Oriental-Indian flavor was heard, and the actresses danced in Indian style while saying things that sounded like mantras (“to find a new place” [in Hebrew], “love yourself” [in English], and “shshshs”) again and again. Adding ceremonial-theatrical elements taken from the Ashram of Osho in Pune, where she and her husband had stayed with their baby girl, was a significant and legitimate connection for the actress in her search for connection with God. The borrowing from another culture suited the New Age spirit that permeates certain circles within Orthodox Judaism in Israel. It also has a strong universal

196 This is a kind of confession recited by the prayer leader on the High Holy Days, who, although he has been chosen for the important task of representing the congregation and leading it in prayer, admits that he is unworthy of doing so, because of his sins. It is recited out loud in part and in a whisper in part, before the Musaf [additional] prayers on the High Holy Days, and it is one of the high points in the service: “Here am I, poor in deeds, trembling and fearful in awe of Him who dwells in the praises of Israel, I have come to stand and implore Him for His people Israel, who have sent me, and even though I am not worthy and fit for it…”

197 This subjects is discussed at length by Jonathan Garb in articles and in his book, *Yehidei hasegulot yehiyu le’adarim; ‘iyunim bekabalat hameah ha’esrim* (2005) [translated as: “The Chosen will Become Herds”: Studies in Twentieth
message: the actress is free to take elements from everywhere and from any religion in order to “connect with God,” and to leave that encounter safely, just like Rabbi Akiba in the Orchard story. She said that even in the emptiness that she saw in Pune—emptiness that she represented on stage by having the other actresses repeat sentences in Hebrew, English, and just sounds—through them one can reach a higher level of spirituality.

**Efforts**

After the prayer scene, a figure wearing a satin magician’s cloak appeared behind a stone wall. Her pockets were full of objects, and she spoke in a thick, low, masculine voice, quoting the Book of Genesis: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” She recited other passages from the Torah along with misquotations. Every sentence was accompanied by an illustrative dramatic action that made the quotation into a kind of magic charm; for example: “Let there be light! … And God created hail [she scattered pieces of gold paper] and very large stones fell!” And, in the same tone, “And Moses struck the rock, and water came out of it!” She pulled a cardboard tube from one of her pockets and struck the stone wall. She seemed to be surprised when the wall failed to respond, so she repeated the sentence, “And water came out of it!” Again she was astonished that nothing happened, and her tone of voice became a childish complaint directed at God: “Why can I do everything You ask and behave so nicely, and when I ask You for something once, you don’t help?!” After that she placed a cardboard box on a stone wall and put a teddy bear in front of it, and she spoke softly, with an authoritative, masculine voice: “Return to me, wayward daughter, and I will show you secrets and hidden recesses within you. Return to me, and I will place you on a galloping horse and I will take you far

away to another land. Return to me, and I will show you...” In mid-sentence, suddenly she and all her objects fell backward and disappeared from the view of the audience.

The Figure of “Other”—the Sinful One

The actresses who were dispersed among the levels of the courtyard made circular motions with their hands like the motions women make when they light Sabbath candles, and each of them recited a personal prayer, as is done after lighting the candles: “Build me a bridge between heaven and earth,” “build me a Temple,” “Fill me like a bottle in water,” “Find me a husband.” The actress who had been sitting in the branches of a tree leaned over and removed a cigarette from her brassiere and lit it quickly with one of the Sabbath candles, while looking around her to see whether anyone had seen her sinful act—lighting a cigarette and smoking it on the Sabbath. From every direction the actresses could be heard, simultaneously reciting different passages from the ethical work, Mesilat yesharim. Chapter Thirteen of that book, which discusses asceticism, states, “There is no pleasure in this world that does not draw some sin after it.” The quoted passage deals with the question of how a person must satisfy his or her needs without sinning, and it presents the example of a rabbi who denied himself physical pleasures, including sexual relations with his wife. While the actresses recited the passage, the actress who had lit the cigarette smeared chocolate on herself and on her white dress. She descended from the middle to the lower level and faced the audience, and she recited a monologue spoken in the name of “Other,” the appellation given to the sinful Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, who spoke to his former student, Rabbi Meir. The monologue expressed yearning for departure from the Orthodox framework and the stifling feeling within it, the desire to depart

\[\text{198 } The \text{ Path of the Righteous, by Moshe Haim Luzzatto, written in the eighteenth century.}\]
from the comfortable and protective framework of religion:
    I could teach you heaps and heaps of halakha, Meir. Is that what you want? They’re so superfluous. Take it from me. Learn from me and go on. Don’t you understand? You chose—I chose. You chose the warmth of the house, and I chose the heat of the desert. You chose the shining eyes at the Sabbath table, and I chose the eyes burning with tears of loneliness. You chose the purified truth, the correct, and the familiar, and I chose the forbidden, the Other, because I couldn’t choose any other way, Meir. I was Other, and I will remain Other.

The actress spoke in a bitter, determined manner, and even though she was portraying Rabbi Elisha, who “cut the shoots,” she looked and sounded like a sensual, seductive woman. At the end of the scene, when she reached the lower level, the prayer, “God, full of mercy,” was heard, recited by another actress who was standing there. The actress imitated the vocal ornaments of professional army cantors who recite this prayer at memorial ceremonies and military funerals, and thereby she perhaps intimated that the place of the sinner was outside of society, and he was to be prayed for as though he were dead.

**He Looked and Came to Harm—He Went Out of Focus**

The whistle was blown, and the officer appeared to portray Ben Zoma, who “looked and came to harm.” She ran in place on the stone wall on the middle level. The teacher’s voice was heard, explaining, “Ben Zoma looked and came to harm, which is to say, he went out of focus.” Then the officer began to tell the Midrash about the Holy One, blessed be He, who sits in heaven and pairs people off in couples, from Midrash Tanhuma. She stood in

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199 Recited in memory of the dead.
200 See p. 252 above. This was the text recited by the matchmaker who
the posture of a commanding officer with her legs spread and her hands behind her back, and she announced in a masculine, military tone, “Like some of the women soldiers here, she found no sign. And quite a few of the women soldiers here, and also our Matron, fell asleep.” She made the actresses run around as though they were recruits in basic training who had to perform some task. In this case, it was to look for the sign that God gives to every woman about her future spouse. “Hurry up, you have twenty seconds to find a sign,” called the officer, and counted the passing seconds. The figure of the magician was seen on the side, and her demand for a sign—“If you exist, then split the sea in two!”—joined that of the officer. The magician suddenly disappeared behind the stone wall again, and the officer returned, blew her whistle, and gave the girls in her squad another ten seconds to find a sign of their future husband. Again she counted the passing seconds, and in the end she announced to her soldiers, who were standing at attention, in a military manner:

Like in our squad, Somebody’s Daughter also didn’t find a sign, and like quite a few girl soldiers here, she fell asleep. In her dream she saw Somebody’s Son, smart and with a good sense of humor...

You’ve got to look—Squad Three! I want to hear the whole squad say …

She went up to the highest level in the courtyard and ran in place energetically, singing a song that was popular at the time of Sinai Campaign: “It’s no fable, pal, it’s no fable, pal—and not a wild dream…”

The Character of the Officer—a Woman of Valor

The character of the military commander represented the group’s conception of the figure of the Jewish Woman of Valor, who serves as an example and an ideal in the girls’ Orthodox appeared the year before in *Bat-mitzvah: halom veshivro*. 
education. The character was based on a visual translation of the Woman of Valor (who wore a soldier’s uniform and spoke in military orders), although she was the antithesis of the traditional Woman of Valor.201 This character suffered from a split: she was slightly androgynous, speaking and behaving like a man, but involved in what is considered a woman’s matter, match-making. Thus, she was abnormal, perhaps like unmarried women in national religious society, who are thought of as breaking social norms.202 There is view that being unmarried is a kind of craziness and aberration, as well as a failure to fulfill the national duty of establishing a Jewish family. The members of the group, or perhaps only the actress who worked on that character, wanted to create a parallel between that view and Ben Azai’s madness, after his encounter with the upper realms. The officer actively sought a mate; she gave orders and obeyed them herself, asked questions and answered them.

The character of the officer created the framework of the play. In the beginning, only her voice giving orders was heard, but at the end of the play she was visible to the spectators. The text used both at the beginning and the end of the play was the same, strengthening the cyclical feeling and the sense of completion of the play. The message that was conveyed by creating a parallel between rigid Orthodoxy and army life was that we are not always in control of our lives, despite the rigid frameworks of Orthodox Jewish observance, and military discipline. Just like the expectation of finding a spouse at the appropriate age, we must believe that the unbelievable will happen, as in the old song, “On Mount Sinai,” which the officer sang in a frenzy at the end of the scene. Despite everything, the officer showed that life within the Orthodox framework, accepting the yoke of the Torah, also has a harmonious

201 Halakha forbids women to wear men’s clothing, and this is just one of the reasons why many Orthodox women will not wear pants or serve in the army.

quality, like the marvelous song that the actresses sang in the ceremony of accepting the Torah at the beginning and end of the play.

**He Looked and Died**

An actress in a tight silver dress and high heels descended from the upper level. She gave an explanation about acting in the theater: the obligation to remember the character’s motivation, where it comes from, and where it is going, what are the character’s conflicts, and how the actress can resolve those conflicts.

Suddenly the magician appeared and told her that one day she almost choked while eating an egg. She spoke as though the egg were still stuck in her throat, and she tried to remove it from her open mouth. At the same time she tried to persuade God to save her, and in return she promised that she would never eat eggs again “in my life” and even to “free the hens from their horrible trucks into an open field.” She took white strings out of her mouth and started talking in a babyish way again, as though examining her relations with God, using expressions from prayers: “The egg has to go down, and You are a Merciful and Forgiving God who loves all flesh—what’s it to You to put an egg in a little girl’s mouth? That’s all I’m asking from You!” After that entreaty, she disappeared again behind the stone wall.

**Back to the Character of Other, Who Cut the Shoots**

Yiftah sang, “I am asleep, and my heart is awake” (from the Song of Songs), and immediately afterward he told about Elisha ben Abuya, who “cut the shoots.” Each actress turned to the people in the audience nearest her and told the story at her own pace, with her own intonation: Ben Abuya went to a prostitute on the Sabbath, but she recognized him as a rabbi learned in the Torah
and tried to dissuade him from having sex with her. He proved to her that he had severed himself from his past life as a great rabbi by picking radishes—thus violating one of the thirty-nine categories of work forbidden on the Sabbath.

An actress wearing a white dress with a crown of radishes on her head played the part of the prostitute in the story. In the background, the other actresses sang, “Many waters cannot quench love” (Song of Songs, 8:7). During the song the magician appeared. This time she stood in the pose of Superman on a stone wall, once again testing God: “God, if You exist, make me fly!” Immediately afterward the theatrical figure in the silver dress resumed her monologue about the theater as though she had not stopped. She declared dramatically: “The actor must be true!” Immediately thereafter the character of Other appeared in the white dress stained with chocolate, and she recited an improvised monologue based on Psalm 42, mingling desire for God with desire for a man and other, similar ideas:

“My soul thirsted for God,” for heights, for shouting, for yelling, for groaning, for roaring, for a caress, to flee, to escape, to begin, for the frightening, for the terrifying, for what makes me shake, tremble, hurt—for the living God... “When will I come and see the Countenance of God?”

Your face, God, is it here, too? Is it also my face? Is it also his face? When will He come and know ... me? Come quickly, because “My tear was my bread by day and night,” and sometimes my tear is more present than my sleep, because I thought about You, and I said to You: “Abyss calls to abyss,” abyss approaches abyss. Abyss deep below and abyss high above and I almost got there, and I fell, “All your breakers and waves passed over me,” and they called to me: “The songs of our nation are the
prayer to the living God, to the secret God, to the hidden God.

In this scene, the transitions from one character to another were very rapid. At the end of it, four actresses stood on the lower level and sang in three parts, in constantly accelerating tempo, “How splendid is the sight of the Priest,” from the Day of Atonement liturgy, where the ceremony performed in the Temple by the High Priest is described. The actress came down from the upper to the lower level while pushing a wheelbarrow that held a pottery jug and reciting the text about the service of the High Priest in the Temple on the Day of Atonement. When she reached the bottom, she waited there for the chorus of actresses. She placed a military helmet on each of them and scattered shiny gold powder on them. At the same time she continued reciting the text with growing enthusiasm and joy, almost in ecstasy, and the chorus accelerated the tempo of its song. At the end of the scene the actress’s voice, with what could be the laughter of exhaustion or emotional weeping, joined the chorus in impressive singing.

One of the singers in the chorus began to sing “Jerusalem of Gold” with a very pleasant voice. But after the first phrase, she seemed to be about to vomit. The actress who had just recited the text about the worship of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement scattered gold powder on her, so she tried to sing the second line of the well-known song. Her spasms of nausea grew worse, and the other actresses moved and bent over with her with every spasm. The actresses turned to face the rear wall and leaned against it in a pose that recalled the famous picture of the paratrooper leaning on the Western Wall after the liberation of Jerusalem in the Six Day War. The actress who was vomiting became quiet. This action was a message of protest against Israeli militarism and the materialism that emerged after the Six Day War instead of spirituality. Because of that, the holy place, “Jerusalem of Gold,” became nauseating, and the audience saw soldiers instead of the High Priest:
We want to have a Temple, and what we have today is people with helmets, with gold sprinkled on them. But it’s sprinkled on them, and it doesn’t raise them up—the gold does the opposite. (Keshet, Interview, 2002)

Orthodox Society—Fragmenting and Stifling

Once again the teacher’s voice was heard: “Until now we’ve been talking about the Orchard.” A monologue recited by a theatrical character with a thin body interrupted him. The actress tried to describe the process she had undergone when she played the role of Desdemona in Shakespeare’s Othello. Suddenly she fainted and fell over backward, and the other actresses, who were standing on a lower level, carried her down to where they had been standing and laid her on a long table. They took off her sweater and shoes and treated her body as if they were plucking feathers from a chicken. While they were handling her, they exchanged recipes for chicken soup, spoke about their daughters—married and unmarried—and offered each other advice about how to find a match for girls and whom they should marry. The conversation among the women was quite loud, with one rudely interrupting the other. From time to time the actress on the table would raise her head and try to sit up and tell the women something about her role as an actress. But they silenced her by force and made her lie down again.

Actress #1 [looking at the prone figure and touching her]: What is this? A quarter chicken?
There’s no meat on her.
She’s going out with a secular guy.
Is it okay to go out with a secular guy?
I told her, “Don’t go out with secular guys—they’re not all like Dad.”
The women are silent and look at the speaker with astonishment, and she immediately apologizes and says, “But he’s against returning Judea and Samaria.”

[They all sigh in relief] He’s an honest person. There are also some honest Arabs. [They try to silence the speaker.]

Actress #2: I want to use this platform [she looks at the audience] to tell my daughter, “Come home! You have no business being there! [She is referring to Judea and Samaria.] Come back to Haifa—the sea is there.

And nearby there’s a little theater. What’s it called? Akko.

[All of them, in agreement] Yes, Akko.

Actress #3: Forget the theater now. My daughter has to be a teacher!

Actress #2: I also wanted my daughter to be a teacher. I told her, “A teaching certificate is life insurance. You get home at one o’clock every day, and you have vacation all Hanuccah to light candles.”

Actress #4: That’s not right. There’s a lot of preparation.

While they were engaged in their gossipy conversation, the actress’ body became devoid of will in their hands, and she rolled off the table onto the floor. The women were suddenly aware of her presence. They looked at her in astonishment and began to recite part of the dawn benedictions correctly, one after the other, and also with misquotations, for example, “Blessed art Thou, Oh Lord our God, who hast not made me a man.”

Afterward they quoted

203 The original benediction is: “who has not made me a woman.” The benediction recited by women is, “for making me according to His will.” The issue of the division of the dawn benedictions according to gender is
in a discordant chorus the curse that Eve was given: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” [Gen. 3:16]. The actress repeated every single word in a listless manner, sadly. Immediately afterward they broke out into a rapid, merry rendition of “A Woman of Valor,” to a happy, bouncy melody, with artificial smiles on their faces.

The theatrical figure made it possible to present a parody of a woman whose field of action is the home and the family. In contrast to the sexy, silver-clad actress, the other women were unattractive, nosy, noisy, and gossipy. They stripped the theatrical, attractive figure of everything that emphasized her femininity and her art. They called the scene in which they plucked her, removing her sweater and her high heels, “the slaughter.” Alufi, who had given birth to her first child a few months before the play, said that the scene was intended to show how she viewed conservative femininity of that kind: “To be an ordinary woman, which is what the mothers do, the mothers who say, ‘be a teacher and get a teaching certificate.’ They strip you and dress you like … it’s certainly a punishment from my point of view” (Alufi, Interview, 2002).

**Reflections of the Spirit of God**

All the actresses except one dispersed, and she began to wind black leather straps like those of tefillin around her arm and heard:

I’m going to steal these straps. They’re what takes them high, high up, and it gives them the strength, the wholeness. And us? We’re just little girls with an empty space almost the size of our body, who want to fill it, that machine, we seal it, and then we get bigger. To that marriage, to that filling up, to that discussed among Orthodox feminists.
wholeness, and in the end it’s a little man and it isn’t enough that it’s a horrible tragedy.

She fell silent, and the focus shifted to the teacher, who was sitting at a table with a volume of the Talmud on it. He poured a drink from a ceramic jug and told about three ascents, which are three reflections of the spirit of God. Two actresses in white dresses sat under the table, mischievously smearing mud on one another from a pottery vessel that was on the floor between them. The teacher paid no attention to what was happening around him and continued to tell about the three “ascents”: an ascent above the Orchard, an ascent above the Holy of Holies, and the woman’s womb. All three are reflections of God. In the background the other actresses sang a soothing Hasidic melody, and he laid his head on the table, perhaps listening to the book, perhaps asleep.

**Immersions**

On the lower level an actress was lying in a wheelbarrow, and on the middle level another actress lay in a kind of hammock. Both of them recited monologues about the upper waters and the lower waters and about the feeling of wholeness connected with immersion in the ritual bath. The monologues were connected to each other with respect to the content and the atmosphere: “I looked between the upper and the lower water.” The other actresses sang “The Voice of My Beloved Knocks” from Song of Songs 5:20 in the background, and gradually the actresses all gathered around the table. A basin of water was placed appeared in the middle of the table. One actress, Keshet, playing a bath attendant, held a prayer book in her right hand and muttered snatches of prayers. She recited the blessing, “who has formed,” while with her left hand she repeatedly pushed the curly hair of another actress into

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204 This blessing is recited with the dawn benedictions and also after using the toilet: “Blessed art Thou, who hast formed man in wisdom and created within him orifices and orifices, hollows and hollows.”
the basin. The actress who was immersed began to mix up the benediction “who has formed” in aggressive tones and openly sexual terms: “orifices and orifices, women’s orifices, why do you open your legs and eyes to heaven? Honey, why are you looking at me? Your curls drive me crazy, and the world is losing its balance.” The bath attendant continued reciting snatches of prayer. “God full of mercy, mercy... so that people will see and be in awe, because the Lord is One, the Lord is One, and the curl is One–Amen!” She recited the text intermittently, between one aggressive immersion and another of the head of one of the actresses, and in the end the attendant proclaimed: “Kosher!”—like the attendants at ritual baths after a woman has immersed herself. The actress with the curly, wet hair descended to the lower level, accompanied by her companions. Each of the actresses, upon reaching that level, pinned a lock of her hair to a clothesline stretched over the actress’ head and “hung it out to dry.” Meanwhile the teacher concluded the play by explaining the interpretations of Rabbi Akiba, who entered the Orchard and left safely, unharmed.

The hair pinned to the clothesline recalled the figure of Abshalom, Kind David’s rebellious son, whose long hair got caught in an oak tree “between heaven and earth,” eventually causing his death. However, the women whose hair was caught on the clothesline had acted according to halakha. True, her immersion in the basin had been done with the forcible intervention of the attendant, so that even if she had wanted to rebel, like Abshalom, she could not have done so. The women gathered around her pushed her hair into the water and held her in place later by pinning her hair to the clothesline. She looked as though she were connected to the superior force above her, like Abshalom, “between heaven and earth.” Her hair, pinned to the clothesline, provided a powerful theatrical metaphor for the situation of

205 Every month, a week after her menstruation has ended, a Jewish woman is commanded to immerse herself in a ritual bath before resuming sexual contact with her husband.
women who observe halakha: a life of confinement. They do not have the freedom they want. This was a theatrical protest against the limitation and restriction of movement imposed on Orthodox women not only by halakha but also—and perhaps mainly—by their society.

Conclusion

The final scene of the play was the teacher’s exegesis. He tried to explain why Rabbi Akiba entered the Orchard and offered the audience one possible explanation:

Maybe when you enter the place safely—then it’s not bad for you or forbidden to you. You’re whole, and you come and go, and by chance you enter the Orchard, and you look... for a few heartbeats. But you don’t cut shoots, and you don’t do any harm. You don’t break or smash, and the king opens your eyes for you, but he doesn’t shatter reality, and he doesn’t change your life. So you can remain that way forever: coming and going and returning in safety.

The final message of the play is one of peace and reconciliation. When the teacher finished speaking, the officer announced a ceremony of receiving the Torah. This was an exact repetition of the lineup ceremony that the audience heard at the beginning of the play, when they were standing in the tunnel. This time the audience saw the actresses who were taking part in the ceremony. This was the closing of a circle for the entire play. The actresses finished hanging up the locks of their friend’s hair and then disappeared into the tunnel that led to the Burj. The officer stood at the entrance and, as at the beginning of the play, she called each actress by name and asked again whether she was ready to accept the Torah. After her name was called, each actress emerged from
the tunnel and stood at attention. After responding positively, she disappeared in the tunnel again. The actress whose hair had been hung out to dry also answered positively, but she stayed where she was with her hair pulled up on the clothesline above her. The audience was sure that this was the end of the play, and people started leaving through the tunnel. In the tunnel they found the actresses standing at attention, frozen in line like soldiers and singing “The Torah of God Is Innocent” in harmony, as they had sung it at the beginning of the play. The audience exited accompanied by harmonious song.

The Reception of the Play

Keshet reported that some of the spectators were very moved and returned to see the play again and again, but there were others who did not understand it at all. In her opinion, people who were familiar with the principal text about the four rabbis who entered the Orchard appreciated the play more, but the group’s intention had been that secular people who did not know the text would also understand it. According to Yiftah, “The actresses didn’t want to convey a message about the place of women in Orthodox society,” but Alufi said exactly the opposite; the religious subject that was central to the play did not especially interest her, and she actually wanted to examine the place of women in Orthodox society.

The reviews that appeared in a few newspapers seemed ridiculous to the actresses, because some of the critics gave the text a far-reaching political interpretation. They said that one of the reporters saw the centrality of the figure of the officer as “the courageous opposition of the members of the group to the evasion of military service by Orthodox girls,” and another journalist interpreted the call to return home to Haifa as an expression of the left wing views of the member of the group against the West Bank settlements. Yet the political opinions of the members of the group
were varied, and one of them lived in a West Bank settlement. Elyakim Yaron, the theater critic for Ma’ariv, a widely circulated newspaper, praised the choice of the Burj Court for staging the play, but his attitude was patronizing and contemptuous. He called them “charming girls who are doing alternative theater,” adding, “It’s not major theater that arouses a deep experience, but the girls are engaged with all their might in presenting lessons in Judaism on the walls of Akko.” The critics hardly dealt with the quality of the play from a theatrical point of view. The only compensation for the lack of enthusiasm of the reporters and their focus on marginal details was the citation awarded to the group by the administrators of the festival. But the women were also disappointed because Orthodox society, “with which the play was in conversation,” did not relate to it.

**The Citation**

The citation awarded by the administrators of the contest stated, “For courage in the quest, brave personal confrontation with complex traditional texts, and for the problematic and fascinating combination of sex, mysticism, femininity, and Judaism in an engaging workshop production.” This aroused various responses among the actresses. Most of them felt satisfaction because the play had gained the attention of the contest administration. The citation made it possible for them to continue presenting the play and even to earn a livelihood from it, and in fact they were invited to present several plays in the “Art for the People” program. But their satisfaction was connected more to the practical aspect of earning a livelihood than to the professional or artistic aspects of the play.

I worked on it for two years, so it will serve me in the future! I decided to bury my ego... Maybe in any event we’ll be able to benefit from the adrenalin

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207 Because the group disbanded, this plan was never carried out.
that will flow no matter what, and maybe it will advance my next project. (Alufi, Interview, 2002)

The citation was a source of both satisfaction and disappointment. The actresses thought that the wording of the citation expressed a paternalistic attitude toward them on the part of the contest judges, because it related mainly to their social affiliations and not to the quality of their artistic work. In Birnbaum’s opinion, the name chosen by the group was translated into a preemptive apology for the low professional quality and was interpreted as an implicit request on the part of the group to have their work judged according to the standards of their social affiliation. Indeed, the citation does not refer to the professional level of the group, aside from saying it was “an engaging workshop production”—a compliment that, as everyone agreed, implied that the work was still in formation, not complete, and not worthy of being considered a finished, polished production.

The justifications given for awarding the citation were the innovation in the use of complex Jewish materials and the combination of sexuality and mysticism and femininity and Judaism. These combinations are integral parts of the social environment of the actresses, so that being impressed by them was mainly an indication of the prejudices of the judges, who were unfamiliar with Jewish canonical texts and with the lives of Orthodox women. The group entered the competition at the festival in order to be tested on their professionalism in theater but ultimately they received a citation because of their social affiliation, which combines these elements naturally. The success in the competition once again made it clear that the secular establishment actually communicates only with itself and is more conservative and captive to its prejudices than the daring Orthodox actresses.
The Price of Avant-Garde Fulfillment

The accomplishment of the plan to appear at the Akko Festival and gaining recognition from the anti-establishment wing of the secular artistic establishment was accompanied by great tension among the members of the group. The group became an arena of struggle where the members were required to clarify their religious identity for the secular director, sometimes in an artificial and exaggerated manner. Concentrating on being accepted in the festival competition directed the women’s energy from an artistic, honest, and authentic manner of expression within the secure place of the communitas\(^{208}\) to a practical effort to please the director and future audiences. A situation of commercialism was created: joint work on the philosophical level and creating with daring and courage were abandoned for the sake of the ultimate goal: acceptance and success in the festival competition:

Part of the work was very great frustration. I occasionally found myself writing in a way that I knew that Miri [Lavi, the director] would like it, and that’s absurd! In a very rhetorical way that I didn’t believe in so much, because it’s not poetry. But really afterward I made my text more simple, and that caused a lot of frustration... From the start, the way of working dictated the form of the play to a large extent, the very fact that everybody wrote something at home and brought in a scene, that already disqualifies the group work. We woke up a little late, with respect to criticizing Miri, and she made it clear to us that it was take it or leave it, that’s how I work. I think it was right to work that way. (Gal, Interview, 2002)

Including Yiftah in the play added to the frustration of some of the actresses, because they claimed that it caused lack of clarity in the feminist messages of the play. The secular director did not understand the significance of the masculine role of a Teacher of rabbinical texts for Orthodox women:

She doesn’t know it, but when you put a man next to a group of women, in the Orthodox world, it immediately brings you back to the synagogue, to the girl’s school, to the fact the women always, as smart as they may be, and as good they are as students, the man is the one who decides halakha, and that’s a very important issue in Orthodox society. The director was very much enchanted by his personality, and rightly so! When he teaches—he teaches on a direct level, without arrogance. And she actually needed Yiftah to solve a dramaturgical problem. She needed someone who would tighten the story: here’s the character of Elisha ben Abuya—now you’ve seen Elisha ben Abuya. (Birnbaum, Interview, 2002)

Dudi Ma’ayan, who came to see a rehearsal, also expressed reservations about the inclusion of a male teacher as the commentator on texts in the play, but he couldn’t convince Lavi to change her concept regarding the addition of a man. The actresses say that Ma’ayan wondered how the audience would interpret the character. He tried to suggest ways to neutralize his authority as a man. For example, he suggested keeping Yiftah in the background and having him mutter a text constantly. Another suggestion was to include other husbands and maybe even the actresses’ fathers in secondary roles in the play (as stagehands or photographers). To the regret of some of the actresses, Lavi rejected his suggestions:

I think that we didn’t think enough about what the audience would say. We talked about it, but
in fact Miri, the director, liked putting Yiftah in as a learned commentator. I also thought that a man would represent intellectual study and that women were terribly emotional, would go wild—and this would strengthen the ordinary stereotypes. Miri said that Yiftah was Yiftah, and he didn’t represent any masculine symbol here. I don’t know. I don’t stand behind the message, and most of the decisions were made by the director, and that’s the difference between this year and last year, when the decisions were our own. (Gal, Interview, 2002)

Abandoning the decisions about content and direction to Lavi, who was unfamiliar with their religious life, just so that they would meet the deadlines set by the festival was, in my opinion, at the root of the disappointment the actresses felt with the play Al tagidu: “mayim mayim.” Placing their success in being accepted in the competition above everything else shows how important it was to the group to be part of the professional theater as well as their lack of self-assurance as artists in the professional, secular sphere of theater. Lavi was its representative for them, and therefore they agreed to give her extensive authority. The place of their own ideological and religious considerations, which had guided them during the previous year at the Center for Alternative Theater with Yosef and Abu-Ali, was taken by practical considerations of success and publicity. This decision exacted a price: the collapse of the supportive framework of the community they had created. The indifference of the national religious society to the play also made it clearer than anything to them that the play had only partially fulfilled its mission. Instead of provoking a storm with personal and revelatory texts, it aroused interest in particular because of the canonical texts and their interpretation by the dominant character of Yiftah, the narrator-teacher, who was neither an actor nor a member of the group.
Conclusion: The Dosiot Group As a Test Case in the Formation of Orthodox Women’s Theater in Israel

The uniqueness of this group derived from the composition of its members, the quality of their work in the theater, their devotion to the work, and their determination to appear in a professional avant-garde theater. It was also uniquely daring; the members were willing to do hard and revealing physical work and to express their anti-establishment attitudes, which came close to subversion. Most of the members of the Dosiot group were raised in liberal Orthodox families, and some of them were the products of mixed Orthodox-secular marriages. Consequently, from childhood they had been exposed to complex reality and to a pluralistic approach to it. This biographical background drove them to the margins of both Orthodox and secular society, because, on the one hand, they did not live according to the conventions of national religious society, and, on the other hand, they did not feel that secular society was interested in the way of life they had chosen or showed any understanding of it.

The friends who created this theater group saw it as a kind of laboratory where they could examine their artistic talents by means of a special language of theater and develop them further. The group was intended to provide mutual support that derived from common denominators: their Orthodox religious world and their Western cultural, artistic world. In the beginning of the process they worked with two male directors who understood the connection between those worlds, and they gave the members of the group freedom and space to learn the language of avant-garde theater: use of the body, of objects, and even of the audience and the freedom to express New Age and feminist tendencies not only in an inter-disciplinary manner by using various original texts, but also inter-semiotically, by expressive use of the body along
with use of text. The dramatic exercises on the subject of “myself,” which were the basis of the work in the Center for Alternative Theater, enabled the women to examine their social and collective place through personal narratives, and to examine the consecrated values of Orthodox society, such as modesty, the importance of custom and place, and the sanctity of halakha, and the meaning of living in accordance with all that. This examination showed that these values sometimes conflicted with daily life, and they were mainly important as a uniform behavioral code that preserved the hegemonic society.

Their consciousness and identity as “Orthodox” women then received expression in decisions connected to the boundaries of what was permitted and prohibited for them. The decisions made by the women in the group and their type of theater work expressed the tension “between two forces that act in opposition as ideal content and fill a person’s life. From this point of view religious Zionism was and is subject to the problematic nature of all traditional societies that undergo processes of change.”

The liberating experience of total devotion to theater in the framework of the Center for Alternative Theater during the first year consolidated the group and enabled the actresses to reveal to one another—and afterward to an audience of relatives and friends—sincere, penetrating, and painful social criticism, which derived from personal experience. The decision to make their first play more moderate before the public performance was also made freely, with friendly consideration, open discussion, and without the intervention of any outside factor. The women understood they were facing a paradox: in order to “correspond” with that society and to shake it up, they had to be considerate of it. The national religious society, which they ultimately shook off, dictated the type of art they created. The next stage in the professionalism of the group was that in which they subjected themselves to the test of

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a broader framework: the Alternative Theater Competition at the Akko Festival, before a mixed Orthodox and secular audience, and before a panel of judges who were representatives of the artistic hegemony in Israel for them. Once again the members of the group were required to make concessions—but this time in important matters: the authenticity of their discourse and their involvement with the creation of the play, which was supposed to represent them. Unlike their first play, here the concessions were made for practical reasons, because the group had to meet a deadline. To simplify and shorten the processes, the actresses gave the director a free hand in determining the staging. Her decisions did not always suit the message they wanted to convey to the audience, and the director, who was a stranger to Orthodoxy and its world, did not always understand the significance of those decisions for the group. The result was that most of the actresses did not identify with the messages of the play; it may have had outward signs of Orthodox circularity and wholeness, but the content was vague, and the messages self-contradictory.

The members of the group believed that the play received a citation for irrelevant reasons. The explanations given by the judges revealed the colonial character of the theater, although it was supposed to be fringe, open, and alternative, and they showed how greatly the establishment determined prejudices about Orthodox women. After two years of collaboration, each of the actresses was concerned with finding her own way to integrate theater in her life as an Orthodox woman, but this time each of them was sober and experienced in professional theater.

The story of the Dosiot group casts a heavy shadow over the possibility of creating a professional Orthodox women’s theater, which would be avant-garde and provocative. It also challenges the women involved with this work to continue trying to get there. It is to be expected that if a similar theater is established in the future, it, too, will encounter tension in confronting the secular theater.
establishment, which is not aware of the unique cultural world of Orthodox Jewish theater or of the unique obstacles that stand in the actresses’ way. However, it is likely that these groups will be able to blaze new paths in the theater, and thus, by setting a critical mirror in place, one that is obviously unanticipated, they will also upset the existing centers of culture.
Conclusion

Orthodox Women’s Theater in Israel—Is It Truly Subversive?

The trauma of the assassination of Rabin in 1995 and of the second Intifada, which broke out in 2000, made national religious society turn inward. Some people from the secular community pointed an accusing finger at national religious society. They identified it in sweeping fashion with the Settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and with the nationalism that aroused the renewal of terror within the 1967 border of Israel as well. National religious society had to find ways to emerge from isolation and its distance from the Israeli consensus, and to reestablish its status as a society that contributed to the state. The intense involvement with the arts within that society in recent years was a suitable answer to its critics. Works of art created within the national religious society made the stereotypical and anonymous figures of “settlers” and “dosiot” into human beings who had an innocent pioneering vision, people with emotions, individuals with whom it was possible to identify, people who experienced fear, sadness, and doubt. The theater made it possible to present what Baba calls a “hybrid identity” to everyone. The women were not only “settlers,” but also mothers and sisters; they were strong women who also felt anxiety and fear; they had a vision, but they were also disappointed. Sometimes it seemed that this theater was a therapeutic process for the community in dealing with the trauma of the physical and psychological distance and isolation that was forced upon them, both by Israeli society and by the terrorist organizations that cut many of them off inside their settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Homi Bhabha dealt with the question of hybrid identity in *The Location of Culture* (1994).
Presenting plays—like writing poetry and fiction, painting and
dancing—is of course an expression of yearnings, desires, hopes, and
disappointments for individual artists. The art that was created,
especially in the area of fiction and poetry, softened the highly
charged relations between religious and secular Jews in Israel in
the late 1990s. At first it seemed as if cooperation between the
two communities would emerge on the basis of the artistic work,
but the theater that emerged showed just the opposite. Joint work
in theater did not narrow the gaps between the national religious
society and other societies in Israel. Rather it gave those gaps
artistic representation. The unequal balance of power between a
society which regards itself as hegemonic in the field of the arts
but which is inferior with respect to knowledge of Judaism and the
society that regards itself as hegemonic in the area of Judaism but
lacks experience in theater is still preserved when one side takes
part in a practice common to both societies—theater. A marginal
group, Orthodox women, who adopted the cultural model of
secular hegemony, created an alternative theater in reaction to
it. The creation of a theater according to Orthodox parameters,
not necessarily artistic, revealed the great differences in the
view of art between secular and Orthodox society. Whereas the
Orthodox women use texts from Jewish sources by examining and
interpreting them as desirable guides for living, the secular artist
translates those texts into the language of theater and relates to
them more as folklore. An example of this treatment of traditional
material is the use of Hasidic stories by Dan Almagor in *Ish
* 
hasid haya [There Was a Righteous Man], whose materials could
ostensibly be appropriate both to Orthodox women’s theater and to
secular professional theater.
The Role of the Rabbis in Teatron Hamishmar [The Preservatory Theater]

Most of the Orthodox women who worked in theater during these years initiated the involvement of male rabbinical authority. They introduced the rabbis to a cultural arena in which they had had not contact—theater—and they increased their power and expanded their authority. Paradoxically, the theater further consolidated the existing social structure, against which the women were expressing strong arguments. The establishment was afraid that the voice they were making heard was a voice of rebellion, and perhaps for that reason they channeled the women to compartmentalize their performances by emphasizing the difficulty in halakha of their appearing before a mixed audience of men and women. However, close examination shows that they did not really rebel. After voicing their frustration and anger, the “rebels’ accepted the invitation of their friends and returned to the bosom of their society, which gathered them in with delicacy and a warm embrace. They created what Oz calls a “Guardian Theater.”

According to Oz, theater people in every generation were really and truly convinced that they were using a theatrical event to criticize society and its injustices, but various ideological traps in which their creations were caught caused those works to become a two-edged sword and to remain within the domain of the guardian theater... It did not manage to challenge the general validity of the ruling system or prepare consciousness for an essential change in the social situation. (Oz, 1999, p. 150)

It appears that most of the Orthodox theater women did not really wish to challenge the existing situation, though they did want to protest, and at the same time they were afraid to upset,
shock, or cause damage. Subversion of this kind is accompanied by many apprehensions, and in cooperation with rabbis it loses its power. At the same time, although the work in the theater did not cause a radical change in the status of women in national religious society, it certainly was another step toward changing the traditional relations of power between men and women in that society. The women established facts on the ground and forced the male hegemony to accept those facts. Over time, it is possible that other initiatives to change the status of women will emerge in national religious society.

The Feminist Character of Orthodox Women’s Theater

The theater made it possible for Orthodox women to focus the society’s attention on their special problems and to express their opinions on what was taking place in that society. It also expanded their fields of religious activity. The adaption of canonical texts according to their original interpretations in the framework of a theatrical production was a type of exegesis—an intellectual activity that had hitherto been reserved exclusively to men. The theater also enabled the women to experience liturgical activity such as cantorial singing, wrapping themselves in prayer shawls, and chanting the Torah according to the cantillation marks were actions that enabled them “to take an active part in other strata of life beyond the motherly stratum”211—a new experience for some of the artists.

Many of the plays were intended to empower the women, to express appreciation of their actions and resilience,212 and to express their women’s world in national religious society, which vacillates between conservatism and liberalism. Many plays dealt directly or indirectly with classical feminist subjects such as the legitimacy

211 Elor (1993), p. 79.
212 Prusat lehem of the Delatayim group and Bina yetera of the Nekuda Yehudit theater.
of self-fulfillment in a marital relationship, rising up against oppression and violence, and the ambivalent attitude toward the female body: the desire to reveal it to a gaze of desire and also to conceal it as part of spiritual elevation. By means of theatrical activity they exemplified ways of changing a negative situation, which was concealed until now in religious society. Woman’s body was a place where the women showed contradictory attitudes toward covering and uncovering, spirituality and corporeality, as well as different attitudes toward feminism.

In many plays, the action on the stage is located in the familiar space of a domestic interior, which is thought of as a woman’s space. The characters active there are housewives, mothers, daughters, and teachers burdened with simple household tasks such as cleaning the house, cooking, setting the Sabbath table, combing their children’s hair, and listening to their stories. Many scenes treated the tension involved in finding a spouse and in relations with parents. The conservative education of the girls is shown to be ridiculous and superficial, and the expectations of the parents and of society from them are excessive and arouse opposition.

The women expressed their resistance to society in shouting, in cynicism, and in wild, hysterical behavior, which only lasted a short time. Scenes that expressed open protest like that usually ended in a reversal: a quiet turning inward that was similar to a fetal position or the embrace of the supportive group of women that came from outside and drew in the rebellious one. Thus, the militant feminist message of some of the plays was not entirely militant. The women and most of the audience regarded the outburst on the stage as legitimate so long as it was clear that the

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213 Beesh uvamayim–temunot miḥayei nesuin of the Domem–Medaber theater, and Hatsidonit of the Nekuda Yehudit group.
214 Ha’erev hayafe behayai of the Domem–Medaber theater, and Al tagidu “mayim mayim” of the Dosiot.

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outburst would die down. The song, “A Woman of Valor,” was sung in many of the plays, in particular after subversive scenes of that kind. On the one hand, those verses from the Book of Proverbs are offensive and arouse opposition, but on the other hand they arouse memories of an innocent age that is gone forever. Thus, they sang it with yearning and in harmony. Interestingly, although women wrote the plays, women presented them, and they touched upon subjects peculiar to women—many of the artists denied any connection at all with the feminist movement.

The Development of the Genre of the Orthodox Community

During the four years when I was conducting research on the subject of Orthodox women’s theater there was great development in every aspect of the theater. From a marginal, amateur, and limited medium, the theater became rich and current, and a change took place in the content and style of Orthodox women’s theater in Israel. When I began the study, women were presenting story theater: the narrator stood and read the text, and the silent movements of the actresses on the stage demonstrated what was narrated. Later the theater became realistic, and by the end of my study, four years later, I also saw avant-garde plays, original musicals, and political plays—including political street theater directed by women and performed by male actors.

Coping with the single-sex composition of the groups also changed. At the beginning of my research, women played male characters when the plot demanded it. But as time passed, women found various ways to circumvent this obstacle of having women represent men. A feminization of the theater took place, so much so that even in plays where men had a role in the plot, the play was worked in such a way that it was possible to dispense with the physical presence of men. The male characters were mentioned
in words and sometimes their voices were recorded, or they were projected on a large screen, and their physical presence on the stage became unnecessary. This technique was developed even further toward the end of my research. These theatrical techniques were a solution to the impossibility of including a man in the team of actresses. They required great precision from the actresses in reciting their lines, so that the conversation with the virtual male image would sound convincing and fluent. The audience regarded these combinations as a self-evident convention that derived from the restrictions of halakha regarding modesty.

The development of the new Orthodox genre was notable not only in the inclusion of technical means in the plays but also in the type of writing, in the dramaturgy. Plays based on personal confessions full of pathos, meant to convey collective and ideological messages, were replaced over time by sincere personal monologues that combined everyday language with passages from Jewish sources, and sometimes with humor and cynicism. Subjects that had been taboo in Orthodox society became central in the original dramas. Toward the end of my study, plays with a more complex plot were presented, with two or more narrative circles, and in the encounter between those circles a meta-text was created with meaning that transcended the drama itself; such a meta-text reflects insights into the society, into art, and into the connection between them.216

Most of the actresses regarded themselves as creative artists who were fulfilling a role with religious significance, and they did not see themselves as “telling dramatic stories.” They believed that appearing in the theater was a kind of “holy work,” through which they could deal with religious practices that were still denied to them: homiletics, exegesis, chanting the Bible with the traditional cantillation, wrapping themselves in prayer shawls, leading prayers,

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216 Hakhnasat kala by the Nekuda Yehudit group and Dema’ot hashoshan by Emunah College.
and even composing their own prayers, such as the Prayer before Going on Stage.\textsuperscript{217} The discourse about the role of the actor and the way actors should work in the theatrical space was influenced by a discourse characteristic of the Hasidic, mystic domain, and it included a comparison of the theatrical experience to that of exaltation, “holy work” and “improving personal traits.” This attitude toward the theater is reminiscent of the ideas of Artaud,\textsuperscript{218} who was active in the early twentieth century, and of Grotowski,\textsuperscript{219} a famous Polish director who was active in Europe fifty years afterward. They both regarded the work of the actor as “holy work.” In their opinion, as in that of many Orthodox women, the theater was meant to bring about spiritual renewal. Grotowski viewed actors as “saints,” who perform acts of self-sacrifice, of self-denial, and by means of that action, they attain self-exposure and even revelation. In his opinion, by inviting the audience to reveal truths about itself—the theater will have a therapeutic effect. The theater of the Orthodox women in Israel also turned its gaze inward to the collective unconscious in order to purify itself and improve psychologically, spiritually, and socially. Instead of transmitting only didactic messages, the theater therefore became an arena where the world of the actresses was revealed. An important difference between the women and Grotowski’s ideas is that the women were not engaged in the search for original theatrical effects and new movements, but rather they were satisfied with the very innovation of their engagement in theater and the adoption of this alien cultural form as a way of expressing their lives as Orthodox Jewish women.

\textsuperscript{217} One prayer was composed by Yael Shechter from the Mahut Theater in 1997, and it appears at the beginning of this book. Another prayer was composed by Rivka Manovitz, the head of the Theater Department at Emunah College. Other groups that I studied used to gather before a performance and recite a prayer.

\textsuperscript{218} Artaud (1970), pp. 64-67.

\textsuperscript{219} Grotowski (1964), pp. 978-996.
Conclusion

The decision to get up and create theater demanded courage, because over the generations the rabbinical authorities had developed a negative attitude towards theater. However, my research shows that work in theater was not an act of crossing cultural borders, as might have been thought, but rather a sharing of borders. Use of patterns from the Western theater connected the marginal (Orthodox women’s theater) to the center (Western secular theater), but it left the women in the margins. The Orthodox women did not, during this period, seek new forms of theater that would be appropriate to their style of life and flow from it. Rather, they sought to set boundaries to the directing, the costumes, the vocal work, and acting, within which they could function so that they would not offend the Halakhic authorities. The Orthodox women’s theater and the context in which it was created might have impelled them to investigate and develop a new theatrical language, a new genre, thus fulfilling Manovitz’ dream, but until the present very few Orthodox women have experimented with that possibility.

The lack of “native” artists, that is to say, artists who had grown up in the national religious community, forced the groups to turn to the secular world in search for professionals who could guide the process. They expected secular playwrights, directors, and stage personnel could help them create an authentic and unique theater according to the parameters that they had set, which is to say a theater that would reflect their world and be essentially different from the repertory theater, the ultra-Orthodox theater, and the theater of born-again Orthodox Jews. However, just as between the colonial authority and the native culture, here, too, very frequently the fringe culture submitted to the dictates of the hegemony. The unequal relation of power that emerged caused the actresses to comply with the demands of the directors who came from another
spiritual and cultural world, and who did not at all understand theirs. The textual materials brought to the play by the Orthodox women’s theater groups were seen as “exotic” but at the same time too “local.” The behavioral codes that were presented on the stage and the elevated language were relevant only to a narrow segment of the community, and were inappropriate for the ultra-Orthodox community and certainly for the secular community as well. When a secular woman director or one who was newly observant came from the outside and did not change her line of thought, the material was distorted or neglected, and thus plays that suited neither the expectations nor the ideology of the group were created. Contact between artists from different sectors and the national religious artists brought the ideological gap between them to the surface in its full sharpness, and the encounters were replete with tension and misunderstanding. Sometimes the Orthodox establishment, which had asked for assistance from artists from the outside, leveled criticism against the quality of the secular theater and the values that guided it, expressing contempt and sometimes aggressively attacking the outside professionals for making the artists give up their values, so to speak. On the other hand, the theater that the Orthodox women created in the first years seemed amateurish, superficial, and obscure to the secular artists, though some of them understood that it derived from the courage needed to break out and express oneself. The secular artistic hegemony was not interested in developing margins that might become an alternative for the national religious community, which fills the repertory theaters, despite its criticism of it. Nor were the Orthodox women interested in creating a theater for secular society, because in recent years plays had been produced that portrayed the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities with contempt and hostility.

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220 Dim’at hashoshan of Emunah College and Al tagidu “mayim mayim” of the Dosiot.
In May 2004, during a class with the students of Emunah College, I shared my thoughts about the phenomenon of Orthodox women’s theater in Israel, and I mentioned the insights of the anthropologist Tamar Elor in relation to Midreshet Bar-Ilan: “Its students, who want to expand the scope of their participation in the Orthodox world beyond that of their mothers, do not want to break out of that world. They want to remain within it, but to enter its depths.”\footnote{Elor (1998), p. 303.} I mainly stressed the idea that until then the theater of Orthodox women had mainly been in correspondence with the community in which it was created, the national religious community, and it had not turned outward. At the same time, I pointed out that the fact that the national religious community did not want to remain outside of Israeli society, and therefore it sought fields of action where it could be included, and theater was one of them. I reinforced those words by moving my hands in a broad circle from the hips outward. Two of the students interrupted me: “No, no! If you write that, you don’t understand anything!” When I responded in alarm, they explained that they did not object to the statement that the national religious community did not want to be outside of the general sphere of activity in Israel, but to the hand motion I had made to illustrate the thesis. In their view, the hand motion should have been the opposite: “This way!” The student illustrated by making a broad hand motion in the opposite direction, from the outside in, toward the hips. “That’s what Orthodox women want!” The student explained that the gesture she had made showed the goal of Orthodox women’s theater: by means of it they wanted to bring the Israeli public closer to the Orthodox community so that it would know and accept its values, its uniqueness, and its religious and political path. The gesture that I had made, in the direction opposite of hers, indicated that the national religious community wanted to be integrated into Israeli society—and according to them, this was not the case. The students
reached this conclusion only after they themselves had created a political street theater and seen how the public responded to their artistic effort. They claimed that the favorable media exposure and the enthusiastic responses were proof that there was willingness to hear their political opinions, and therefore now they thought that an audience might be willing to hear their religious doctrine as well. They knew that in order to succeed, they would have to take the initiative, to become professional, and to believe they could change a reality that they did not approve of, such as violation of the Sabbath, which existed throughout the country. Their success empowered them to such a degree that they raised the idea that their next presentation should deal with the religious realm, with the subject of Sabbath observance. They thought that theater would enable them “to be audacious in holiness” — not to be afraid to demand and to act so that life in Israel would be influenced by their society and by the Jewish values that guided their lives, and not the other way around.

It is possible that the empowering experience that the women underwent when the theater they initiated succeeded in becoming a political tool did indeed manage to give rise to a theater of a different character, in its goals and composition from that which I have analyzed in this book. The political theater that expressed subversive ideas outside of the Zionist consensus and received its expression in the year of the evacuation of Gush Katif was a turning point for the students and also for me as a researcher of the phenomenon. It is possible to see street theater, created at such a critical time from their point of view, as a theater whose existence depended on decisions made in an entirely different area, and with

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222 The street theater, Lirkod ‘im zeevim, which was produced before the withdrawal from Sinai by “Young Creative Artists for Gush Katif,” see above, p. 000.

223 This was a paraphrase of the expression, “daring in holiness,” a kabbalistic expression that indicates a positive religious action—holiness—whose source is in a negative force: daring, brashness.
the dying down of the voices of protest—the theater of Orthodox women in its limited form will remain in correspondence mainly with the society from which it emerged. Nevertheless, the fact that it was created in the face of a threatening political reality of fateful decisions raised the possibility that mobilizing all the forces for the purpose of social and political influence could actually develop a theater of Orthodox women in different ways: to be a theater that challenges the establishment, one that would also bring about additional change and flexibility from within, and perhaps even open broader channels of communication than those that have hitherto existed, even broader than the large circle of my gesture, from within to outside, and the student’s gesture, from the outside inward, could ever create.
Epilogue

I have continued doing research on Orthodox women’s theater in Israel until the present (2013). Naturally I have also observed, documented and analyzed plays produced by Orthodox men’s theater groups, as well as the only Orthodox group in which men and women performed together onstage, “Heref Ayin.” They performed the play *Leshem Yichud* in the Acco fringe theater festival in 2006.\(^{224}\)

In the introduction of this book, I pointed out that the major men’s theater groups (“Aspeklaria,” “Tair” and “Amuka”) are more stable financially since they are allowed halakhically to perform in front of mixed audiences of Orthodox men and women, while most Orthodox women can perform only for women. The men’s groups cater to the Orthodox public’s need and desire for “kosher” entertainment, plays without vulgar speech and immodest costumes that do not deal with controversial topics. Although the men too have artistic aspirations, they do not tend to be experimental, but there are exceptions. For example, in 2006, Professor Yehuda Morali directed a play as theater-in-the-round using dance movement called “Kolot” [Voices], based on a story by Y.L. Peretz. Some critics defined this as a “hassidic musical,” and there was also transgendered acting. In 2009, Guy Biran wrote and directed a play about the Ramhal (Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzatto) for the *Tair* theater. Dance theaters have been established: for example “Kaet” [At the Present] with its 2010 performance “Tzaluta”. Daniella Bloch, an Orthodox dancer who performs in front of mixed audiences, established a dance troupe in 2012 called “Nehara,” and women graduates of the Orot College perform as a troupe called “Noga”.

The women’s theater groups continue to less stable financially than the men’s groups but more daring and dynamic. I have met many graduates of the Emunah College who cultivate their artistic inclinations despite the burden of raising young children and working outside home to help finance their families. They establish theater groups and produce small-scale productions, mostly for children and high school pupils. They also produce plays for adults dealing with topics that were previously considered intimate and inappropriate for public discourse: problematic relationships within the family, such as prolonged singleness, marital problems, divorce and even the topic of parental neglect and abuse. The plays present a new understanding and acceptance of different forms of family life (single parenthood, singlehood) evolving in this sector of Orthodox society. I believe that the many plays dealing with domestic issues prove that this society, still striving to maintain a strictly obedient life-style, is transforming its former glorification of normative family life into a more realistic, postmodernist attitude towards intimacy and relationships within the family sphere.225

In addition, there are Orthodox women groups which deal with ‘playback’ theater, a mixture of psychodrama with improvisational drama in which the audience is active by telling their life stories and acting them out with professional actors. Some perform in front of mixed audiences (“The Kachkes”), while others only perform in front of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox women (“Dor Ledor Interactive Theater Troupe”). All these initiatives provide alternative theater experiences for those from the Israeli Orthodox community who are strict observers of halakhic rules concerning modesty.

In the summer of 2011, further developments seemed to be close at hand. The “Tent Protest Movement” which began in July was still in full motion. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis from

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all walks of society demonstrated against the anti-social policies of Israeli governments in the past decade. The demand for “social justice” re-awakened feelings of solidarity once thought to be extinct. The wish to re-connect socially, morally and culturally characterized this grassroots movement. It replaced what seemed until now the only natural way to survive in the Israeli social ‘jungle’: the cultivation of social and cultural enclaves which kept Israelis with different religious, ideological and economic interests apart. Although that protest has since dissipated, it was widely acknowledged to have left active roots throughout Israeli society, not least in a change of consciousness of possibilities. Perhaps it has influenced and given strength to a new theatrical initiative in Jerusalem. In the summer of 2013, Hana Partouche, also a graduate of the Emunah college, established a “home” for Orthodox women theater groups in Jerusalem. She hopes to provide suitable working conditions for all women theater groups and establish a thriving repertoire theater which will contribute to the Jerusalem cultural ‘scene’. At present, her efforts are focused on supporting ultra-Orthodox theater initiatives, but she promises in the future to invite other sectors to participate in this framework and to create a platform for mutual contact and communication between women.

Cultivation of a separate cultural enclave in which Orthodox art is encouraged has the potential of widening the gap between secular and Orthodox communities in Israel. Not only does this community create its own educational and religious institutions, and in some cases adhere to the religious hegemony’s decisions on political issues, but it also seems to be establishing its own

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226 The main slogan is “H’am Doresh Tzedek Hevrati” [The nation demands social justice!]

227 The name of a radio program on Galei Zahal, the military broadcasting station.

228 For example, the more militant right wing rabbis, called on this sector of Orthodoxy to refuse to take part in the evacuation of settlements in Gaza and Judea and Samaria, injunctions that conflict with the government’s
culture, thus marginalizing itself even further. Yet at the same time, separation from mainstream secular theater has empowered Orthodox women and allowed them to develop their own art by exploring and adapting Jewish cultural resources and engaging in intercultural activism. I believe that in the future, as Orthodox women’s theater receives proper support and financial backing and Orthodox women develop this art more professionally, it will become a vehicle for wider social contact between women from different sectors of Israeli society.
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