

A debate over portrayals of Orthodox women



The Coat of the Chained Woman by American-born Israeli artist Andi Arnovitz depicts the plight of women unable to obtain a get, or religious divorce, from their husbands and so are not free to remarry. The piece is made from shredded copies of ketubot, or marriage contracts, with threads hanging, contrasting the joy of Jewish marriage with the agony of agunot, or chained women.

Photo courtesy Andi Arnovitz



Paula Birnbaum, left, of the University of San Francisco and Yael Zerubavel of Rutgers' Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life field questions about the conflicts between traditional Judaism and women as portrayed by religious female artists.

□ *Photo by Debra Rubin*

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A program at Rutgers University on feminist art in Israel took an unexpectedly contentious turn when audience members began debating the sometimes negative portrayal of tradition in work that depicts religious Jewish women.

The artwork — created by religious women and featured in a presentation by Paula Birnbaum, associate professor and director of the art history and arts management program at the University of San Francisco — offered commentary, often critical, of the treatment and attitudes toward women within Orthodoxy. Topics included the plight of women unable to obtain a religious divorce (*agunot*), the segregation of men and women in public places, and the laws of family purity.

Birnbaum, presenting the annual Ruth and Alvin Rockoff program on Sept. 23 at the campus student center in New Brunswick, said she visited with many religious feminist artists this summer, and their works are reflective of the clash of modern feminism with religious law, even among the most devout.

“Tensions are really building,” said Birnbaum.

Some audience members, however, strenuously objected.

“I’m Orthodox and these things are totally not looked at that way in my circle of friends,” said a woman who would only identify herself as being from Edison. “I follow all these laws.... I think Shabbat night is one of the most beautiful nights of the week.”

Another man yelled out, “I’m not Orthodox, and I do too.”

The woman also said she had been in Israel this summer and had seen some of the exhibitions, challenging Birnbaum’s portrayals, adding, “I think these women are very blessed.”

However, another woman stood up to challenge that woman’s views, pointing out that “these are women deeply invested in their tradition,” but with a different perspective on those traditions and were creatively expressing them.

The program was sponsored by Rutgers’ Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life in conjunction with The Fertile Crescent: Art, Gender, and Society, a five-month long symposium of the Rutgers Institute for Women and Art. Displays and programs will be held at Rutgers and Princeton universities through Jan. 13 (fertile-crescent.org).

Birnbaum said that despite the accomplishments of women in Israeli society — including Golda Meir’s tenure as prime minister, Israeli women serving in the military, and strong laws against sexual harassment and discrimination — women continue to be marginalized in *haredi*, or fervently Orthodox, communities.

She cited an incident last year in Beit Shemesh in which an eight-year-old Modern Orthodox girl was spat on and harangued by men on her way to school for being “immodestly dressed.” In another instance, a woman who won a scientific award was not allowed onstage to accept her honor because of modesty issues.

The Women of the Wall have had an ongoing fight for years to pray in *tallit* and *kipot* at the Kotel, while women in some religious communities last year were forced to ride in the back of buses.

“Posters [depicting] women have been disappearing from streets, based on the *haredi* concept of modesty from ancient texts,” said Birnbaum.

But religious women are pushing back, she said. In January, a group of 250 women joined in a “flash mob,” dancing and singing in the streets of Beit Shemesh in defiance of the rules on modesty. Anat Hoffman, a leader of the Women of the Wall, led a coalition that pressured lawmakers to pass legislation heavily fining bus drivers who force women to the back.

In response to the unusually passionate audience reaction, Bildner executive director Dr. Yael Zerubavel said “anybody who studies art knows that it is a form of cultural expression.”

“It doesn’t mean it is representative of the entire society,” she said. “One or even 10 pieces is not representative of everybody’s voice. I would add this is the power of art.”

Zerubavel said the artists portrayed were trying to express their ambivalence, and that through such lectures Bildner was showcasing the diversity within the Israeli art world and welcomed thoughtful debate.

After the program, Birnbaum said she had never encountered a reaction like at Rutgers at any previous presentations.

That feeling was seconded by Zerubavel, who told *NJJN* the next day that Bildner had rarely sponsored a program that provoked so much reaction. She was continuing to receive responses from those attending, some of them Orthodox, telling her the evening caused them to think about issues in a way they never had before.

“They found the program and discussion very intriguing,” added Zerubavel. “They’ve also been telling me they appreciated my remarks at the end.”

In response to an e-mail from *NJJN* after the event, featured artist Andi Arnovitz said, from Jerusalem: “The work is not all easy and so I am glad that it provoked and caused people to rethink things.

“I am Orthodox and love Judaism deeply, but much of Halacha [Jewish law] is written by men and thus not perfect. The whole point is to work through, improve, and make the world better, and the entire point of the art I make is to do this.”

For a full listing of fertile crescent exhibitions and events, go to fertile-crescent.org.

<http://www.njjewishnews.com/article/14544/a-debate-over-portrayals-of-orthodox-women>