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## **"I'm Different from You but Very Much Like You": Religious Women Activists and their Father Figures**

By Ayelet Makaros<sup>1</sup> and Edith Blit-Cohen<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This study examined activist women in religious society in Israel in order to gain in-depth insights into their lived experience and coping strategies in advocating for change in their society. The article is based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with fourteen such women. Contrary to the expectation that there would be a dominant mother figure influencing the activists' lives, the findings show that the influence of mothers was marginal and even an impeding factor, while father figures were the most significant in these women's childhood and development into activists. All religious activists perceived their fathers as highly influential, in three contexts: the father as a pioneer, the father as an extraordinary figure, and a strong attachment to the father. Based on these findings, we believe it is important to involve and integrate men in programs that act to promote and empower religious women in Israeli society on both the political and occupational level.

*Keywords:* Israel, Women activists, Social change, Father figures, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox women

### **Religious Activists in the Israeli Sociocultural Space**

The recent decade has seen the emergence of religious women who are active for social change and have gained public and political visibility in Israel. These women lead significant change processes that are often inconsistent with the norms of their community (Safran, 2006; Schnabel, 2018; Zion-Waldoks, 2015, 2018). This new phenomenon is related to the wave of social protests, particularly the one that swept Israel in the summer of 2011 and reignited the social rights and justice discourse (Burton, 2011; Gordon, 2012). Social media, which also occupied public space in this era, provided convenient platforms for raising issues, organizing, and protesting. In particular, they contributed to the ability of religious activists to break the silencing barriers and make their own voices heard (Artzi Srur, 2018; Pavel & Avrami, 2012).

Despite the recent gradual adoption of some modern norms by Jewish religious communities (Zicherman & Cahaner, 2012), the space where they are socially active remains a religious one, characterized by authoritative and patriarchal leadership, conservatism, and varying degrees of segregation from the outside world. Above all, it is a space where women are considered inferior. Accordingly, by the very fact that they are socially active, women religious activists challenge and criticize the conventions and norms of their society (Safran, 2006; Zion-Waldoks, 2015, 2018). They promote hitherto silenced issues, and their activism is therefore daring,

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transgressive, and often severely objected to. Some of the activists have led dramatic and successful moves, whereas others cope with multiple difficulties and encounter various degrees of resistance, including excommunication and shaming, to the point they feel they must conceal their activism (Schnabel, 2018).

The activists in our study belong to two main groups: the ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox Jews. Ultra-Orthodox (or Haredi) society represents 14% of Israel's population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Its members are expected to be loyal to the community and its leaders, and to obey strict religious-behavioral codes (Efrati, 2019; Goodman & Witztum, 2002). The community frowns upon modernity and, in some groups, perceives its influence as a spiritual risk. Consequently, most ultra-Orthodox Jews lead an isolated community life, often in towns and neighborhoods separated from non-religious society (Ben-Yehuda, 2010; Shoham, 2012). The women are expected to work and support their husbands who study the Torah, but at the same time are expected to be modest and not stand out in the public and political sphere (Safran, 2006).

Orthodox society represents 16% of Israel's population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). It is also characterized by the observance of religious customs and studying the Torah, but this is combined with relative openness to the modern world, to technology, and to secular society (Hermann et al., 2014). Orthodox women are usually employed and educated, and are active in the public sphere, but suffer from inferior status compared to men (Schnabel, 2018; Zion-Waldoks, 2015, 2018).

The activist women's conduct in their cultural environment may be examined with reference to theories that relate the activism of the individual to her sociocultural background. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), systems theory (Weiss-Gal, 2007), and others highlight the influence of the sociocultural conceptions of an individual's environment upon their knowledge, attitudes, and conduct. Accordingly, the women religious activists' daring is surprising, as it runs counter to the conservatism and acceptance of male religious authority common in their communities.

The cultural context may be examined on three major levels: the conceptual, the social-reformative, and the dynamic processes (James & Cherry-McGee, 2013). Thinking about religious activism as a concept refers to the fact that the cultural reality from which an activist has emerged affects her ability to operate as one. The views and attitudes of that environment raise important questions: Is it appropriate for a woman to be active in public space? Does she feel strong enough to run against the grain and raise controversial issues? Does her activism represent a betrayal of religious commandments, traditions, and values? Given those questions, it is clear that in order for these women to make their voice heard, power relations must be changed in the systems around them, and their society must be reformed (Närhi, 2004; Zion-Waldoks, 2015).

On the level of social reform, the activists attempt to influence policies. In this context, they act to effect change in two directions. The first is achieving personal, organizational, community and political power, enough to gain control of their own lives and lead to change in others' lives (Gutierrez, 1990; Itzhaky & Bustin, 2012). The second is leading change in the patriarchal system that oppresses women (Echols, 1989; Saulnier, 2000), highlighting the gap between women's dominant position in the domestic sphere and their inferiority in the public sphere (Motzafi-Haller, 2007).

Thirdly, on the level of the dynamic process, the activists must treat the required cultural change as an ideal that may not always be fully achieved. This requires the realization that social change is a prolonged and difficult process that requires persistence and careful consideration of

the appropriate tactics and strategies to influence policymakers (James & Cherry-McGee, 2013), including indirect, sophisticated approaches (Friedman, 1996; Zion-Waldoks, 2018).

The gap between the expectations that the women religious activist adapt to social requirements and norms and her courage in criticizing society indicates that there are other, significant factors that provide her with the legitimacy and the personal and social credit to act. In this article, we examine a potentially powerful factor in this dynamic: the figure of an activist's father and his role in developing her identity.

### **The Father Figure's Significance in Constructing Religious Activists' Identities**

Developmental and clinical psychology has attached huge importance to the parents' role in individual development. The mother and father figure provide a rich sequence of experiences that have lifelong effects (Bauman, 2018; O'Connor, 2002; Pantone, 2000). Obviously, the mother and father play different roles and affect the development of different parts of the individual personality. In traditional societies, this distinction is even clearer (Apter, 2014). For example, the father is seen as responsible for instrumental tasks such as providing security and livelihood and is more involved with the public realm, whereas the mother is seen as responsible for the expressive tasks such as education and providing warmth, a sense of protectiveness and solidarity, and resolving family conflicts (Coltrane, 2004; Coltrane & Glat 2000; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Despite the changes in gender roles in modern times that have blurred this differentiation (Bianchi, 2000; Yoshida, 2011), a clear division of roles can often be seen in many communities worldwide (Cann, 2018; Quadlin & Doan, 2018), including Jewish religious society in Israel (Foster, 2014; White, 2000).

Since theoretical literature addresses father-daughter relations in close relation to mother-daughter relations, we will address both relationship types as affecting the identity development of religious activists. One of the major issues in mother-daughter relations is separation and individuation. Theories suggest that the mother does not encourage the daughter's independence because she perceives it as betrayal, abandonment, and giving up on her expectations for her daughter, whereas the daughter feels she cannot grow while at the same time maintaining closeness and warmth in her relations with her mother. This experience is heightened in a traditional, patriarchal society. Many mothers in such societies have given up a professional career or other ways of expressing their talent in the past, to devote themselves to their domestic role. When these mothers face daughters who choose to try to live in both the professional and domestic worlds, to be mothers and have a career, some view this choice as erroneous (Friedman, 1996). Again, this conscious or unconscious conflict due to maternal expectations or judgment is felt by many women. But in traditional societies, there is a particularly powerful pressure on the mother to retain the traditional values. She finds herself facing questions such as whether to foster resistance or conformity, to adjust to the dominant, open society around their community or remain loyal to their own community's values (Friedman, 1996; Lajos, 2014). This complexity is particularly intense in ultra-Orthodox Jewish society, as it experiences processes of transition and opening up to the modern world, powerfully affecting mother-daughter relations.

The father's role should be viewed against this complex background. The father has a significant role in the daughter's early development and is seen as enabling her separation from the mother. As opposed to the mother's expressive role, the father plays an instrumental role in preparing the daughter for society and the external world, promoting her autonomy and extroverted approach to life. Among other things, he provides her with confidence, a sense of protection, authority, and inner strength (Netzer, 2012).

The theoretical literature refers to the father archetype as including the masculine, the hero, the wise old man, the pathfinder, and even a God figure (Murdock, 1996). Like the experience of the mother, the primary experience of the father is that of an omnipotent, godlike archetypal being. This is true particularly in patriarchal culture, where men have high status and power compared to women, and therefore have considerable influence on daughters' development, especially the aspects related to the outside world (Almog, 2012; Netzer, 2017). According to Netzer (2017), "daddy's girls" who identify with the father's values and internalize his appreciation for them will achieve more in the outside world. The daughter's closeness to the father strengthens the masculine rational-intellectual aspects in her psyche, particularly if she finds herself unable to appreciate her mother. The father has a major influence on the daughter's development as a powerful, independent person:

A father who listens to his daughter, takes an interest in her thoughts, marvels her, conveys to her that she is creative and special, will enable her to grow into an independent and confident woman, connected to her inner voice, one who would be able to realize herself as a person and a professional. She would not be afraid to stand up tall and face every challenge, believing in her ability to leave her mark on the world. (Katz 2009, 158)

Accordingly, it is essential to examine the father figure and its relation to developing the activist's identity.

The literature review indicates that next to the cultural aspects, significant personality and family factors affect the developing identity of women religious activists. The present study examines this aspect through three research questions: (1) What is the family background in which the participants' activist identity has developed? (2) How did their childhood affect the participants? (3) What key figures in the participants' life have influenced their activist identity?

## **The Design of the Study**

### *Method*

This qualitative study is informed by a critical feminist approach that considers the participants' discourse as a major source of information (Shkedi, 2011). The critical approach seeks to free the interviewees from the bonds of conventional socio-political discourse (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Complementarily, the feminist approach challenges social inequality and seeks to free women from automatically viewing the men as the most powerful in society, and to encourage them towards self-realization and being able to affect the social institutes and processes that (re)produce this inequality (Grbich, 2007; Travers 2001).

In critical studies, the researchers' worldview and perspective are highly important (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). The two researchers are community social workers with years-long field and academic experience in social change in communities. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers (one of the researchers and a research assistant) who identified with the religious community, were familiar with its unique content world, and were highly sensitive to its cultural code and social symbols.

### *Participants*

Fourteen religious activist women took part in the study, located using the snowball technique. Given the characteristics of ultra-Orthodox society, very few women are socially active, and the sample includes the most prominent activists in Israel. Moreover, as they are connected to

each other through social media, it enabled us to reach saturation; thus, we found this technique most appropriate.

Of these activists, eight were Orthodox and six were ultra-Orthodox Jews. Their mean age was forty. All had higher education (two had a third degree, six had an MA, five had a BA, and one had a diploma in professional studies). All were married except for one divorced participant, and all had children between the ages of two to six. These women were active in a variety of areas, including women's rights in the workplace, municipal and national politics, preventing sexual harassment and assault, and reforming religious divorce procedures.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data were collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews, 60-90 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted like a conversation and held in an environment that was safe for the interviewees. They were audiotaped and transcribed.

Data analysis was performed in three stages. In the first, the researchers read the interviews several times to become empathically acquainted with the interviewees' narratives. In the second stage, units of meaning were identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the third stage, similar utterances were grouped into themes. These themes constitute the conceptual skeleton of the research findings (Creswell, 2013; McLeod, 2013).

### *Ethical Considerations*

The study was conducted in keeping with ethical rules and was approved by the ethics committee of the Social Work School at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. The participants signed an informed consent form, having understood the study's objective and the use made of the findings. The latter were reported anonymously while protecting the participants' privacy.

## **Results**

Examining the participants' background opened the door to a broad and comprehensive discussion of their childhood. Nevertheless, it was very clear that father figures were pivotal in their development as activists. Of all the interviewees, only one talked about her mother as a role model. Two spoke about their mothers as having tried to stop their activism, and for the rest, the mothers were presented as marginal or not mentioned. The interviewees perceived their fathers as having affected their lives and activism in three main contexts that constitute the themes of this study: (1) the father as a pioneer and man of action; (2) the father as an extraordinary and inspiring figure; (3) strong attachment to the father, involving joint religious learning; and (4) the mother figure.

### **"Pioneer": The Father as a Man of Action**

The interviewees described their fathers as highly active and involved in public life, contributing to society, and sometimes even pioneers in leading processes that are controversial in their social environment. This is evident in Efrat's words: "He was also the first pioneer who allowed into the [rabbinical] court women as secretaries, as well as typists. Inside the court [system], the first female typist was actually in his own court" (Efrat, personal communication). Miri and Edith described their fathers as men of action, involved in events of national importance:

My father was an anarchist, then a communist. He threw water with potatoes in a bag in May '68, at the time of the student rebellion in Paris. He threw potatoes at the Parisian riot police. Very-very active [...] with a socialist worldview. (Miri, personal communication)

My father was active in academia, but he did do some great things that influenced the State of Israel. He was an Israel Prize laureate [...] received recognition for what he did. (Edith, personal communication)

Shira described her father as not only an activist, but also as a highly active and opinionated essayist: "Yes. It starts from home. My father was an educator for many years, but he would always also write, send articles, opinion pieces or thoughts about all kinds of subjects to the newspaper." For some of the interviewees, not only the fathers represented an influential male figure, but also the grandfathers were mentioned as significant in shaping their activist identity:

Today, I can say that both my grandfathers affected me, they were highly active. I have a grandfather who died about six months ago [...] who on the other hand had political standing, but he also conceived [the idea of a] yeshiva in the religious kibbutz [...]. On the other hand, I have a grandfather who was highly activist – still is. May God prolong his days, he's 93, he was in Gush Etzion and was captivated [by the Jordanians] and established another settlement, [re]established Gush Emunim [after 1967], and was later in the Knesset. (Lea, personal communication)

As suggested earlier, Miri described a childhood experience with her father that highlighted the significance of the political upheavals in France for their lives. Her father perceived these changes as dramatic, and they would go out to the streets to share the joy of the masses, with Miri on his shoulders, experiencing first-hand both the political events and the way her father was experiencing them:

I have this scene etched in my memory. May 1981, I'm six [...] there's elections in France. My parents don't have French citizenship [...] the socialist movement wins. We hadn't voted, but it didn't prevent us from going out to the streets, me on my father's shoulders, and we're shouting in the streets: "We won! We won!" From my father's point of view, the socialist victory was like we, like we won, the immigrants from North Africa, it's the Jews who won – he was certain that a new day would dawn the next day [...]. Our home was very socially engaged. (Miri, personal communication)

Both Miri and Efrat described how their fathers were not only active themselves, but also pushed them to act. Efrat described how her father pushed her to start higher education, although this was highly uncommon in ultra-Orthodox society. It was he who pressured and encouraged her to make the actual step. Efrat stated, "I was in my third maternity leave and my father came to me with a suggestion [...]. I was already 24, and then he came to me with this suggestion: 'Maybe you should start studying? Enough. It's about time'" (Efrat). Miri described how her father pushed her to immigrate to Israel alone, despite her young age:

We had a huge photo of Jerusalem in the middle of the living room. And they kept telling us that here in France, our life was not the real life. Therefore, at age 15, I told my dad: "Every year, when you say, 'Next year in Jerusalem', you're kind of fooling the Almighty, 'cause you don't really mean it." So, he actually told me, "Is that it? You want this? Be my guest!"—and I immigrated alone at age 15. What I mean to say is that it was very-very clear that if you believe in something, it's not enough to talk about it, you have to do something to make it come true. (Miri, personal communication)

### **"A Wall Full of Books": The Father as an Extraordinary and Inspiring Figure**

The interviewees' father figure was notable also in being inspiring, thought-provoking, and trailblazing. Efrat called her father a visionary: "In every field. In everything. Simply way ahead of his generation. Truly a visionary" (personal communication). She emphasized his sensitivity to the status of women in the rabbinical court and his uncommonly reformist view of the matter. She recalled things her father had told her that represented his innovative if not revolutionary worldview:

It was very important for him personally, and he also said as much more than once. It was a conversation topic at home, that women in the rabbinical court were a minority that was heard and wasn't heard. [...] In every [marital status] case there's also a woman, but [hers] is a voice that nobody can raise to the right level, and properly represent it, legally, before the judges. (Efrat, personal communication)

There's a woman there. And there are three judges [and] the *Safra de-Dayana* [the Writer of Divorces] – who is also a man. A husband who is also a man, her attorney and his attorney are also men. And there's a woman who has to speak before all of them, and that's simply unbearable. (Efrat, personal communication)

Shira also referred to her father as thought-provoking, albeit from a different angle. When she would turn to him with questions, he would encourage her to search, to read, to check things out, and arrive at the answer by herself, rather than provide the answers immediately: "Dad was always very-very thought provoking. Still, I'm still living in my house, but a wall, a wall full of books, holy books, was very dominant. I always live with walls and books, and he would always send me out to look for answers. It's a worldview" (Shira, personal communication). Shira's father was also inspiring in his ability to present situations in a complex way. He educated her to see the perspective of the other side, and to presents the different sides of the same coin, as illustrated in the following quotes:

I inherited a lot of complexity from him, because he has this thing – he still does it with his students [...] to represent a different viewpoint. Suppose now he's the ultra-Orthodox Jew who refuses to be enlisted in the army; he would actually argue with you. Actually presenting, actually convincing others why enlisting is wrong. Or he would play a Palestinian-Arab or a gay person who wants to marry. So, I can actually remember this happening around the Sabbath table, that I would say something that was rightwing, and then he would say something leftwing, and right after I would get to, "OK, well, you don't really think that way," he would start explaining his own worldview. But that's the way he always was. (Shira, personal communication)



Yes, complexity, I mean that things are never black or white, and so he always presented to us the opinion of the other side, to show that ultimately, even if you do have a different opinion and you don't agree – he was always, I'm always proud of having the ability to see the other side. Things were never absolute. So, it's like that from home. (Shira, personal communication)

### **“Despaired of Having a Son”: Strong Attachment to the Father, Involving Joint Religious Learning**

Many of the interviewees had a deep personal relationship with their father. They viewed their fathers as a source of support and advice, and as their companions in significant decisions. This strong attachment was also accompanied by religious study as a joint father-daughter experience:

I had the privilege of studying with my late father – deep, broad and serious Torah study. I usually joke that this was a combination of my curiosity and the certain despair that began to settle in his heart because we were five daughters. And I was the third, and I believe that he already despaired of having a son. Because he was a *Cheder* teacher, and studying with a daughter was not too appropriate, but I was so curious, so he taught me. (Hilla, personal communication)

Now attitudes towards women are a bit different inside religion. Beyond the fact that [...] I was the eldest [...] I always had a very strong relationship with my dad. I would always go praying with him – like in the United States, he would wake me up early and I would go with him to study the daily page. So also, with regard to that entire issue of access to the Torahic world, I felt I was supposed to have an equal share. (Shira, personal communication)

He would also sit next to me and teach me the Halachic issues [...]. He would come 3-4 times a week and we would simply sit down, sit for hours and learn. Between the material for the exam and material, he thought I needed to know even if the exam did not require that of me. That's what you call enrichment. (Efrat, personal communication)

The strong attachment to the father did not necessarily end in the interviewees' childhood. For some of them, it continued into the present. The father remained a significant figure and accompanied his daughter in her own activism. Rivka describes how her father supported and accompanied her in all her activist endeavors as an advisor and partner in thought:

Little me relied on Father's broad shoulders. If he wasn't there, I couldn't have done it. But I also convinced him that it was about time, and that you couldn't go on like that. So, he told me, “What you're suggesting is very dangerous.” So, I said, “Dangerous, true, but every question has a solution”. He said, “I'd like to first hear all of your solutions, and then I'll answer.” [...] I placed this issue on the table right in front of my father. And I said, “Alright, let's see how we can handle this.” So, he said, “How? I need to know how. Not ambiguous like that. I need to hear [from you] how.” [...] And after two years I came to him for help, and he held my hands and said {sighing}: “You think I'll always be here to

put out fires? That I'll always hold your hands and help you? If you can't do it on your own, shut it down or face the music—knowing that you're alone. (Rivka, personal communication)

These quotes indicate the close relationship Rivka had with her father, as a co-activist, an advisor at a critical junction, supporting and encouraging her to be independent and face reality on her own.

Sarah's relationship with her father is different. Interestingly, although he disagrees with her actions, he also serves as a paternal figure for her, praying that she does not suffer from the consequences of her actions:

My father can't, he's a rabbi, he's like a legal scholar, a rabbi, he's very conservative [...]. He cannot come and support me on this level, but he would always bless me and tell me he prays for me. He doesn't pray for me in order to improve my actions but [...] "so that you'll succeed and please God and man, so that everything would be alright, so that your car wouldn't be burned down, so that they wouldn't do such things to you." He would really constantly pray for me like that, in the most fatherly way. Would he agree with everything I do? No, he wouldn't. He would think that in many senses I do things the wrong way. (Sarah, personal communication)

### **"Keep your Mouth Shut; It Will Kill You": The Mother Figure**

The mother figure did not emerge in this study as a significant factor shaping the participants' development as activists. Most did not mention their mothers on their own initiative, and when deliberately asked about them by the interviewee, referred to their mothers as secondary figures with little or no influence on their activist self. The only participant who mentioned her mother as an active figure was Lea, who described her as a role model, an active mother that would identify urgent needs and act upon them:

First of all, my mother, who is 55 today, founded two schools. It's like there's nothing she doesn't establish. If she gets up in the morning and says there's no school like the school she would like for her child, then she finds one. She decided that the existing school built twenty years ago was no longer any good, so she established a new one. For me, she's very much a source of inspiration. Whenever you believe something should happen, don't wait for somebody else to do it. Do it yourself. (Lea, personal communication)

For most of the interviewees, the mothers (unlike their fathers) were seen as trying to prevent them from being activists, as warning them and conveying the message that they had to keep to their boundaries:

Yesterday, I was interviewed for *LaIsha* [lifestyle magazine for women]. The interviewer asked me, "Give me the best advice you have ever received in your life, and the worst one you've received". I scratched my head for an answer and finally I said that the worst advice I have received in my life was from my mother, who said it wouldn't hurt me to keep my mouth shut, because my mouth would kill me one day. It's bad advice because polite women don't make history. (Yael, personal communication)

Hilla also identified her mother with boundaries and restrictions. She described herself trying to appease her mother, who was concerned that her activities outdoors affected her duties as a homemaker: “I told her, ‘Don’t worry mom, don’t worry....’ She would always give me a hard time for not cooking hot food all week [...]. ‘Enough with all your running around, get back to the kitchen already.’”

## Discussion

The findings indicate that the participants have a highly developed socio-political perspective, grown out of a complex family experience. On the one hand, they had a supportive father, who encouraged innovation and public courage. On the other hand, they had a mother who often blocked or delayed public and social activism. Unlike what could be expected of a traditional patriarchal society (Coltrane, 2004; Coltrane & Glat, 2000; Wall & Arnold, 2007), we found that these religious Jewish activists were empowered and legitimized to act by the paternal figures in their lives.

In a society where the dominant division of roles is gender-based, we might have expected the fathers to be the ones who would block their daughters’ involvement in public activism and their advancement in the political arena. We might have expected the fathers to encourage their daughters to fulfill their traditional roles and express their abilities and talents in the domestic sphere—both in order to keep maintaining the traditional role division and associated cultural norms and in order to maintain the exclusivity of the masculine foreign minister role.

As opposed to these expectations, this study found that the fathers were the key figures that encouraged and even pushed the daughters to act, whereas the mothers served as the community’s gatekeepers (Lajos, 2014). The mothers were motivated both by the desire to protect their daughters from reputational damage and criticism within the religious society and by the desire to protect the cultural codes related to the daughters’ traditional domestic responsibilities (Friedman, 1996; Lajos, 2014).

These intriguing findings are supported by theoreticians who have referred to the father’s importance in developing women’s identity as independent and strong (Katz, 2009; Netzer, 2017). The father’s closeness to the daughter, the support and appreciation he provides her, strengthen her confidence, helps her be more attuned to her inner voice, and contributes to her resilience, allowing her to cope with the challenges involved in leading social change in the local community and national political sphere, even when it involves criticism of social traditions.

Moreover, the activism of the participants in this study challenges the gendered distinction between the public and private spaces in Jewish Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox society (Schnabel, 2018; Zion-Waldoks, 2018). It appears that protest activities and political activism are acceptable if not commendable in this society, despite having been, until very recently, labeled as an exclusively male domain. The religious women’s breakthrough into public and political space challenges the traditional norm, represented in the verse: “The king’s daughter is all glorious within” (Psalms 45:13), interpreted as requiring women to be modest not only in dress but also in voice. Women are expected to silence their thoughts or convey them through a masculine agent such as their husband or rabbi responsible for acting in public and political space (Safran, 2006; Schnabel, 2018; Zion-Waldoks, 2018). Female activism thus protests not only against the social wrong in question, but also against this line of thought, this hegemonic order, striving to reform it in order to bring women’s voices to the forefront and change the political and media space (Berkers et al., 2016).

The centrality of the father in developing the religious women activists' identity highlights the importance of combining masculine and feminine role models in the development of activist women. Developing the activist identity and expressing it in practice require strategic thinking, leadership, the ability to cope with stress and conflicts, analytic skills, and abilities for social development and planning, none of which is consistent with stereotypes and common expectations of women in traditional patriarchal societies (Coltrane, 2004; Coltrane & Glat, 2000; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Combining the feminine and masculine models could help religious women activists adopt traits associated with both and realize themselves both as mothers and homemakers who continue to play by the social rules and as opinionated women with a voice and ability to lead social change.

Finally, the findings indicate that when daughters are legitimized to be active in the public sphere by their fathers—the key family figures in traditional societies—chances are that they would grow into active and independent women. In other words, had the women not been supported by their fathers, it is doubtful whether they would have been socially active, willing to violate social conventions and face the challenges involved. In a traditional patriarchal society, the father's support is critical in constructing not only an activist identity, but also empowering the daughter to face the gendered messages received by the nuclear family and the community, and to have the strength to pay the price of possibly going against family and community. In fact, the father provides her with the personal and social credit she needs. In a society where women have little power and little social standing, male support is crucial (Madhavan et al., 2018). It appears that without the father's legitimation, it is very difficult for religious women activists to be active in the public sphere.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

In terms of practical implications, we recommend that organizations interested in encouraging religious women to make their voices heard and be active in public spaces should be aware of the significant roles of both fathers and mothers in shaping young women's activist identities. Presumably, the parents' voices echoing in the future activists' heads can delay them from acting or encourage them to do so. Thus, awareness of this issue is critical among both the activists and the bodies encouraging and training them to be active.

Various programs have been designed to encourage women to integrate in the workplace by providing role models of women who have managed to reach senior positions. One example is ProWoman (2020), an NGO (non-governmental organization) active in promoting women in the Israeli economy, with branches in Israeli colleges and universities, as well as in New York. As the current findings highlight the importance of male role models together with female ones, we recommend that such programs include men role models as well, out of the understanding that to reach senior positions in the economy, women have much to learn from men as well.

Given the study's limitation in focusing on a highly specific population, we recommend expanding research efforts among activist women, and religious ones in particular, given that the latter represent a very recent and rapidly growing phenomenon. We need to better understand the experiences of activist women, identify barriers and find ways of overcoming them. Among other things, we recommend quantitative studies that will help assess the scope of the phenomenon, as well as qualitative studies that will delve deeper into the narratives of such women about their activism, and the meanings they associate with it.

Finally, we recommend studying activist women with particular reference to ethno-religious diversity, including non-religious or moderately religious women activists, and activists

from a specific ethnic background such as Palestinian-Arabs or Jews of Ethiopian or Russian descent. We believe that each of these groups has unique characteristics and coping mechanisms, and that these must be understood in order to help women activists from each population—and in general—to develop and grow.

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