

Essay

Contemporary Orthodox Jewish Feminist Art in Israel: Institutional Criticism of the Rabbinical Establishment¹

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ABSTRACT

The feminist art movement of Jewish religious women in the United States and Israel emerged at the end of the 1990s. This article examines Jewish feminist art being created in Israel—a country in which legislation has empowered Jewish Orthodox institutions with sole control over the personal status of its Jewish citizens. Through an examination of works by four Orthodox Jewish Israeli women artists, I demonstrate how they have formulated a broad, radical critique of the rabbinical institutions that govern the female body, particularly regarding menstruation, conversion, and modesty—topics that have bearing on their identity as women, Jews in general, and Orthodox Jews in particular. Considering the exclusion of women from spiritual leadership roles within the Orthodox Jewish world, I underscore the importance of the art world as an alternative field of action through which religious feminists can make themselves heard.

Keywords: Israeli art, Jewish art, feminist art, contemporary art

The Jewish religious feminist movement that has developed in the United States since the 1970s, and later in Israel, offers an opportunity to consider the conflict that exists within feminism between upholding religious traditions, which may be viewed as patriarchal, and advocacy for women within the religious community, an advocacy that is fundamental to feminist concerns. Through art, Jewish religious feminism criticizes the patriarchal nature of tradition, *halakha* [religious law], and religious institutions while making a space within those traditions for women's

experience and expression. Although Jewish thinkers and artists have been central to American feminist foci and dialogue since the 1970s,² only in the late 1980s and particularly in the 1990s did Jewish culture and religion become a main subject in Jewish American feminist art.³ Judaism was also rarely discussed in the feminist academic art discourse until the 2000s, and only in 2005 was a significant exhibition on the subject presented.⁴ In the 2000s, religious Jewish women's feminist art gained traction in both the United States and Israel, focusing in particular on criticizing the rabbinical establishment.⁵ This criticism is especially severe in Israel, where the laws of the state give the Orthodox institutions control over personal status laws regarding its Jewish citizens.⁶

This article examines works by four Orthodox Jewish women artists active in Israel: Hagit Molgan (b. 1972), whose work takes a critical look at the ritual laws of menstruation; Nurit Jacobs-Yinon (b. 1973) and Hila Karbelnikov-Paz (b. 1984), whose works deal with the ritual immersion of female converts to Judaism; and Andi Arnovitz (b. 1959), who challenges the extreme religious laws of modesty as they are interpreted in the Orthodox rabbinical discourse in Israel. In examining their works, I argue that, despite the first impression that these artists are only questioning internal issues of halakha, in practice, they offer a broad, radical critique of the rabbinical establishment in Israel. I show that, unlike some feminist thinkers who came from the Christian world and called for women to leave their churches and establish a post-Christian religion, the Orthodox Jewish women artists active in Israel neither reject halakha nor seek to undermine the rabbinical institutions. Instead, they criticize the male control over these religious institutions as a first step in repairing them from within. Thus, these artists express their criticism in the name of the religion and culture to which they belong, continuing a practice that is prevalent among religious Jewish feminists and contemporary women artists who engage in institutional critique, voicing their criticism in the name of the institutions they criticize, not against them.⁷ In light of the exclusion of women from spiritual leadership roles within Orthodox Judaism, I underscore the importance of the art world as an alternative field of action through which religious feminists can make themselves heard.

My findings regarding the nature of the criticism offered by the artists whose works are discussed here are consistent with the claims of various scholars who have addressed the relationship between women's art and religion. For example, Eleanor Heartney investigated depictions of the Catholic image of the Virgin Mary in the art of American women artists during the end of the twentieth century;⁸ Gannit Ankori studied the works of Palestinian artists who interact with their traditional environment (Christian or Muslim)⁹; Yael Guilat discussed video art by secular and traditional Israeli artists who explore the halakhic approach to gender issues¹⁰; and Tal Dekel examined the works of Ethiopian women artists in Israel who criticize the rabbinical institution while seeking to foster a sense of communal belonging for themselves and their community.¹¹ In their respective fields, these scholars have shown that contemporary women artists in various geographical and cultural spheres do not reject their culture but rather affirm it by challenging the oppressive patriarchal dictation that excludes them as women.

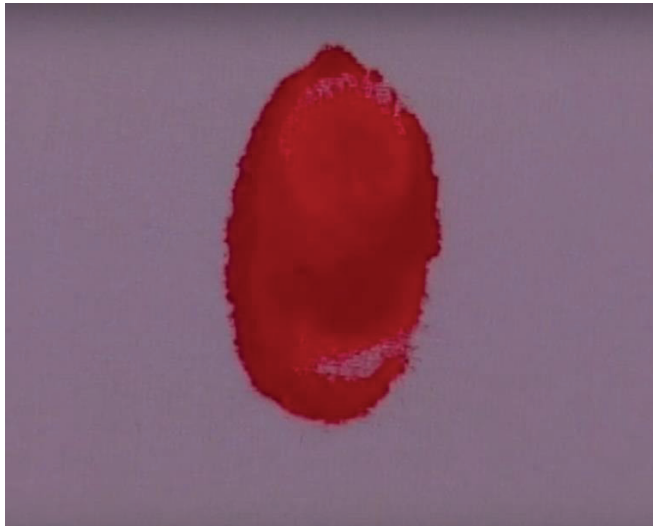
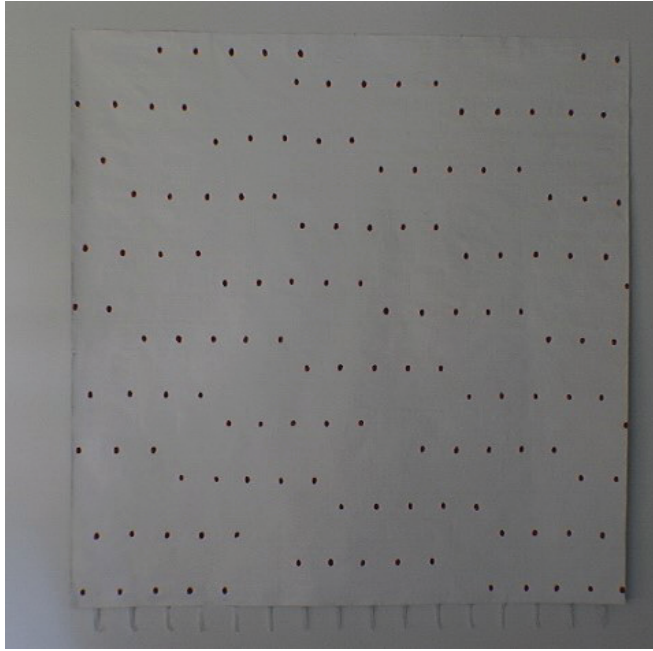
HAGIT MOLGAN: *NOT PREPARED*

Born in 1972 into a religious Mizrahi family in Petah Tikva, Hagit Molgan graduated in 2001 from the Faculty of the Arts–Hamidrasha at Beit Berl College, one of the leading fine arts schools in Israel. Molgan's works are critical of the Orthodox rabbinical stance toward women during menses. In 2004, only a few years after completing her studies at Hamidrasha, Molgan showed her work in an exhibition titled *Not Prepared* (curated by Ziva Jellin) at the Kibbutz Be'eri art gallery. This exhibition propelled Molgan's work into the public eye, where it received attention in various media platforms, including a review by Dana Gillerman in the daily *Ha'aretz*, mentions in the newspaper *Maariv* and on Israel television's Channel One news, and an interview on Israel Radio's Reshet Bet.

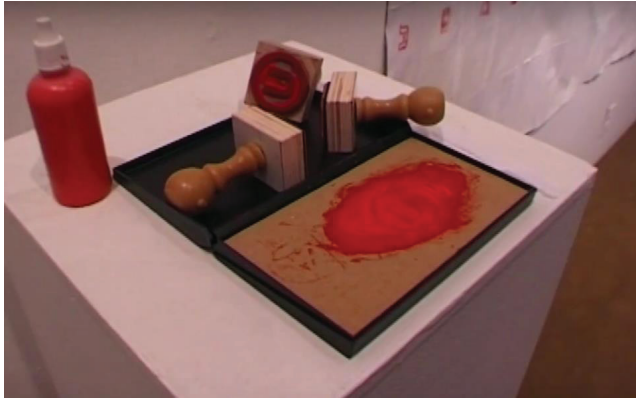
In her exhibition, Molgan was the first artist to bring the bedika cloth into the public arena in Israel and encourage a discussion of the meaning and effect of the religious practices surrounding a woman's menstrual cycle in the art world and in the Israeli Modern Orthodox

branch, known also as Zionist Orthodoxy.¹² During the period of menstruation [*niddah*], a married Jewish couple is prohibited from any act that might result in physical contact. Only when the woman's period has ended completely and there is no sign of blood for seven days is a couple allowed to resume intimacy. The bedika napkin is a piece of cloth an Orthodox woman uses to check whether her monthly bleeding has stopped. Following the end of her menstrual cycle, she will insert a napkin into her vagina every morning and evening for a period of seven days. If on any of the days the napkin is stained with blood, she must begin again to count seven "clean" days. If the napkin is stained but the type of the stain is not clear, it is customary for her to bring the napkin to a halakhic authority (typically male) who decides whether the stain is "impure" (i.e., whether it is menstrual blood). *My Patchwork Quilt* (2004), one of the works in Molgan's exhibition, was made from white cotton serrated square bedika cloths glued next to each other in rows. Some were stained with red drops or the artist's fingerprints in series of five stained cloths and seven white cloths, in keeping with the halakhic definition of five days of menses followed by seven clean days (figs. 1).

Another work, titled *Kosher . . . Kosher* was a quilt similar to the one in *My Patchwork Quilt*. In *Kosher . . . Kosher*, Molgan placed stamps with the word *kosher* on a table next to the work, and visitors were encouraged to stamp the work with red ink (figs. 2). In so doing, she sought to challenge viewers to consider their own position with regard to the policing that is embedded in the practice of bedika cloths. Molgan describes what led her to sharpen her criticism of the rabbinical establishment while creating this work: "These are regulations written by men according to their interpretation of the halakha, and these rules cause a woman for half of her life to feel inferior and impure."¹³ According to her, presenting a bedika cloth to a rabbi forces a woman to participate in her own objectification and loss of autonomy and control.¹⁴ For Molgan, the bedika cloth represents the rabbinical establishment's incursion into the very core of her body, into the innermost place of her being.

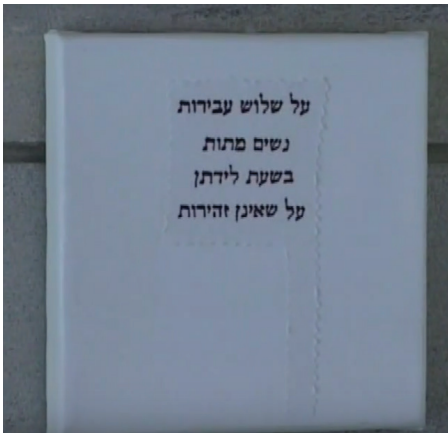


Figures 1. Hagit Molgan, *My Patchwork Quilt*, 2004, acrylic on white cotton cloths (“Bedikah Witnesses”) on canvas: 82.677 × 86.614 in. (210 × 220 cm) (artwork © Hagit Molgan, photographs provided by Hagit Molgan, Jerusalem).



Figures 2. Hagit Molgan, *Kosher Kosher*, 2004, acrylic on white cotton cloths (“Bedikah Witnesses”) and red stamps: 82.677 × 86.614 in. (210 × 220 cm) (artwork © Hagit Molgan, photographs provided by Hagit Molgan, Jerusalem).

In another work, Molgan glued four bedika napkins onto a canvas (figs. 3) and in black marker wrote the verse from the Mishna that is read in the synagogue on Friday evening: “Women die in childbirth for three transgressions: If they are not careful with [the laws] of menstruation; and if they are not careful [to separate some] dough [when baking to give to the priest]; and if they are not careful with the lighting of the [Sabbath] lamp” (Mishna, *Shabbat*, 6, 2). By connecting the Mishnaic text to the bedika cloths, the artist places the practice of ritual purity embodied in the cloths in its broader context, which confines women to traditional gendered roles through the threat of punishment.



Figures 3. Hagit Molgan, *For Three Sins . . .*, 2004, oil on white cotton cloths (“Bedikah Witnesses”) on canvas: four units, 7.874 × 79.5274 in. (20 × 202 cm) (artwork © Hagit Molgan, photographs provided by Hagit Molgan, Jerusalem).



When the exhibition opened at the Be'eri gallery in 2004, *Not Prepared* received mixed reviews from the religious kibbutz movement and the Israeli Modern Orthodox community. Some saw it as trailblazing feminist art. Conversely, a significant portion of critiques called it blasphemous, an obscene breaking of taboos.¹⁵ In an interview for *Kol Yisrael* radio station, aired in parallel with the opening of the exhibition, Molgan recalled a conversation with a religious woman who said the exhibition prompted her to discuss *niddah* practices with her spouse from a female perspective for the first time.¹⁶ Molgan also relayed that “many types of women with many types of lifestyles really wanted to talk about it.”¹⁷ Alternatively, Molgan notes that every “gallery discussion with religious women included ‘recruited’ participants who patiently waited to say that displaying this kind of exhibition was wrong.”¹⁸ In the Sa’ad local newspaper, a kibbutz member by the name of Dalia Roi criticized the show, emphasizing that it was wrong to air the subject in the secular world:

The *mitzvoth* of family purity have just been presented to our secular neighbors in a critical and ironic light, and buses from Sa’ad went in droves to witness the miracle, which, forgive me, had a degree of *chillul Hashem*.¹⁹ I felt that such misgivings and criticism should be resolved among ourselves before depicting it as a barbaric, tribal custom to Jews who are not familiar with the deeper layers of the issue and could develop certain conclusions and strange ideas about our holy Torah.²⁰

In the local newspaper, the kibbutz Rabbi David Asulin explained the concepts of purity and impurity from a halakhic perspective, while gently urging that Molgan’s approach to the issue be disputed.²¹ Following the exhibition, the rabbi and his wife Shifra Asulin also offered to hold meetings on the subject. In a flyer distributed in the kibbutz, they described the exhibition as one that “raises questions and thoughts” and invited female kibbutz members to “a discussion on the various subjects raised by the exhibition and as a result of it.”

In 2012, Ayelet Wieder-Cohen, chair of the religious feminist Koleh organization, honed her radical criticism of *niddah* laws and the religious

institution through a discussion of Molgan's work. In a debate that took place in the pages of *Makor Rishon* (a daily newspaper with religious Zionist orientation) regarding immersion in the *mikveh* [ritual bath], Wieder-Cohen described Molgan's works in order to present the challenges engendered by these religious laws. She stated, "Whoever wishes to understand the difficulties faced by a woman with regard to the laws of *niddah* is invited to listen to the artistic and feminist discourse in this context."²² She honed Molgan's radical critique, but as befits an activist, also put it into a practical context, claiming that, "changing religious law apparently necessitates breaking through a steel wall."²³ She concluded that it is safe to assume Molgan's radical demand is still far from being realized. Indeed, Molgan generated a far-reaching critical discourse on *niddah* laws and customs at a time when feminists within the Israeli Orthodox community made no attempt to challenge their construction by male rabbis.²⁴ Her art served as an act of feminist activism, breaking out beyond the walls of the art gallery promoting a discussion about the laws of *niddah* within Israeli Modern Orthodox society and the religious kibbutz where she lived.

NURIT JACOBS-YINON AND HILA KARBELNIKOV-PAZ:
A TALE OF A WOMAN AND A ROBE

Nurit Jacobs-Yinon (b. 1973) is a graduate of the Ma'aleh School of Television and Film in Jerusalem. Her films, which embody a religious feminist outlook, have been shown in dozens of festivals and at screenings in Israel and abroad. In 2013, Jacobs-Yinon initiated and produced the exhibition *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe*, in which she also presented her own work, at the Zaritsky Artists' House in Tel Aviv (curated by Raz Samira).²⁵ The exhibition was critical of the practice of the ritual immersion in the *mikveh* of female converts wearing only a robe under the gaze of a panel of three male "religious court" judges [*dayanim*].²⁶ Not satisfied with the idea of an exhibition that would be on view for a limited time, she also produced a film that treated the exhibition and its themes (*A Tale of a Woman and a Robe: Ritual Immersion of Female Converts*, Israel, 30 minutes) and organized a series of public meetings and media events in religious

Jewish communities. In addition, Jacobs-Yinon presented parts of the film at meetings of the Knesset's Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women and Gender Equality in 2013, 2014, and 2016. The exhibition received widespread coverage on television and in print and new media, bringing the issue of female converts immersing in the mikveh before a panel of male judges to the public for the first time. Public discussion of the exhibition led Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz, director of conversion at the Prime Minister's Office, to announce at the Knesset Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women in 2016 that the directives had been revised: henceforth, the *dayanim* are forbidden to enter the mikveh space and stand over the immersion bath itself; they now have to remain standing at the entrance.²⁷

In the exhibition, Jacob-Yinon's video, *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe*, was projected in large format across the far wall of the gallery (figs. 4). The work depicted the process of the ritual immersion of a female convert in front of a panel of male court judges. Jacobs-Yinon's second video installation, *The Midrash of the Female Convert*, included a bird's-eye view of a woman immersing in the mikveh. This video was screened on the floor of the gallery. On the wall in front of it there were three video monitors, each showing one of the three rabbis of the beit din, who seemingly observe the woman submerging herself in the ritual bath (figs. 5). The men in these videos are leading rabbis in the religious Zionist movement in Israel and all three have dealt with the issue of conversion during their careers. In the videos, each rabbi offers his personal viewpoint of the issue of the ritual immersion of the female convert in front of a panel of male *dayanim*. In the exhibition catalog, curator Emily Bilski offers her own summary of the rabbis' stances: "While the three rabbis differ in their level of discomfort over the situation and in their sensitivity to the feelings of a female convert, none sees any possibility of changing the status quo."²⁸ In an article in the nationalist religious newspaper *Makor Rishon*, Michal Bregman presented the rabbis' positions in an even clearer light: "The woman's viewpoint disappears. Even someone who agrees that this situation is difficult and that it would be better to find an alternative solution is unwilling to suggest one."²⁹



Figures 4. Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe* (details), 2013, video installation: 3:03 min., loop (artwork © Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, photographs provided by Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, Shoham).



Figures 5. Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, *The Female Converts' Midrash* (details), 2013, video installation: 2:25 min., loop; *Rabbi David Stav*, 1:53 min., loop; *Rabbi Benny Lau*, 1:43 min., loop; *Rabbi Haim Drukman*, 2:56 min., loop (artwork © Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, photographs provided by Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, Shoham).

The voices of the three rabbis could be heard through the headphones attached to the video monitors, and in the gallery the *Midrash of the Female Convert*, a text written in the 1980s by rabbinical advocate Rivkah Lubitch, could be heard being read aloud. The text of the midrash was screened on another monitor (fig. 6).³⁰ This contemporary feminist midrash offers a direct criticism of the ritual bathing practice, underscoring the violation of the ethos of modesty that occurs with the entry of men into a mikveh when a woman is performing the ritual act.

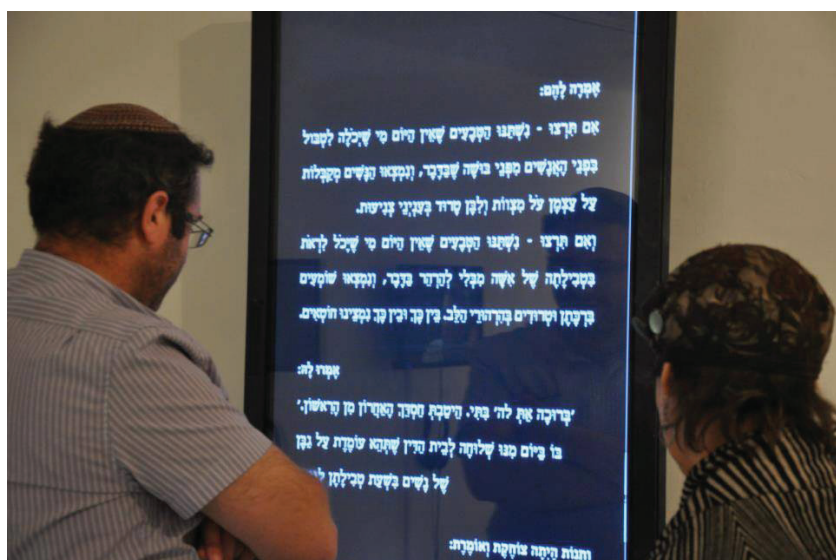


Figure 6. Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, *The Female Converts' Midrash* (detail), 2013, video installation: 2:25 min., Loop (artwork © Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, photograph provided by Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, Shoham).

The exhibition also included works by Hila Karbelnikov-Paz, known for her realistic collages that incorporate masking tape. Among the works she exhibited were copies of photographs she had taken in the mikveh during the photo shoot for *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe*. The frames that show the convert immersing herself at the feet of the male judges highlight the woman's discomfort (figs. 7 and 8).



Figure 7. Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, *Dayanim Watching* (detail), 2012, masking tape and wallpaper on canvas: 55.118 × 66.929 in. (140 × 170 cm) (artwork © Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, photograph provided by Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, Tel Aviv).



Figure 8. Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, *Legs of the Dayanim* (detail), 2012, masking tape and wallpaper on canvas: 59.055 × 66.929 in. (150 × 170 cm) (artwork © Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, photograph provided by Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, Tel Aviv).

On view at the Zaritsky Artists' House in Tel Aviv, the exhibition was interpreted as a form of internal religious criticism about the immodesty of the situation in which a woman finds herself immersing in a ritual bath in front of men. But it was almost never discussed as being a radical subversion of the male rabbinical establishment in Israel. In the opening text of the exhibition catalog, Jacobs-Yinon and Samira clearly state, "This act, which is the culmination of the entire conversion process, is one of great religious and spiritual significance for the convert; however, the manner of the female converts' *tevilah* [ritual immersion]—in front of three men—is immodest and disrespectful of both the woman and of the *dayanim*."³¹ Thus, both artist and curator were openly critical of the practice of women converts being required to immerse in the mikveh in front of men and presented this requirement as disrespectful to the convert and also halakhically and morally unacceptable.

The rabbinical establishment first rejected Jacobs-Yinon's claims and portrayed her view of the situation as untruthful. At a panel discussion in the Gush Etzion community center (May 18, 2015), Rabbi Israel Rozen, founder of State Conversion Authority, declared: "What you have seen [in the film] is false." He further claimed that the film was a fiction of women's organizations, and added that he saw no problem with the status quo. In contrast, following media exposure of the issue, some Orthodox rabbis attempted to solve the problems that were engaging Jacobs-Yinon's interest, creating a discourse diametrically opposed to the conservative stance that by then had taken on extremely strident tones. For example, at the exhibition's concluding event at the Artists' House, Orthodox Rabbi Yehoshua Reich, head of the Women's Institute for Halakhic Leadership at Midreshet Lindenbaum College for Women's Torah Studies, conducted a Torah study session in which he made a case for the halakhic possibility of a woman serving as a rabbinical judge.

The exposure that the exhibition received in the media led to an Orthodox rabbinical response to the acute problem of the unequal power relations of male *dayanim* and women converts in the mikveh. Rabbi Dr. Haim Borgansky, rabbi of the community of Mitzpe Hoshaya,

published an article in which he argued that the issue is not modesty, but rather the power relations and control that result when three men stand above a woman in the mikveh, as Karbelnikov-Paz's work underscores. Borgansky's article was written in response to an article by Orthodox Rabbanit Michal Tikochinsky, published on the *Ynet* online news site under the title "The Rabbis Must Be Removed from the Mikve!" Tikochinsky asked, "How can one claim that a woman dressed in a sopping wet robe standing in the water with three men standing above her is a modest incident?"³² Next to the article was a photograph of one of Karbelnikov-Paz's works from the exhibition. In it, we see the woman in the mikveh through a space between the bodies of the judges standing above her (fig. 9). Borgansky addressed the meaning of the image, going even further than Tikochinsky:

Whoever looks at the works of Hila Karbelnikov-Paz from the film *And Sara Converts the Women* that accompanies the article by Rabbanit Tikochinsky on *Ynet* will find that what it presents is not a situation of immodesty, but rather a situation of control, of a man who stands in a patriarchal pose above a woman. I have not come to argue that there is no problem, but rather that the problem lies in a somewhat different place than the regular "discourse on modesty."³³

The reproduction in the media of the image from the exhibition promoted awareness in Orthodox rabbinic circles of the unequal power relations that exist between men and women and are manifested in the ritual immersion that is part of a woman's conversion ceremony. The fact that Borgansky's insights drew on an image from the exhibition—at the very least, were presented that way—constitutes a prime example of art's ability to generate and promote feminist discourse, even within the Orthodox rabbinical world. Jacobs-Yinon indeed dealt with a local halakhic matter (the issue of modesty), but through it she set in motion a much broader and more radical criticism of the inferior status of women in Orthodox Judaism, signified by the prohibition of their serving as judges in the religious court.³⁴



Figure 9. Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, *Between the Dayanim*, 2012, masking-tape and wallpaper on cardboard: 59.055 x 31.496 in. (150 x 80 cm) (artwork © Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, photograph provided by Hila Karabelnikov-Paz, Jerusalem).

Over the years, Jacobs-Yinon has become more outspoken in her radical critique. In a collection of articles she published in 2016, she exposed a series of sexual harassment incidents endured by a number of women converts in the mikveh and presented a solution once suggested by Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, one of the great halakhic decisors of the last generation.³⁵ At a conference of *dayanim* organized by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in 1952, Waldenberg suggested that women converts perform the ritual immersion under the supervision of other women, arguing that women can serve as “emissaries of the *beit din*.”³⁶ But beyond this halakhic precedent as a solution to the problem, Jacobs-Yinon wrote:

If [. . .] I initially supported [the] adoption of Rabbi Waldenberg’s proposed solution, it seems to me today that the time is ripe to explicitly demand the establishment of a designated all-woman *Beit Din* for women

converts. This is no less than a revolution in the halakhic world that will surely shock its very foundations, but I believe that it is useless to shut the stable door, since the horse has already bolted, and sooner or later, this [will be] the ultimate solution.³⁷

Jacobs-Yinon emphasizes her commitment to Orthodox Judaism but does not conceal the conflict that exists between it and her feminist outlook: “This conflict is part of me, and it is how I raise my four children, and from this place of the ‘faithful are the wounds of a friend’ (Proverbs 27:6), I am here to ask the question, even if I receive no answers—at least [I] ask.”³⁸ Beyond asking the questions, she undoubtedly aims to reform the institution of the *beit din* in a real way so that it will eventually include women.

ANDI ARNOVITZ: THE PORNOGRAPHY OF THE FUNDAMENTALIST RABBINIC INTERPRETATION OF THE JEWISH LAWS OF MODESTY

Andi Arnovitz grew up in the Conservative Judaism movement in the United States, immigrated to Israel from Atlanta in 1999, and today belongs to the Israeli Modern Orthodox stream of Judaism. Arnovitz is a prominent artist who has consistently addressed in her work what are perceived from the religious feminist perspective as stumbling blocks in Orthodox halakha. Since 2011 she has been creating works that are critical of the extreme religious laws of modesty as they are interpreted in the Orthodox Rabbinic discourse in Israel.

In 2011, Arnovitz produced her first work that addressed the laws of modesty. In it, she called to task not only Orthodox Judaism, but all fundamentalist religions and cultures. Her work *504 Years Later* (2011; fig. 10) originated in the feminist discourse on the female body and female sexuality, which criticizes the erasure of women in male-dominated cultures. Arnovitz scanned a reproduction of the iconic 1507 work *Adam and Eve* by German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), now in the Prado Museum in Madrid. Dürer’s work depicts the biblical scene from

Genesis 3, in which Eve offers Adam the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. Dürer paints Adam and Eve naked, with only their genitals covered. Arnovitz covered Eve in leaves to allude to how this iconic image would be depicted today in fundamentalist religious cultures. In 2017 the work was shown in the exhibition *Thou Shalt Not* at the Museum on the Seam in Jerusalem.³⁹ Ouzi Zur, art critic for *Ha'aretz*, described it as follows: “Arnovitz is casting blame upon the male worldview for constricting women’s freedom and for penetrating their consciousness. The result is a unique, productive encounter between contemporary Jewish art and the Christian art tradition against conventions and strictures.”⁴⁰ The artist explained that concealing and effacing women in fundamentalist religions has become the ultimate means for male subordination of women. Where women do not submit, they are punished, at times severely, even murdered, in what is known as “honor killing” in fundamentalist Muslim societies. In echoing Dürer’s work from the past, Arnovitz is posing the question: Are we today more advanced with regard to women’s visibility and liberty? Or are we perhaps regressing more than ever due to fundamentalist religions?

Arnovitz’s referencing of the biblical scene as a commentary on fundamentalist cultures’ suppression and erasure of women is sharpened in light of the Jewish feminist discourse, which is critical of the founding myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Jewish feminist thinkers maintain that the Jewish Sages derived the archetype of the errant female from this myth in order to explain woman’s inferiority to man and to justify the obligation for her to cover her head as a symbol of her shame for her sin. In the midrash, the Sages ask: “Why does a man go out with his head uncovered, while a woman is covered,” to which Rabbi Yehoshua answers, “[For] one who has transgressed and is ashamed in front of others, for that reason she goes out and her head is covered” (*Bereshit Rabab* 17, 8). Given the historical misogyny embedded in Jewish tradition, Jewish Orthodox feminist thinkers are not surprised that women are viewed as the source of men’s sinning and moral decay.⁴¹ It is in light of this attitude that they criticize the laws of modesty formulated by the Sages to curtail women’s conduct and influence over men.⁴² Accordingly,

such feminists view the laws of modesty as reinforcing the same concepts accepted in the general culture, particularly women's inferiority in relation to men.⁴³ Thus, Arnovitz's starting point is this iconic image of Adam and Eve, who for centuries has been used to brand women as impure, lascivious, and sinful, and she connects these concepts to the concealment and exclusion of women in fundamentalist religious cultures today.



Figure 10. Andi Arnovitz, *504 Years Later*, 2011, Archival pigment ink print threads: edition of 4 47.244 x 17.7165 in. panels (120 x 45 cm) (artwork © Andi Arnovitz, photograph provided by Andi Arnovitz, Jerusalem).

Arnovitz follows in the footsteps of feminist artists such as Judy Chicago (b. 1939), Carolee Schneeman (b. 1939), and Lynda Benglis (b. 1941), who were active in the United States in the 1970s. These women artists presented the female nude as a symbol of freedom from and opposition to the patriarchal world that prevented women's visibility and suppressed their sexuality.⁴⁴ Arnovitz's work, however, goes a step further and connects general criticism of Western secular culture with particular criticism of the Orthodox Judaism to which she herself adheres.

In the series *What Have We Done to Her* (2012), Arnovitz focuses on the image of a young girl to point out the sexualization of girls in contemporary secular and fundamentalist religious societies (fig. 11). In one piece, Arnovitz added intimations of breasts and pubic hair to a piece of infant clothing (fig. 12). In this and other works, Arnovitz follows in the tradition of feminist art that is simultaneously critical of Western culture's control over the image of the woman and its objectification of women.⁴⁵ Arnovitz is even more extreme in her criticism in pointing directly at contemporary Orthodox rabbinical discourses in Israel. The artist specifically targets the ongoing dialogue stimulated by rabbis: Since 2010, rabbis of the Hardal community⁴⁶ and the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) circle in Israel have taken Jewish law on female modesty ad absurdum by applying it to little girls. In 2016, Arnovitz created a series of etchings titled *Questionable Motives* that criticized the fundamentalist Jewish discourse on modesty. In the foreground of the works are silhouetted figures (similar in style to those in the works of American feminist and postcolonialist artist Kara Walker, b. 1969) identifiable through their religious garb. In the background are silhouettes of little girls engaged in games (figs. 13). Arnovitz explains that she created these works in response to the latest—in her words “absurd”—round of harsh modesty laws circulating in ultra-Orthodox society, such as one that prohibits girls from riding bicycles and another that prohibits mixed bathing of men with girls over the age of three.⁴⁷ This extremism is stretching the boundaries of modesty to include early childhood. In 2012, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, one of the most prominent rabbis of the Hardal community in Israel, published a list of modesty regulations. In his short essay, he stressed that upholding the

laws of modesty must begin in childhood—from the age of three!⁴⁸ When his article appeared, modesty manuals for young girls were also being published in the ultra-Orthodox sector. The books outline the rules for the outdoor behavior of young children. Little girls are instructed not to leave the house unless there is a good reason, as “it is beneath the dignity of a *bat melakhim* [daughter of kings] to wander aimlessly in the markets, and also not to run, skip, or jump.”⁴⁹

Arnovitz’s views can be further elucidated by Michel Foucault’s analysis of how Western society discusses sexuality and the changes that took place in the seventeenth century. According to Foucault, “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they con-signed sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret.”⁵⁰ In the same vein, Arnovitz opposes the intensification by rabbis of the conversation on sexuality, through the very obsession male rabbis have with female modesty.

Arnovitz’s criticism is sharpened in light of the Orthodox feminist discourse on the laws of modesty. In contrast to the increasing radical-ization of the discourse on modesty within Jewish Orthodoxy, religious feminist discourse is critical of the fact that the traditional mores of mod-esty are always framed in terms of the temptation that women pose for men. The premise that only men are sexually aroused and are unable to control their passions places responsibility for male sexual conduct entirely on women. The argument of Orthodox feminist scholars is that instead of curtailing women’s freedom, men should be held account-able and demonstrate more self-control.⁵¹ Gender studies scholar Tova Hartman, whose work on Orthodox women filmmakers can be found in this issue, insists that the contemporary Orthodox discourse on the boundaries of modesty is obsessive and essentially absurd, with (male) rabbis vigorously discussing the parts of a woman’s body as part of a comprehensive debate on which of a woman’s appendages is the most sexually stimulating.⁵² Hartman claims that the contemporary Orthodox discourse on modesty is so disproportionate that it can be likened to por-nographic discourse in the secular world.



Figure 11. Andi Arnovitz, *What Have We Done to Her*, 2012, cotton onesie and other materials: 18.1102 x 11.0236 in. (46 x 28 cm) (artwork © Andi Arnovitz, photograph provided by Andi Arnovitz, Jerusalem)



Figure 12. Andi Arnovitz, *What Have We Done to Her*, 2012, cotton onesie, human hair, and paint: 10.2362 x 7.874 in. (26 x 20 cm) (artwork © Andi Arnovitz, photograph provided by Andi Arnovitz, Jerusalem)



Figures 13. Andi Arnovitz, *Questionable Motives I, III, IV, V*, 2016, etching and chine collé: edition of 4, 14.9606 x 10.43305 in. (38 x 26.5 cm) (artwork © Andi Arnovitz, photographs provided by Andi Arnovitz, Jerusalem).

In a 2016 interview, Arnovitz stressed that she did not question the need for and importance of the boundaries of modesty, but that she was opposed to the construction of this boundary from the exclusively male rabbinical perspective. Indeed, her series *What Have We Done to Her* makes “pornographic” use of images of the female breast and pubic hair in order to expose the pornographic nature of the fundamentalist modesty laws. In a similar vein, her choice of the title *Questionable Motives* for her

other series criticizes the absurd round of harsh modesty laws circulating in Orthodox societies. Thus, Arnovitz expresses her criticism of the very empowerment of the male rabbinical sexual discourse that is at the foundation of the current obsessive discourse on modesty. These works reveal how, through the mechanism of controlling the laws of modesty for women, the rabbinical hegemony actually produces pornography.

CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY: RADICAL ART IN THE JEWISH ORTHODOX WORLD

The artists whose works are discussed here act as women who are committed to the Orthodox world and its institutions but seek to critique the Orthodox religious system from within and use the art as the agent to bring about this change. Ronit Irshai and Tanya Zion-Waldoks have used the terms *tempered radicalism* and *devoted resistance* to describe this praxis. The term *tempered radicalism* was originally coined by Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully, who used it in a political context with regard to organizational changes in the workplace.⁵³ *Tempered radicalism* comprises a built-in contradiction in that it calls for radical change, but within the framework of the accepted rules. This term has been used in social science research in the context of feminist activism among religious societies, such as the place of black women in their churches.⁵⁴ Irshai and Zion-Waldoks use the term to characterize feminists in the Orthodox Jewish sector whose feminism is radical in its gender criticism and subversive in its demand for equality in the religious sphere, but at the same time tempered by being deeply rooted in Orthodox society and committed to Jewish tradition and the halakhic framework.⁵⁵ Moreover, according to Zion-Waldoks the political agency of religious feminist activists is realized by penetrating the public space in acts of *devoted resistance*.⁵⁶ Hartman and Charlie Buckholz coined this term to describe criticism within a relationship. This criticism does not break from religion or the commitment to it, but is, rather, shaped by it.⁵⁷ *Devoted resistance* is characterized by wanting to voice criticism precisely in the name of the culture within which one acts, not against it. Thus, the artists whose works are discussed

here defend their stance, which obligates them to follow Orthodox ritual, but at the same time present a frank and radical critique of the Orthodox rabbinical institution and seek to trigger social and halakhic change from within the system.

Religious feminist action in the realm of art is particularly important in light of the reciprocal relations and influences that exist between the system of religious laws and rules and the narratives that constitute them. As discussed at length by Zion-Waldoks, Irshai, and Bana Shoughry in another contribution to this volume, legal scholar Robert Cover delineates the interface between the law [*nomos*] and the system of beliefs and stories a society tells itself [*narrative*].⁵⁸ For Cover, the *nomos* that reflects the values and vision of a society is the realization of the dominant narrative at a given time. If narratives constitute a fertile ground for the creation of a culture and influence the development of its rule of law, then action in the realm of art and other creative arenas that weave narratives will create a world of new meaning and, in this way, the new feminist narratives will be assimilated into the laws of society. The Orthodox feminist artists discussed here are working to change the narrative of the Orthodox Jewish world through their art and media, which may also lead to reform in the areas of ritual law and custom.

Lubitch, whose feminist midrash was featured in the exhibition *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe*, has offered her own explanation of the importance of religious activist critique through the creative arts. At the exhibition's closing conference, she stated that the creativity of Orthodox feminists in the fields of art, law, and politics is necessary because they are still excluded from dealing with halakha and still have a limited ability to make an impact in religious terms within the community. Even when they deal with halakha or Jewish texts, their lower status in the religious leadership prevents them from effecting any real, significant change. Therefore, Lubitch argues, they use the world of art and media as an alternative platform for their actions aimed at reform: "If we think that changes in the halakha need to be made [. . .] we must not only write articles about the halakha [. . .] we must paint pictures, and create artworks [. . .] and write midrashim [. . .] only in this way will we succeed in creating

change.⁵⁹ Jacobs-Yinon also described the significance of the art world as an alternative sphere of feminist activity to those of the Orthodox Jewish world—namely, feminist activism in the areas of Torah study, halakhic law, and religious thought, which, though it does exist, still rests in the margins of rabbinical discourse. The artist noted her ineligibility to serve as a witness or judge in rabbinical courts; in this context, she described the art world as a unique space that allows her to submit her “testimony” and make her voice heard: “The work of art is the only witness I am permitted to bear, from **without** and not **within**” [author’s emphasis].⁶⁰ Molgan too, stated that it is the art world that allows her to openly address subjects that are considered taboo in the religious community.⁶¹ Indeed where the Chief Rabbinate enjoys a monopoly by law in all matters of personal status pertaining to the Jewish population, many attempts to introduce change in the rabbinical establishment run into political and legislative opposition. In fact, Orthodox feminist women in Israel find themselves confronting not only the rabbinate but also the state legal system itself. For this reason, institutional critique against the rabbinate is so vital in Israel, making it all the more urgent to create a broad public and political conversation that goes beyond the borders of religious communities, the way Jacobs-Yinon did by engaging the media.⁶² Beyond that, through this study I found that when the artists actively cooperated with other agents to foment meaningful discourse on their works and the issues they raise within the religious communities, they succeeded. This is a significant finding given the marginality of the arts in religious Jewish communities.

Hagit Molgan, Nurit Jacobs-Yinon, Hila Karbelnikov-Paz, and Andi Arnovitz work to alter the narrative of the Orthodox Jewish world through their art, which enables them to create a public and political discourse that has the potential to bring about change within their religious world. The marginality of women as religious leaders increases the importance of other arenas of action including the art world, which enables the voices of feminists to be heard in public. Artwork created in traditional cultures often facilitates the visibility of subjects that are omitted in the dominant discourse of these societies.⁶³ By examining the works of these four Orthodox Jewish artists, I have demonstrated how they effectively

create a broad, radical critique of the rabbinical establishment in Israel and work to reform it. These artists operate within the Orthodox system and are unwilling to forsake its laws. They critique the rabbinical institution that formulates halakha from its male perch and seek to repair it so that it will include the perspective of women, who have historically been excluded from it.

NOTES

1. This article is based on parts of my Ph.D. dissertation titled “Jewish Feminist Art in the U.S. and Israel, 1990–2017.” The dissertation was written under the guidance of Professor Ruth E. Iskin (The Department of the Arts, Ben-Gurion University) in the Gender Studies Program, Bar-Ilan University, and was sponsored by the President’s Scholarship for Excelling Doctoral Students, Bar Ilan University; The Rotenshtreich Fellowship for Outstanding Doctoral Students in the Humanities, and The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture Doctoral Scholarship, New York. My thanks to Professor Iskin, Dr. Karen E. H. Skinazi, and Dr. Rachel S. Harris for their attentive reading of earlier versions of this article and their insightful suggestions.
2. For a comprehensive survey and discussion of the contribution of Jewish women to American feminism and art, see Antler, *Jewish Radical Feminism*; Amishai-Maisels and Ankori, “Art in the United States.”
3. Bloom, *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art*, 3; Baigell, *American Artists, Jewish Images*, 153–54.
4. See Levin, “Upstarts and Matriarchs”; Levin, “Beyond the Pale.”
5. See for example Birnbaum, “Modern Orthodox Feminism;” Sperber, “The Liberation of G-d;” Sicher, “Written on the Body.”
6. Berner, “Religious Feminism,” 167, 173.
7. See Zion-Waldoks, “Politics of Devoted Resistance”; Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique.” In contrast, Yoav Peled and Horit Herman-Peled present religious feminism in Israel as limited and conformist as they always remain faithful to the halakhic system. See Peled and Herman-Peled, *The Religioinization of Israeli Society*, 193, 197. For criticism on the books narrative, see Sperber, “Yoav Peled

- and Horit Herman-Peled;” Sperber, “The Fear of Religionization of Israeli Cultural.”
8. Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, 134–70; Heartney, “Thinking Through the Body.”
 9. Ankori, *Palestinian Art*, 176–219; Ankori, “Re-Visioning Faith,” 390.
 10. Guilat, “Gender, Ritual and Video Art,” 595.
 11. Dekel, “Welcome Home.”
 12. As customary in the literature of Jewish religious feminism in Israel, I use the term *Modern Orthodoxy* as a synonym for Religious Zionism and National Religious (Dati Le’umi) who are usually used in a political context. A precedent for Molgan’s work is a unique work created by Ayana Friedman (b. 1950) in 1996, in which she incorporated the bedika cloth. However, unlike Molgan’s work, Friedman’s work did not create a discussion in the art world or in Orthodox society. See Amishai-Maisels, “Ayana Friedman.” Later, other American European and Israeli artists used the bedika cloth in their art. See Sperber, “The Abject,” 130–34; Oryan, “Female Artists in their Pollution and their Purity,” 120–21.
 13. Gillerman, “Adom meza’aze’a.”
 14. Ibid.
 15. See Sperber, “Jewish Feminist Art,” 131–43.
 16. Krimolowski, “Miri Krimolowski interviews Hagit Molgan.”
 17. Dok-Diyuk, “Ta’arukhata shel Hagit Molgan ‘Lo mukhana,”” 32.
 18. Ibid., 31.
 19. *Chillul Hashem* is when the name of *Hashem* [God] is desecrated by the actions or behaviors of followers. In Jewish tradition, *chillul Hashem* is considered a particularly severe offense.
 20. Roi, “A Response to a Response to a Response.”
 21. Asulin, “Tum’a ma’hi?,” 2.
 22. Wieder-Cohen, “Restoring Autonomy to Women.”
 23. Ibid.
 24. At the time, feminist discussion in the Israeli Orthodox community dealt only with the boundaries of *niddah* practices but made no attempt to challenge the laws themselves or their construction by male rabbis. See for instance Shimon, “Family Purity in Our Generation,” 165–82.

25. This was Jacobs-Yinons' first action in a series of three activist art projects that dealt with issues of women's status regarding the relationship between religion and state in Israel.
26. Later Israeli artists Taeesa Skripchak (born in Kishinev, Moldova in 1989) and Nirit Takela (born in Ethiopia in 1985) addressed the same subject. See Dekel, "In Search of Transnational Jewish Art," 113–16; Dekel, *The Monk and the Lion*, 117.
27. Knesset, "Gender Aspects of Conversion."
28. Bilski, "The Mikveh and the Male Gaze," 52.
29. Bregman, "Olah min ha-tevila."
30. A midrash is a form of traditional rabbinic commentary.
31. Samira and Jacobs-Yinon, "Prologue," 82.
32. Tikochinsky, "Hayavim lehotzi et ha-dayanim me-ha-mikve!"
33. Borgansky, "Bal nispokh et ha-mitgayrot im ha-mayim."
34. The lengthy discussion of the installation, *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe* by Yoav Peled and Horit Herman-Peled illustrates the authors' limited understanding of the subversive practices of religious feminism in general and of religious activist art in particular, as they claim that this project and religious feminism in general do not challenge the exclusion of women from serving as judges on a religious court. See Peled and Herman-Peled, *The Religionization of Israeli Society*, 197.
35. Jacobs-Yinon, *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe: New Reflections*, 50–62.
36. *Ibid.*, 46–49.
37. *Ibid.*, 93.
38. In Farkash, "Mayim kedoshim."
39. Curated by Raphie Etgar.
40. Zur, "Ha-mivtsar haaharon."
41. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, 184–85.
42. Baskin, "The Separation of Women in Rabbinic Judaism," 14.
43. Swidler, *Women in Judaism*, 138; Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, 50–51.
44. Tickner, "The Body Politic," 235–53.
45. Dekel, *Gendered*, 30–37.
46. Hardal are Zionist Orthodox Jews whose approach to Judaism is similar in certain ways to that of the ultra-Orthodox Community (Haredim).

47. Interview with artist in her studio, 18 December 2016. All quotes here are from this interview unless noted otherwise.
48. Aviner, "Begeg znanu'a."
49. Merilos, "Hadash al ha-madaf."
50. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 35.
51. Weiss, "Under Cover," 70.
52. Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, 51–56.
53. Meyerson and Scully, "Tempered Radicalism."
54. Wambura-Ngunjiri et al., "Tempered Radicals."
55. Irshai and Zion-Waldoks, "Ha-feminism ha-Ortodoxy-ha-moderni be-yisrael," 237.
56. Zion-Waldoks, "Politics of Devoted Resistance."
57. Hartman and Buckholtz, *Are You Not a Man of God?*.
58. Cover, "The Supreme Court," 4–5. Thanks to the work of the important Jewish feminist thinker Rachel Adler, who used Cover's ideas, this paradigm has become dominant in Jewish feminist thinking. See Irshai and Zion-Waldoks, "*Ha-feminism ha-Ortodoxy-ha-moderni be-yisrael*," 238–40.
59. Panel discussion at the concluding event of the exhibition, *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe*, Danon Gallery, Zaritsky Artists' House, Tel Aviv, 3 May 2013.
60. Jacobs-Yinon, *A Tale of a Woman and a Robe: New Reflections*, 49.
61. Dok-Diyuk, "Ta'arukhata shel Hagit Molgan 'Lo mukhana'" 30.
62. See Sered, "Women and Religious Change in Israel."
63. N'Goné Fall demonstrates how women's artwork in Africa serves as broad platform for feminist ideas that barely exist outside the world of art. See Fall, "Providing a Space of Freedom," 71–78.

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