

“THEY HAVE EYES AND SEE NOT”

Gender Politics in the Diaspora Museum

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An analysis of the display of gender in an Israeli museum of social history decodes the practices by which the museum constructs gender and uses gender difference in the display of Jewish life to construct male dominance and to marginalize women. It reinforces a stereotypical world in which women remain nameless and voiceless and have no contribution to show for themselves. Far from being a reflection of historical reality, women's marginalization is the erasure of women's contribution to Jewish survival. This trivialization of women goes unnoticed by the visitor, to whom the display seems perfectly natural and factually acceptable, and contributes to the preservation of gender difference and inequality in Israeli society. Thus, *Beit Hatefusot* can be seen as a metaphor for the nonconscious ideology that marginalizes women in Israeli culture and results in their exclusion from such activities that are honored or glorified or bring money or power.

This article is a commentary on the construction and display of gender in an Israeli museum of social history—the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, known in Hebrew as *Beit Hatefusot*. A source of considerable national pride, Beit Hatefusot ranks high on the list of “must see” for both tourists and Israelis. The military training of every soldier includes a study tour of the museum, which also organizes activities for Israeli students and provides programs in 14 languages for students from abroad and new immigrants. In other words, Beit Hatefusot is an important institution for the transmission of Jewish culture in Israeli society.

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An official publication explains that Beit Hatefusot was not planned to be a shrine to the past. Instead, it presents the story of 2,500 years of Jewish dispersion as a living, stimulating experience. The aim of Beit Hatefusot is to explain what Jewish life is and has always been about and by doing so to enrich those who visit it. In this article, I decode the practices by which the museum constructs gender.

The apparent function of most museums of social history is to collect, preserve, and display authentic objects of social and historical importance and to make objectively valuable knowledge and culture equally accessible to all members of society. However, museums, as Bourdieu (1973) pointed out, also have a hidden function, to preserve social differentiation. The construction of gender in museums helps to produce the social and cultural differences between women and men that justify their unequal treatment (Lorber, in press).

The production and reproduction of culture are part of what Dorothy Smith (1987) called "the relations of ruling." Most people do not participate in the making of culture. The forms of thought and images we use do not arise directly or spontaneously out of people's everyday lives and relationships. Rather, they are the product of the work of specialists occupying the influential positions in the ideological apparatus (the educational system, communications, etc.). Our culture does not arise spontaneously; it is "manufactured" (Smith, 1987). Museums are locales in which the manufacturing process is implemented. The culture display is a reconstruction of events, the product of a process of interpretation, selection, and constitution of the facts as viewed through the prism of those responsible for its making. Deciphering the gender discourse embedded in the displays at the Beit Hatefusot museum reveals the way in which this museum contributes to the preservation of gender difference and inequality in Israeli society.

A museum is a display of a reality but is not reality itself. The display as constructed reflects the specific reality of the experts as well as their strategic decisions concerning how to convey that reality through the exhibits. Judaism's androcentric character constrains the decisions, but it does not determine what is displayed and what is omitted, what is highlighted and what is hidden, and whether women's lives—their role in the practice of Jewish life, their experiences and rituals—are given due importance or rendered invisible. Those decisions are left to the museum planners. They ultimately determine the display. "[C]ultural productions . . . are implicit or explicit narratives about gender" (Lorber, in press), and through the narratives they construct, the specialists reproduce and reinforce the androcentric theme in the story of the Jewish people.

THE BEIT HATEFUSOT MUSEUM DISPLAYS

The museum exhibits are organized thematically rather than chronologically. The name of each theme is predicated by the term *Gate*. In Hebrew,

the term *Gate* takes on multiple meanings, including portal, chapter, or theme. The six major themes, according to the official release, “formed the main factors of Jewish survival”: Gate of the Family, Gate of Community, Gate of Faith, Gate of Creativity, Gate Among the Nations, and Gate of Return (to Zion).

This article provides a guided tour of Beit Hatefusot viewed through a gender lens and points out how the museum constructs gender difference by assigning women and men to different roles, statuses, different forms of interaction, and different locations in the display. As Gayle Rubin (1975) observed of the cultural emphasis on difference between women and men, “Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities” (pp. 179–180). Also, gender difference is used in the display of Jewish life to construct male dominance and to marginalize women. Far from being a reflection of historical reality, women’s marginalization, especially in the family, is the erasure of women’s contribution to Jewish survival. This trivialization of women goes unnoticed by the visitor, who raises no eyebrow or question and to whom the display seems perfectly natural and factually acceptable. Few visitors leave saying “Hey, where are the women? Surely women did more than that?”

Scenes From Family Life

The Family Gate is the first exhibit, as well it should be. The family—women’s proverbial domain—has been and remains the mainstay of Jewish life. The term for housewife in Hebrew, *akeret habayit*, literally means *the essence of the home*. Elsewhere, say at the Gate of Creativity, the Gate of Faith, or the Gate of Redemption, women’s invisibility could be too easily dismissed as a historical fact.

At the approach to the Family Gate, on the wall facing the entrance, the caption reads PORTRAITS FROM THE PAST. Six large portraits display three men and three women. Under each portrait is an identifying caption. The men displayed are *Moses*, *Susskind of Trimberg*, and *Rabbi Jacob Sasportas*. The women are *Personification of Autumn*, *A Jewess from Poland*, and *A Jewess from Morocco*. The men are all real persons with names and/or titles. The women are members of categories.

A glass case below the portraits contains nine additional portraits from the past: six men, three women: *Rabbi Eliyahu Delmedigo*, *The Arraby Moor—the Chief Rabbi of Portugal*, *The Physician Ephraim Bueno*, *The Painter Maurycy Gottlieb*, *Rabbi Samuel Jacob Haim Falk—The Ba’al Shem* (name of a famous Rabbi) *of London*, *An East European Jew* (male), *Rebecca Gratz*, *Mrs. Asher Wertheimer*, and *A Jewish Bride*. All but one of the men have names. They also have achievements, as their titles bear out. Three are rabbis, one is a physician, and one a painter. Of the three women, only one woman has her own name and her right to fame is not mentioned. (She was a 19th century philanthropist who estab-

lished and supported Jewish communal services in Philadelphia.) A second woman's claim to a name and a place in the display presumably rests on her having made a good marriage. The third woman is in a typically female generic category.

The first scene is constituted from white plaster figures. At center stage in the Circumcision scene, three men covered with prayer shawls participate in the ceremony—one of them holding the infant. Over to the side, at a distance from where the action is taking place, there-but-not-there, a number of women mind small children. As a group of tourists approaches, their guide explains in English, “The family exhibit is organized around two dominant themes—the life cycle of the Jew and the cycle of the holidays of Israel. The life cycle of the Jew begins with the circumcision of the newborn.” But the life of the Jewish female child does not begin with a circumcision. I wonder whether the little girl's arrival was ever marked by any ritual at all. Maybe a small blessing? The museum is silent on the subject. Implicitly, the answer is no. The other visitors appear indifferent to the issue.

In the next scene, a young woman is seated by herself embroidering. The caption reads **THE BABY'S SISTER EMBROIDERS A TORAH COVER FROM HIS SWADDLING CLOTH**. The woman is identified in relation to her brother. She is only his sister. Her activity is also in relation to her brother. She is preparing the band he will use when he is called to the Torah at his bar-mitzva ceremony. The baby boy is just born and already there is a woman devotedly in his service.

The next scene—three displays in figures and pictures—portrays Torah study. Learning is of unparalleled value in Jewish life. Jews have always considered themselves as The People of the Book, and studying Torah is considered superior to observing almost all other religious obligations. The caption introducing the display reads **THE JEWISH FAMILY PUT THE CHILD'S EDUCATION ABOVE EVERYTHING**. A more accurate description of the exhibit would read “The Jewish Family put the little boy's education above everything.” All three displays, historical and current, exclusively show little boys studying and their men teachers. One picture taken in recent decades is in a modern setting. The unarticulated message is that little girls did not learn Torah, do not learn, and need not learn. Why is there no picture of little girls studying Torah in Beit Yaakov, an educational network established for ultra-orthodox girls at the turn of the century? Will the museum anywhere tell the story of Sara Shnerer's successful struggle with the ultra-orthodox rabbis of Europe at the turn of the century to create the Beit Yaakov movement and thus make formal Jewish education available to girls? Education is so highly valued, and she made this treasure available to orthodox girls—surely her contribution would be recorded. Hard as I looked for her in the various exhibits I could find no trace of her anywhere. Perhaps her only claim—bringing literacy to women—was not path breaking or important enough to be included in the collective memory portrayed in Beit Hatefusot.

The bar-mitzva ceremony is next in the life cycle of the Jew, according to this museum. On show are two men flanking that Bar Mitzva Boy reading from the Torah against a background curtain (hiding the women folk?). The caption reads THE THIRTEEN YEAR OLD SON IS TOLD—NOW YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR DEEDS. Thousands of young pupils will come through this exhibit. How will they ever learn from Beit Hatefusot that girls become responsible as well for their deeds at some point in life?

I ask a passing woman guide, "How come there are not more scenes with women in them?" "Because women are not circumcised and didn't have a bar mitzva," she replied as she brushed by me with a tone of disdain at my ignorance. It did not occur to her that things could be otherwise. I wanted to suggest that it might be more appropriate to open the family exhibit with a scene of a mother blessing the Sabbath candles, surrounded by her children whom she blessed in turn.¹ After all, our sages tell us that the Sabbath guarded over the Jewish people and the women guarded over the Jewish home. Surely, opening the family gate with an exhibit of a woman ushering in the Sabbath would reflect Jewish survival. But the guide was gone, and there was no one around with whom to share my thoughts.

The marriage is next. A wedding requires the bride, her mother, and her mother-in-law. Like the groom and father, they too are there for real; being who they are, not quite props. Mazel Tov. The ceremony is underway. The sculptor froze in plaster the moment in the groom's life when all the significant women—his mother, wife, and mother-in-law—circle round him seven times. The women are united in a ritual of worship of a man. It is not the androcentricism of the museum curator that caused the bride, her mother, and her mother-in-law to circle the groom—that is also done at Ashkenazi weddings. It is the androcentricism of the museum curator that immortalized that moment in the ceremony rather than another or that omitted women's prewedding henna rituals and mikva (ritual bath) parties.

A slide projector reflects the final stage of life: a succession of paintings by an unknown artist, 14 slides depicting the process from deathbed to mourning. Women appear in only three. Their roles are visiting the sick, crying at the door of the bedroom while the men pray at the deathbed, and sewing the shrouds. Jewish history provides many additional options. In Roman times, women were hired as professional weepers. They could also have been there accompanying the dead, mourning, or comforting the mourners, but they are not.

Scenes From Jewish Holidays

The display of the holidays in more recent times might be expected to tell a different story. However, there is monotonous repetition of women's blatant invisibility in the holiday cycle of the Jewish year. There are scenes

from 10 different holidays. Three of these holidays, Passover, Hanukkah (Festival of Lights), and Shavuot (Festival of Weeks), are displayed as family scenes that include women. In the displays representing the remaining seven holidays, only men appear: Purim—a little boy carrying *shalach manot*, the gifts that Jews traditionally send one another on Purim; Tabernacles—father and son praying together; Lag Ba'Omer—a Chassidic man standing over a bonfire, a Kabbalistic practice associated with the holiday and a favorite activity of the younger generation in contemporary Israel; Day of Holocaust and Valor (memorial day for those who died in the Holocaust)—an old man mourning by a graveside; and the Day of Independence— young boys in procession, brandishing national flags.

Do little girls not deliver gifts on Purim? Do women not traditionally make the blessing over the *etrog* and *lulav* in the *succah* during Tabernacles? Were women not murdered like men in the Holocaust? Do young girls not rejoice at the rebirth of the State? Is the mother, who throughout Jewish history ushered in the Sabbath—queen with her candle blessing and observed by her young children next-to-be blessed—not important enough to be immortalized, either as part of The Life Cycle of the Jew or The Holiday Cycle of the Jewish People?

The Day of Atonement is treated in a separate enclave. The major exhibit, a reproduction of a painting by Maurycy Gottlieb, is a painting of eight men and a boy in a synagogue, caught in a moment of prayer and devotion. Behind them and fully exposed, is the women's balcony. It is empty. Are women absent from the synagogue on the Days of Atonement? None are to be seen in the Gottlieb reproduction on display at Beit Hatefusot. The original painting at the Tel Aviv Museum, a copy of which hangs as a poster in the museum gift shop, tells a different story; that of a gallery filled with handsomely dressed women standing behind but above the men. The women in the painting here were erased, wiped out of the picture and so wiped out of history. Women's erasure from Jewish life is symbolically culminated in their absence from the Day of Atonement. Not one of the museum staff I asked could tell me why the women had been removed from the picture. Some assumed it was done "to prevent distraction from the main theme. . . ."

THE GENDER POLITICS OF MUSEUMS

Pedagogic action, of which museums are a specific case, have, according to Bourdieu (1973), a twofold arbitrariness about them (cf. Robbins, 1991). The content is arbitrary in the sense that it has no absolute reference and is only a reflection of the interests of the group controlling the context. The context within which culture is transmitted is arbitrarily determined by the power relations between groups in a society. Like other

cultural institutions, museums contribute to the reproduction of the relations of ruling by serving as bearers of the dominant ideologies of the culture and as a medium for their transfer from generation to generation.

All significant positions of power in Israeli society are held almost exclusively by men. Men's interests and concerns and experiences are those that inform the culture. The culture that is transmitted thus reflects that of men's experiences, interests, and ways of knowing the world. As in other major religions, women have been historically excluded from the making of ideology of Jewish knowledge and of Jewish culture. Although throughout history women's contributions were important for the operation and preservation of society, their contributions were trivialized or marginalized and then erased by men's history. Dorothy Smith (1987, pp. 17–18) explained the significance of this exclusion.

Being excluded, as women have been, from the making of ideology, of knowledge, and of culture means that our experience, our interests, our ways of knowing the world have not been represented in the organization of our ruling nor in the systematically developed knowledge that has entered into it.

Women's representation in museums, where knowledge, culture, and ideology are produced and disseminated, reproduces the historical practice of women's exclusion. It contributes to women's experiences, in the words of Sheila Rowbotham (1974), remaining "hidden from history."

The displays in the Museum of the Diaspora support and reproduce a hegemonic ideology² of Jewish life that is both androcentric and paternalistic. Its central features are hierarchically organized activities appropriated in individual and group activity, the outcome of which is to marginalize other kinds of activities. For example, the decision to represent family life through a life cycle of men's religious rituals (circumcision and bar mitzva), to show the groom as the central figure in the wedding ceremony, and to marginalize women in the depiction of the main mourning rituals are decisions that exclude women where Judaism says they are central, for example, the family. Hegemonic Judaism privileges activities typically performed by men and usually permitted only to men. Women's traditionally sung activities such as preparing the food for the family holiday meals and sending portions to the poor and needy, consecrating the home for the Sabbath and the holidays, calling on the sick, negotiating with non-Jewish shopkeepers every day in stores and market places, magically transforming the humble family room by day into a store and by night back to bedroom, are nowhere highlighted on front stage in the history of the diaspora. This important museum symbolically annihilates women and reinforces the hegemonic Jewish view that institutionalizes men's centrality and their dominance over women.

Women's exclusion from the museum's history of the diaspora is not

noticed by most visitors because what is rendered invisible is rarely missed. The fact that those who are controlled, less privileged, or excluded do not feel grieved by their condition is evidence of what Lukes (1974, p. 24) called the *third dimension* or hidden face of power.

Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognition and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?

The purpose of this study was to decode the practices by which gender was constructed and accomplished and to decipher the gender discourse embedded in the displays at the museum. Gender is, in Kessler and McKenna's (1978) term, accomplished through social practice. Museums accomplish gender through a complex chain of practical decisions, including whom to display and whom not to display, in what activity or inactivity, where and where not, in relation to whom and in relation to whom not. Once accomplished, the gender display becomes part of the collective memory of those who view it. The Diaspora Museum's version of Jewish history is transmitted to the next generation, who will visit the museum and view the culture on display as objective and external to themselves but also as a part of themselves and from which they learn about who they are.

Thus, Beit Hatefusot can be seen as a metaphor for the nonconscious ideology that marginalizes women in Israeli culture and results in their exclusion from such activities that are honored or glorified or bring money or power. Like so many other monuments in Israeli society, Beit Hatefusot reinforces a stereotypical world in which women remain nameless and voiceless and have no contribution to show for themselves. Stereotypes are manipulated politically to legitimize the preservation of male dominance. The trivialization and marginalization of women go unnoticed by the visitor, who raises no eyebrow or question, to whom the display seems perfectly natural and factually acceptable.

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NOTES

1. At the entrance to the Family Gate, a pair of silver Sabbath candle sticks are encased and beneath them the caption: "The Jewish home on the Sabbath eve." The Jewish woman who makes the Jewish home is nowhere in sight. Among the hundreds, perhaps thousands of exhibits, I found only one small picture that portrays a woman lighting candles on the eve of the Day of Atonement as her two small children and another woman stand by.

2. Hegemony here means social ascendancy. The concept of hegemonic Judaism is adapted from Connell's (1987) use of hegemonic masculinity.

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