

Title of the podcast series: “Israel’s Divides Explained”

Title of the podcast episode: “How does religion affect Jewish women’s rights in Israel?”

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Duration: ___ minutes (the requirement is for a minimum of 15 minutes and a preference for a maximum of 30 minutes)

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Introduction:**1. “General Information”:** 1 min 50 sec

- Hello and welcome to the podcast series “Israel’s Divides Explained.”
- Today’s episode focuses on the religious and gender divide in Israel.
- As one might guess, Israel is situated in the Middle East is situated on the Mediterranean Sea between Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. The State of Israel is the homeland of the Jewish people and the biblical holy land of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.
- But what does religion have to do with gender? Quite a lot, you can find many rules for men and women in almost all forms of religion, but today we are focusing on women’s rights in Judaism in Israel. From the beginning of Zionism, women’s rights haven’t been a priority. But with the creation of the State of Israel, a woman’s right to vote and be elected was established. It was not given to women who asked kindly, it was taken by the women who did not sit idly by. Like Zionism, the women organized themselves exceptionally, and when the men asked them to be more “lady-like” and wait for the “right time” they did not back down. Even with women being able to vote and be elected, with so few women being elected, they continued to fight for their rights and were never far behind when an issue arose. Women’s suffrage was a necessary part, but only a small step on the way to full equality in Israel.
- So who is ready to learn how religiosity affects Jewish women’s rights in Israel?

- This episode of the podcast series was produced in Spring 2023 as part of the course Israel: From Idea to statehood with Prof. Zeedan at the University of Kansas.
- I'm your host Madeline.
- I'd like to introduce myself as a Senior at KU, majoring in International and Global Studies with a History and Middle Eastern Studies minor.
- While I have no personal connection to Israel, by taking several classes about the Middle East and Israel now my appreciation for the complexity of the region has grown.

2. Music /sound effects: 19 seconds

3. **“Topic introduction”**: 2 min 13 sec

- So let’s get into the basics of our topic before we dive head first.
- There are many different levels of religiosity of Judaism: secular, traditional, orthodox, ultra-orthodox, etc. And each has different rules for people, but they are some overarching rules for all women in Judaism.
- So the question of today’s podcast is “How does religion affect Jewish women’s rights in Israel?”
- Even with the right to be elected, few women are elected, and only one woman has been prime minister. Showing easily that women aren’t equal socially and the more deeply religious you get the more rules women have. Women’s rights are glossed over in government documents and with no separation between church and state in Israel, it’s quite plain to see that faith can affect the ways we treat people.
- It should also be added in Fogiel-Bijaoui’s paper, “On the Way to Equality? The Struggle for Women's Suffrage in the Jewish Yishuv, 1917–1926”, the author states, “... the World Zionist Organization recognized women's suffrage as a fundamental principle since the Third Congress in 1899”. As the New Jewish Yishuv was being adopted, they were one of the first political entities to approve of women’s suffrage, which is extremely important to note in our readings here today.
- This question is important due to the equality of women in society and day-to-day life, we can’t just say “well women have the right to vote and work, feminism is no longer needed”. With such a deeply divided country like Israel we can take

part of society and link it to the bigger picture of how socially women can just be put into boxes by unconscious bias, generational gender roles, and religion.

- The information here is based on a selection of primary and secondary sources, however, this is not an exhaustive survey.
- One of my major sources for this episode is “Equality, Religion and Gender in Israel” by France Raday.
- I will be posting my sources online. More details at the end of this episode.
- In our episode today, we will talk about a four major items:
 - i. A short introduction to Israel
 - ii. Introduction to the six divides and the gender divide in Israel
 - iii. The answer to our question
 - iv. Looking towards to the future
- Just a fun little tid bit: Did you know that Jewish women are seen as holier than men in Judaism?

4. Music /sound effects: 7 seconds

Central Section:

- I know I gave a small sampling of Israel at the beginning, but let's dive a little deeper.
1. Let's begin with some history, the history of Israel to be specific. Obviously that's what you came here for! The roots of the Land of Israel stretches across 35 centuries, which means Israel as a place has been around for more than a thousand years before the first century. The idea of Israel came about with the social/ religious movement called Zionism, which I speak briefly about at the beginning of the podcast. The whole goal of this movement was for Jewish people to return to the land of Israel as a safe place with growing antisemitism spreading across Europe in the 19th century. The British took control of modern day Israel after WWI and slowly gave way for Jewish governmental autonomy and for the opening of civil rights to flourish under the New Jewish Yishuv. So when the British gave up control in 1948, the official state of Israel was established. Today Israel's population has boomed, and education, culture, and economy have flourished. Like the rest of the world though, every country has its issues, but Israel has become a deeply divided nation on many fronts throughout the decades. And the gender and religious divide is just a small part of the division that we are going to be tackling today. If you would like to know more about the history of Israel, I read the book "Israel: A History" by Anita Shapira, and for more of a bite-sized option go to [echo and reflections dot com](http://echoandreflections.com) to find "A Brief History of Israel".

5. Music /sound effects: 7 seconds

2. There are six divides present in Israel scholarship today these include: the political divide, the national divide, the ethnic divide, the socioeconomic, the religious divide, and finally the gender divide.
3. The divide we will be covering today is the religious/gender divide. The religious divide is quite vast in Judaism, just like any religion, there are secular Jews to ultra-orthodox Jews. The intersection of gender with religion is that the rules change with how much Judaism you participate in or are raised in.
4. Pre-Israel, a woman's right to vote was an extremely hot topic, in the Zionist movement as well throughout the 20th century. Jews were eventually divided into three factions on the issue: liberals who were in favor of a woman's right to vote, a conservative camp aka the Mizrahi movement, and the Non-Zionists who were against women getting the right to vote, which were the Ultra-orthodox Jews.
5. Although with so much divide over this decision, the right for women was still put in place regardless of the religious opposition in the Yishuv in 1920 and when the state was established in 1948.
6. There are different views on the gender divide: that women and men are equal but have different roles and the other side of the argument is women and men aren't equal because of the segregation of the sexes. There are also different perspectives on the religious divide: To be a Zionist is to not be in line with the Torah and to be Zionist is to be in line with God and take back Jewish agency.
7. A quick search on youtube can find all these different types of opinions on the issue of gender and religion, one I found really interesting is "Can Secular and Orthodox Jews See Eye To Eye?". It deals with gendered issues such as: circumcision, women and men's

roles in society, marriage in the Jewish community, and so much more. This series on this youtube channel brings together quote-unquote opposing sides, it shows how much different levels of religiosity makes people believe different things. But also regardless of levels of religiosity: people can still find middle ground, come to an understanding, and come together to find community.

6. Music /sound effects: 7 seconds

So the answer to our question is: Women’s lives are affected by the level of religiosity they follow or were born into.

1. There’s a long answer to this question, and who doesn’t love a long drawn out answer.
2. If Judaism is made up of all these unique perspectives and a range of ideas all across the board, where do women’s roles and place play into all of this? No need for you to answer, it's rhetorical.
3. Women are valued for traditional feminine roles and are put into a box by society and faith, not just in Israel or Judaism. “Family and familism” is how Hanna Herzog put it, these pillars of a woman’s identity even as women get jobs, have less kids or no kids, and become more active in public rather than in private.
4. To support this claim, I will bring up many sources in the Torah depicting how women and men should behave in day-to-day life and in basic principles to live by. In addition, sources in legislation, education, sociality structure, and employment.
 - a. Under halakhah, women are not regarded as fully qualified to give evidence in court and cannot be appointed as rabbis or judges (Deuteronomy 17:6; Maimonides, Laws of Evidence 9:2, Laws of the Study of Torah 1:13)
 - b. The concept of a marriage ceremony is the “purchase” of a woman by her husband, which he takes her as his wife in a unilateral ceremony (Mishnah in Kiddushin 2a).

- c. Divorce is not a judicial act and may be achieved only in accordance with the husband's wish—until he declares that he is willing to divorce her, there is no way in which she may be released from the marriage bonds (Deuteronomy 24:1; Gittin 85a–b).
 - d. “Women refused a divorce cannot remarry and, if they bear children from a union with another man before the divorce is given, face the severe problem of mamzerut—a form of bastardy applicable to the children of adultery by a woman. (A mamzer cannot marry within the Jewish community: Deuteronomy 23:3; Shulhan Arukh, Even ha-Ezer). In contrast, for men whose wives refuse to agree to the divorce, there is no problem of “mamzerut” and there are even ways in which the husband may acquire the right to remarry without a divorce (Shifman, 1984; Shereschewsky, 1984).” Raday cited all of these places in the Torah to explain women's inequality in Judaism.
5. While women are told to follow these rules, women are also treated differently. As I said before women are seen as holier than men in Judaism, why is that? Well, in traditional Judaism God is said to have endowed women with more “binah” (aka intuition, understanding, intelligence) than men. While God and his teaching, the Talmud which is the most significant collection of the Jewish oral tradition interpreting the Torah, has said many kind things about women, humans tend to focus on the more negative things. To quote Judaism 101, a website with a vast wealth of knowledge for teaching people about Judaism, “Various rabbis at various times describe women as lazy, jealous, vain and gluttonous, prone to

gossip and particularly prone to the occult and witchcraft. Men are repeatedly advised against associating with women, although this is usually because of man's lust rather than because of any shortcoming of women. It is worth noting that the Talmud also has negative things to say about men, frequently describing men as particularly prone to lust and forbidden sexual desires." In addition, women are discouraged to pursue higher education or religious pursuits, because it might take away from their "true" priorities being a wife and mother. You can see how we circling back around to family and familism, when a person is reduced to what they can give to others they are put in a box and place of unhappiness. It can be seen in the US as a good example of the "pill popping depressed stay-at-home mother" of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Women yearn for more than to be a servant of a man and a family, not to say all women feel this way. Many women can find happiness and fulfillment in these roles, the problem is when aspects of a woman's faith and society force it on them.

6. Next is legislation, while Judaism has afforded women so many rights that Western women didn't have until the end of the 20th century, specifically referring to marital rape. "Traditional Judaism recognizes that forced sexual relations within the context of marriage are rape and are not permitted..." The federal law of marital rape in the United States was passed in 1993, while under Jewish Law its been illegal for tens of centuries, which is a win in my book if you ask me. That doesn't mean that laws in the nation-state have the same leniency. The exclusion of marriage and divorce rights from the women's constitutional right to equality, established in the Women's Equal Rights Law, has been shown

by the Supreme Court and lower courts not taking action to lessen the disadvantages women have in the halakhic rules of marriage and divorce. The case of Plonit v. Ploni was a case that would not grant a woman a divorce from a husband she had been separated from for over six years. The court ruled that it would not overturn the Grand Rabbinical Court's holding that there was no proof that the husband committed domestic violence and if so "had not been put on warning". Additionally, The 1992 Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty does not explicitly include the principle of equality over the sexes. The development of women's rights is in complete conflict with religious personal law. Which is what these divides are all about right? Under the law and in the public eye you can say whatever is needed to seem equal, but in practice is it truly that way or something else entirely. These statements are not an attack on Judaism, religion, or a nation in any way, it is simply pointing out the ways we construct boxes for everyone to be put into. Humans see life easier with boxes tied with pretty little labels for everyone to be put into, it's the way our brains work. Although it's easier though, the society we've created is changing and boxes no longer represent what everyone can fit into, especially the boxes we've put on women in life and their roles.

7. What's crazy is women even buy into ourselves, with people in our community, the people you'd think we'd support the most. Nagar-Ron and Pnina Motzafi-Haller point out in their paper that Mizrahi Jewish women are seen in society as women that are under Mizrahi patriarchy by Israeli Jewish society. Middle-class Ashkenazi Israeli feminists see themselves as the "saviors" of their "less

fortunate” Mizrahi women, which in itself is classist, sexist, and culturally insensitive. Like I said before, these women are seen as valued for what they give to others, especially men. There is an unequal power imbalance between these two groups, the ones on the outskirts of the country and society, and the ones at the top.

8. A final point to make is the way Secular and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women in Israel are educated. Ultra-Orthodox women are still out performing men in education, but they are at 12.8% compared to the 39% of secular women. That is such a small percentage of women in education for a developed country, the only issue is the education Orthodox Jewish children receive isn’t standardized anymore. Children are being left behind in hyper religious schools and aren’t being prepared to enter a job market and the “real” world. That’s why Ultra-Orthodox men and women make up so little of the job market and make up most of the unemployment, the only people lower on that list is Arab-Israelis for both. As shown in the “Share of Academic Degree Holders, 2008” from the Taub Center of Social Policy Studies in Israel.
9. To quote Ruth Bader Ginsberg, “We have made huge strides ... but we have not reached nirvana. There's still rampant discrimination on the basis of race, gender. It's true that most of the explicit classifications — men are treated this way, women that way — are gone from the law books. But what remains is what has been called unconscious bias. One excellent example of that is the symphony orchestra. In my growing up years I never saw a woman in a symphony orchestra, except perhaps a harp player.”

10. An interesting story to add to this dynamic is a news story from about a year ago, speaking about Orthodox Jewish women disappearing from public view. This is due to what the news reporter described as “extreme” views on modesty spread throughout the country. These women and girls have been increasingly removed from ads on the street, art, and children’s textbooks. Little girls are being told to sit at the back of the bus, because that’s where they “belong.” Jewish women’s organizations are trying to address this trend, but unfortunately they seem to be getting nowhere. The organization said this is happening due to no separation between church and state in Israel and religious extremism is becoming more mainstream. This all circles back to women being boxed in, being kept in the home, and not allowed in the public sphere.
11. I only fear that with the current right wing government, the more extremist religious views that have gone mainstream, and the democratic erosion of Israel that women of all kinds including Palestinian-Israelis will continue to lose rights, access to the public sphere, jobs, education, and quality of life. Because Passover, which was just celebrated, is the Festival of Freedom, how can Jewish people be free if women can not shake off the chains of oppression.
12. “Freedom is won, not on the battlefield, nor in the political arena, but in human imagination and will. To defend a land, you need an army. But to defend freedom, you need education.”

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Looking to the future: 2 minutes 47 seconds

1. When attending a panel called “Democratic Erosion (?) The Impact of Judicial Reform in Israel” with speakers and who have all been my teachers. This panel showed scholars like Dr. Noa Balf and the Professor of this class, Dr. Rami Zeedan. Dr. Zeedan spoke about how “Tribalism” has led to deeply divided society and to the main six divides I mentioned previously. He also spoke about the triggers that will come from the judicial reforms in Israel, saying “the culmination now [in] 2023 of [democratic] demographic changes, which very much connects to Tribalism”. He spoke about the potential implications of the judicial reforms that are going to affect “minority rights, women”. In addition, Dr. Balf spoke about how with the reforms the slow expansion of Israel’s religious courts’ jurisdictions. In addition, Dr. Balf spoke about how the “test of reasonableness” will be removed with the judicial reforms and that is how women and minorities have achieved and kept their rights in Israel.
2. Yes, scholars have a lot of big words and terms for the judicial reforms and how it affects women, but how do common people and stakeholders in Israeli society see the future of this divide? An article was written in the “Israel Democratic Institute” by Anat Thon-Ashkenazy about the ramifications of the reform on the status of women in Israel. Specifically saying, “Each bill on its own and all of them taken together would undermine the protection of women's rights from various sectors of the population, and mainly women from marginalized groups”. She also added later in the article that “The current situation in Israel is that women’s rights are not adequately protected. Women are not appropriately represented in the senior ranks of government ministries and local authorities...and a large percentage of working women hold low-paying jobs, especially

women from groups that are the victim of discrimination, such as the ultra-Orthodox and Arabs.”

3. I honestly think from the articles, to the scholars, the classes, and all the media I could possibly consume on this topic, it will only get worse. I don't want it too, but when any society is pushed too far in one direction, and as Dr. Zeedan said, “the criticism of the government was that it was too liberal and left leaning”, the pendulum is bound to swing the other way just as hard.
4. And of course, women's rights are more protected in an illiberal democracy, like Israel, rather than an authoritarian regime, like Saudi Arabia, but that doesn't mean that the fight for equality stops. It means we are only coming closer to a world that women like myself can look back at and be proud to leave behind when the next little girl takes our place.

8. Music /sound effects: 7 seconds

Wrap-up and closing remarks

9. So where does that leave us in the end? I know it's a heavy topic to dive into, but how can we summarize it all? Well we can start back with Israel has a deeply divided society and the gender/religious divide is only a small part of a bigger picture. Women have a lot more rights in Israel than they do in other parts of the world, the Zionist Organization and Yishuv have shown that time and time again since the end of the 19th century. What other countries can say that? Not many I'll tell you that, but with changes comes good and bad. And I can confidently say that the change happening in Israel is bringing more bad than good in this American's eyes.

Equality is more than suffrage, it is tied to every part of society from: education, legislation, employment, division of labor in the home, child-rearing, and so much more. And religion isn't the only part of life that can breed inequality, so don't take this as an attack on religion or Judaism. Take this as part of life we can still love yet be critical of, because scholarship isn't about tearing things down it's about peeling back the layers and reflecting on what can be learned. And I don't know about you, but everyone needs a little self-reflection at times.

10. Sources: I will be posting my sources for this episode online, look at this online page where you are listening to the episode.

11. To close this episode out I'd like to thank the audience for listening and to check out other episodes of the series "Israel's Divides Explained". I know you'll enjoy them as much as I did. Thank you again and have a wonderful rest whatever time of day you're listening.

12. Closing music: 50 seconds

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