

Irshai, Ronit, and Tanya Zion-Waldoks, editors. Holy Rebellion: Religious Feminism and the Transformation of Judaism and Women's Rights in Israel. Brandeis University Press, 2024

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Irshai, Ronit, and Tanya Zion-Waldoks, editors. *Holy Rebellion: Religious Feminism and the Transformation of Judaism and Women's Rights in Israel*. Brandeis University Press, 2024.

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Ronit Irshai and Tanya Zion-Waldoks' book is an enrichment to the field of Gender Studies in Israel and for those interested in the developments Judaism is going through in the modern world. It is a unique document of cohesion between many changes and shifts in Israeli society over the last decades, focusing on the Religious Zionist Ashkenazi community. Both authors identify as trained in the school of activist-engaged feminist scholarship,¹ as well as Religious Zionist feminists.² The book comes out at a time of what they authors call an illiberal government,³ as war and uncertainty are the main actors of the political, public and private sphere. This review is a critical analysis of the book, discussing its great contribution to multiple fields as well as a few of its blind spots and fallacies.

The book consists of four chapters, which are preceded by a preface and an introduction (Gender, Religion, Nationalism: Our Israeli Case), and followed by an afterward (Looking Back, Moving Forward). In the first chapter (Nomos and Narrative: A Story of Law and Culture) they present Robert Cover's concepts of *nomos* and *narrative*. These two concepts are the foundation of the analysis throughout the book, as keys to analyzing the nature of the interaction between law and culture. Chapter two (Homes: Renewing Orthodoxy from Within) is the largest (94 pages) and densest chapter. It is an implementation of Cover's methodology that they use to show how changes in the halakhic nomos are done via changes in the narrative. They employ imagery from Tamar Ross's works,⁴ and reflect upon her prophetic analysis two decades ago.⁵ Chapter three

¹ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. xiii.

² Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. xiv.

³ For example, in Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 104;137.

⁴ A second edition was published in 2021. The first edition is: Ross, Tamar. *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*. Brandeis University Press, 2004.

⁵ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024 p. 63, referencing Tamar Ross, "The Holy Rebellion of the Religious Zionist Woman: The Problematics of the Status of Women in a Democratic Jewish State," in *A Hundred Years of Religious Zionism*, vol. 3, edited by Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz, 447–57 [in Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003).

(Rabbinic Illiberal Backlash) is an examination of the reactions from the other end of Religious Zionism, and the methodologies they use in order to criticize the new innovations and successes of Religious Zionist feminists. The fourth and last chapter (Judicial Encounters: Narrative Ripeness and Dignity Tests) is where an innovative analytical tool is presented, in which they analyze several examples of appeals to Israel's High Court and introduce their theoretical model, consisting of two elements: the "Narrative Ripeness Test" and the "Dignity Test." Showing that an intervention in the legal realm can be helpful if the narrative is ripe enough for it, and harmful or even destructive when not. The "Dignity Test" is of a balancing quality, to fight blatant injustices which still exist in Israeli society, even though the narrative has not yet ripened for such changes.

The general structure of the book is well planned. Irshai and Zion-Waldoks start with a general methodological introduction, leading to an ethnography of shifts in Israeli society and Religious Zionist feminism within it as well as responses to these shifts from various voices on the spectrum of Religious Zionism. They choose to close with their suggested new analytical tool. Such a structure amplifies the necessity of the tool they present. Furthermore, in this order they show how to apply the tool in the context of the Religious Zionist feminist movement to a ripe reader - who has been well immersed in the movement's development in the last decade.

The book is an expansion, a translation and an update on an earlier article by the authors.⁶ Given the velocity of change in Israeli society, and more specifically within the Religious Zionist feminist context, such a book is a necessity. Not only that many more appeals have been made to the Supreme Court, but the ripeness of Israeli culture has changed. The backlash has developed and become more nuanced, and the authors present an in-depth analysis of the various sources of these reactions. They also place them in relation to the growth and spread of various achievements of the Religious Zionist feminist movement, such that were unthinkable a decade or two ago.⁷ Overall, the book is written in a concentrated but clear language, presenting an overview of the

⁶ Ronit Irshai and Tanya Zion-Waldoks. "Orthodox Feminism in Israel: Between Nomos and Narrative." *Law and Governance* 15, no. 1–2 (2013): 233–327. [in Hebrew].

⁷ The word "unthinkable" is used in the context of appointing a female spiritual leader, alongside the male rabbi, at Bar Ilan University (Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 69)

growth within the Religious Zionist movement in the last decades, and its relationship with the legal system in Israel as a reinforcing and creating force of change in the country and in the communities living in it.

The “Narrative Ripeness Test” which they apply in the fourth chapter was already introduced in their earlier article, but to use a more picturesque language: the field is much wider now. The *narrative* as well as the *nomos* relating to questions of Religious Zionist feminism has grown significantly. This demands a more expansive examination of recent changes and inquiry of the narrative as is told by people in the field itself, and as can be inferred from their actions. Some parts of the field are ready to be harvested, while others might still be too dry, thus not bearing any fruit. In addition, their analysis could serve as important inspiration to other religious feminist contexts - of other religions, or in other countries - and more generally: other movements of cultural change. The test is applicable regardless of the narrative or culture in which it is to be applied, and adjusts according to each culture’s internal norms. The problematic element is that of the “Dignity Test.” The authors also reflect on its complexity in application - given the difference and relativity in definitions of dignity.⁸

Alongside the great innovative nature of this book, and its comprehensive ethnographic analysis - it has three main weak points. Firstly, a lack of intersectional representation in the realm of sistering feminist battles within Judaism and Israeli society. Secondly, a lack of a critical perspective on the rise of nationalism and violence within the Religious Zionist movement, affecting the lives of Palestinians at large, and specifically of Palestinian women. Lastly, it lacks a discussion of the origin of the terminology used throughout the book, and the implications of the imagery conjured by “Holy Rebellion.”

The Religious Zionist feminist movement has many sisters along its path, and as any other movement is also supported by “outsiders” to the institution of Religious Zionism. Irshai and Zion-Waldoks mention a few other struggles which they name “parallel,”⁹ failing to point out the many important points of interaction and overlap. It seems like the Religious Zionist feminist movement,

⁸ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, pg. 189-192.

⁹ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 26: “ultra-Orthodox feminists, Mizrahi-traditionist feminists, and Palestinian, chiefly Muslim, feminists.”

as is presented in the book, is lacking sisterhood¹⁰ to sistering battles - even most neighboring ones. The Mizrahi Feminist movement is seen as a parallel fight, and is mentioned only casually as one of many examples.¹¹ They reflect on the lack in their afterward,¹² but do not point out the prices Mizrahi women have been paying in running alongside Ashkenazi women.¹³ Furthermore, they reject the premise of the claim that Religious Zionist Israeli feminism is an American phenomenon,¹⁴ at the same time that they repeatedly point out to the effects American Jewry has both monetary¹⁵ and culturally¹⁶ on the Religious Zionist feminist movement. The analysis would be surely enriched, if more attention would be given to the differences between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi religious *and* secular feminism. Equally important to compare with the effects such American funding has on the occupation and discrimination towards Palestinians. This leads to the next point, regarding the lacking discussion of Palestine.

Irshai and Zion-Waldoks reflect on their lack of intersectional representation and analysis of Palestinian women.¹⁷ They acknowledge that the current Religious Zionist feminist movement is turning ever more militaristic and nationalistic,¹⁸ in which it is seen as a feminist goal to recruit young religious women to the IDF.¹⁹ Such feminist activism “obstructs any possible solidarity with Palestinian women,”²⁰ they rightly state. Yet, the image portrayed in the book is a little grotesque especially because of its dedication: Alice Shalvi (1926-2023), to whom the book was

¹⁰ For example: Morgan, Robin, editor. *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. Random House, 1970; hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984. Chapter 4, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women," pp. 43-61. For a more recent reflection on the concept and its developments: Mitra, Durba. "Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2023, pp. 649-671.

¹¹ For example, in a sentence or two in Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, pg. 17;55;78;85.

¹² Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 257.

¹³ In the sphere of prayer and identity formation, see for example: Wood, A., & Zentner, N. C. (2024). Resonating repentance: selichot and the performance of Mizrahi identity in the Israeli public sphere. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 23(3-4), pp. 739-761. Haviva Pedaya, a religious feminist and world-renowned thinker and researcher, is also missing in this context. Specifically, her book Pedaya, Haviva. *The Return of the Lost Voice*. HaKibbutz HaMeuchad 2016.

¹⁴ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 65.

¹⁵ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 64-65.

¹⁶ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 74-80.

¹⁷ They reflect a little on it (Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 192) and conclude that: "But this issue is not part of our subject here." They mention it again in the afterward (pp. 254-255.)

¹⁸ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, pp. 166-171.

¹⁹ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, pp. 108-113.

²⁰ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 257.

dedicated,²¹ was a clear Religious Zionist feminist - who was indeed very busy with women rights in Jewish law and was one of the key figures in the Religious Zionist movement. Nevertheless, she has also dedicated her life to fight for the end of the occupation,²² has denounced all forms of militancy, and fought for Palestinians rights. In her words:²³ “True feminists do not take kindly to their activities being exploited for narrow nationalist purposes. Their mandate is to create a world of equality and mutual respect: sisterhood.” Furthermore, the authors mention Lea Shakdiel’s case in the supreme court,²⁴ but fail to mention her anti-occupation activist and religious work - in which she participates as a female rabbi and a voice representing Jewish tradition.²⁵ In addition, Shakdiel uses the very same language of “Holy Rebellion,” to criticize Religious Zionist perspectives on the occupation. In examples Irshai and Zion-Waldoks bring for various achievements of Religious Zionist feminism, they insufficiently address the danger of normalization of the occupation through these acts.²⁶

This is not to say that the Religious Zionist feminist movement has a clear anti-occupation agenda. Rather the opposite.²⁷ Yet, as a part of the general positions and ideologies that group themselves under “Religious Zionist feminism” - those of Alice Shalvi and Lea Shakdiel are of great importance. To use the language offered by the authors, one could say that Shalvi and

²¹ Volume 6 of *Nashim*, published in the Fall of 5764/2003, was dedicated to Alice Shalvi. This issue, titled “Women, War and Peace,” was edited by Alice Shalvi herself.

²² Shalvi, Alice. *Never a Native*. Peter Halban, 2018. In the chapter “Palestinians,” Shalvi describes her demonstrations against the occupation: “Israelis and Palestinians congregated at Paris Square, near the Prime Minister’s residence, and at Zion Gate, where east and west Jerusalem meet. We wore black shirts and bore banners. We called ourselves Women in Black. [...] Every Friday I took my place at Paris Square, wearing my black T-shirt and bearing a banner reading ‘End the Occupation Now.’ On occasion, passersby joined us. Frequently, drivers paused to denounce us as traitors and whores.”

²³ Shalvi 2018, towards the end of the chapter “Palestinians.”

²⁴ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 193.

²⁵ Leah Shakdiel, “Revisiting the Holy Rebellion,” in *Abraham’s Children: Liberty and Tolerance in an Age of Religious Conflict*, edited by Kelly James Clark, 74 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

²⁶ For example, they mention a radical right winged Knesset Member supporting a relative of hers in pursuing rabbinical ordination, but do not point out to the flipside of the same act: normalization of racism and discrimination. See more in Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, pp. 251-252.

²⁷ This goes along with another research, for example in Hartal, Gilly. “Re-reading Homonationalism: An Israeli Spatial Perspective.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 14, no. 5, 2017, pp. 617-634.

Shakdiel apply the “Dignity Test” in the question of Palestine and Palestinians, even though the Israeli narrative is clearly not yet ripe for it.²⁸

Lastly, the title of the book “Holy Rebellion” receives very little discussion. The authors tend to lean on Tamar Ross’s article and terminology.²⁹ Nevertheless, the mentioned article came out in a collection on Hundred Years of Religious Zionism, thus the term enjoys the context of “Religious Zionism” being the Holy Rebellion.³⁰ It was first used in that collection by Yoske Ahituv and Yair Sheleg, and Ross most probably leans on *their* usage and applies it to Jewish women in Israel - comparing the revolution of Religious Zionism to Religious Feminism - both expanding the boundaries of religion.³¹ Irshai and Zion-Waldoks do mention Ahituv briefly in their afterward,³² but do not mention his centrality in the coining of the term elsewhere.

Furthermore, the term has deeper roots - in both Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism, it goes back to very early days and reappears in the beginning of Religious Zionism.³³ In Christianity it refers to the Middle Ages and monastic rebellions - relating also to the dangerous possibilities of “holy war.”³⁴ Further consideration of the terminology could enrich the analysis Irshai and Zion-Waldoks offer, and lead to new inquiries. For example, through this etymological analysis, the narrative can be revisited: is the Religious Zionist feminist movement another part of the Zionist movement, a nationalist renewal of Jewish Identity? Or rather a sect within Jewish religion, with

²⁸ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 253: “[...] situations in which the violation of human rights is so blatant that it harms the dignity of men and women. In these cases, the court must not wait for the internal narrative to ripen and must intervene at once, regardless of any fear of the reaction its intervention is likely to provoke.”

²⁹ Ross 2003.

³⁰ Yoske Ahituv, “Towards a Non-Illusional Religious Zionism,” in *A Hundred Years of Religious Zionism*, vol. 3, edited by Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz, 7-29 [in Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003).

³¹ Yoske Ahituv, “Holy Rebelion Now” in *Amudim* 610(9), 1997 pg. 262-266 [in Hebrew]. Yair Sheleg described the democratization of Halakhic decision making, and the growing liberty of individuals as the “New Holy Rebellion” in an article, alongside other articles on autonomy and Halakha. See under “The New Holy Rebellion,” *Gilyon* 199, pg. 4-7 [in Hebrew].

³² Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. 247;252.

³³ Firestone, Reuven. *Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea*. Oxford University Press, 2012. As well as through the lives, ideas and actions of Shmuel Haim Landoy (1892-1928) and the “Admor HeHalutz”: Yeshaayahu Shapira (1891-1945). A book in honor of Shmuel Haim Landoy carries the same title: *Don-Ihye, Shabtai. The Holy Rebellion: Shmuel Haim Landoy’s Life and Legacy*. Moreshet, 1960 [in Hebrew].

³⁴ The concept dates back to St. Augustine and the first centuries CE, some read it already in the book of Matthew 11:12. See more in Bronisch, Alexander Pierre. “On the Use and Definition of the Term ‘Holy War.’” *Journal of Religion and Violence*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 35-72. On its development in the Middle Ages, see Moore, R. I. *The War on Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe*. London: Profile Books, 2014.

the rebellion being holy independently of its nationalistic nature? Moreover, looking back into history, can allow a more careful attitude with new holy rebellions. Every holy war or rebellion has had its costs: be it in human lives, solidarity with other groups, or gatekeeping from other identities or people.

Paying more careful attention to the words forming the narrative could help identify those activists or battles who are with one hand fighting for the right causes, but with the other hand hurting, ignoring and ruining other intersectional struggles. Or, in the worst cases, using their power actively in order to hurt individuals, in the name of some holy goal. That is to say: feminism alone would not necessarily lead us to a more just world. As an answer to a question about the place of women in Israel (in a book launch of her memoir in 2018) Alice Shalvi replied the following:³⁵ “We have thirty-one women members of Knesset! Unheard of, unprecedented. And [...] our Minister of Justice is doing her best to destroy our legal system. You realize that just having a woman isn’t enough, you need the right woman.”

To sum up, *Holy Rebellion: Religious Feminism and the Transformation of Judaism and Women’s Rights in Israel*, is an important step in the development of Gender Studies in Israel and in the world. In addition, it suggests an innovative analytical tool, which can be useful in other cultural contexts. It allows a multicultural perspective and prism to work through for both activists as well as academics in other fields. As Irshai and Zion-Waldoks reflect in their preface, their closeness to the issues and people discussed has led to blind spots:³⁶ and indeed the three mentioned above are some of them. Their work is another important piece in the Religious Zionist feminist movement’s narrative. As much as it is an ethnography and an analysis - it is yet another building block, in the renovation of the house known as Religious Zionism. As such, it is a testimony of the Ashkenazi Religious Zionist Feminist movement in Israel. This is not a problem necessarily, but is simply an important contextualization, as all knowledge is situated.³⁷

³⁵ B'nai Jeshurun. *Alice Shalvi: Never a Native*. YouTube, 18 Dec. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/live/JmB9KOv9hV4?si=TMRPdt5dvsPky75u>. (quote taken from 1:15:37-1:16:22)

³⁶ Irshai & Zion-Waldoks 2024, p. xv.

³⁷ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575.

Lastly, Religious Zionist feminism as a holy rebellion or war, could also - like other such holy wars - demand high sacrifices and victims. Thus, future research should focus on a more critical, intersectional approach. Our current times are one of the most difficult times that Israel and Zionism has known, and it is my great hope and prayer that Israeli Zionist feminism will be able to hear the voices of those who have been othered and silenced: only this way will we all be free. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's words: "when they enter, we all enter"³⁸

³⁸ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139-167. The quote is from p. 167.