



Israel Religious Action Center
Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism

WOMEN TALK ABOUT SEGREGATION IN ISRAEL

THIRTEEN WOMEN ON DISCRIMINATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Israel Religious Action Center. January 2012 / Tevet 5772



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“Without consideration, without pity, without shame they have built great and high walls around me. But I never heard any noise or sound of builders. Imperceptibly they shut me from the outside world.”

Constantine P. Cavafy, translated from Greek by George Barbanis

In recent years, almost unintentionally, we are encountering more and more walls in our public sphere. Some are visible and some are hidden from sight. Those are the walls of separation between the sexes – gender segregation. The public space is no longer open and free to both men and women alike. It is divided unequally. The ramifications of this division include pushing women aside, minimizing them and hiding them.

The most extreme factions in the ultra-Orthodox public, who believe that women should not set foot in the men public sphere, have succeeded, in contravening the laws of the state and because of the weakness of the authorities that capitulate to them, in imposing more and more segregation on the public sphere, sometimes by coercion and physical violence.

Whether this involves a public bus to Safed, the waiting room in a Health clinic in Jerusalem, an event by a government body, the entrance to a grocery store or even a street with separate sidewalks for men and women – the segregation is slowly permeating our lives and our common spaces.

This booklet contains 13 stories of women, religious and secular, young and old, from Jerusalem and other places, from a variety of backgrounds and cultures – all of whom experienced discrimination. This is an opportunity to listen to the voices that have been silenced. Together, these voices intensify into a great cry: Enough!

These injustices are committed in spaces common to all of us. The woman who walks shamefacedly to a seat at the back of the bus is you. That woman is us. If we continue to consent to this with our silence and we don't stay on top of the issue and fight it, one day we will find ourselves wondering how they “shut us from the outside world”.

Anat Hoffman

Executive Director, Israel Religious Action Center

In honor of my father, the late Avraham Davidian

EULOGIZING MY FATHER / Rosie Davidian

My name is Rosie Davidian. I am in my 30s and I live in Moshav Mavo'im

My beloved father, the late Avraham Davidian, died about a year ago, but it never occurred to me that at my father's funeral I would not be able to eulogize him.

My father, Avraham, died after a battle with cancer. He was well known in the area and there were hundreds of people at the funeral and at the cemetery in Ofakim. Already at the cemetery, we encountered segregation. My five sisters and I sat at the back, in the area allocated to women, and on the other side, next to my father's body, sat my two brothers. It was strange to me that we were required to sit separately, but I knew that those were some of the dictates of the place and I did not want to make a scene.

The first person to speak was the head of the local council. After him, my brother rose to speak. I sat in the back and heard through the loudspeakers that my turn had come to speak. I took out the eulogy that I had written and suddenly I heard the rabbi say, "Don't pass her the microphone, she cannot get up to speak."

I was in shock. My brother, who was next to the rabbi, asked in amazement, "What do you mean?" And the rabbi answered him, "Women do not give eulogies. You can speak in her place." My brother argued with him, retorting "How can I speak the words when she is the one who wrote them?" In the background, I heard my mother's brother turn to the rabbi and tell him: "These may be your customs, because you are from the Moroccan community. That is not our custom." The rabbi insisted, "Women do not give eulogies. If you want, I will read it instead of her."

I certainly did not agree to that, that the rabbi would read "Dear Daddy." After all, these were my personal words of parting that I had written for my father. I wept bitterly. I felt superfluous. Not only could I not give the eulogy, I could not walk alongside my father on his last journey. They only let me walk in the back. My father's death was traumatic for me and the experience in the cemetery was no less traumatic.

I mustered my courage and, with the help of attorney Orly Erez-Lachovsky of the Israel Religious Action Center, I filed a lawsuit against the Hevra Kadisha, the burial society, of the city. The lawsuit will certainly not compensate me for the distress and the terrible feelings, but maybe it will prevent a repetition of such things in the future.

In summary, I would like to say that we grew up in a religious household. My father always said, "Emphasize what is beautiful in religion and don't distance people with

extreme behavior” but, unfortunately, that is not what happened. Some religious people have forgotten that at Mount Sinai, Moses gave the Torah to the people of Israel as one entity. He did not divide it between men and women. Soon the memorial service will be held on the first anniversary of my father’s death. This time, I intend to read the eulogy that I will write, and I will not back down.

A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER ON SEGREGATION IN BEIT SHEMESH / Ariela and Rachel

Ariela

I am a 14-year-old high school student and I live in Beit Shemesh. I travel to school at the Ulpana by bus. I had heard stories from my friends about the segregated bus lines and about women who had been forced to sit in the back, but I never encountered it. Until the day I was returning from school with my friends.

On the way home from the Ulpana, I got on the bus together with my friends, and we sat in the front section. After a while, two ultra-orthodox men boarded the bus. Because there was no place for them to sit in the front section of the bus, they stood next to us without speaking. At that point, the driver turned to us and told us to move to the back of the bus, in order to make room for the two ultra-Orthodox men at the front of the bus.

I felt immediately that that was wrong. I knew that I could sit anywhere I wanted on the bus. There were many empty seats on the bus – why did we have to move to the back? Why were the boys allowed in the front but the girls were not?

Despite the fact that my friends and I felt humiliated and angry, we could not refuse to do what the driver asked and we moved to the back.

When I got home, I told my mother what had happened.

Rachel

One day in September, Ariela returned home from school and told me what had happened on the bus. The story made me angry. There are also problems at the school that Ariela's sister attends. The students of the Orot Banot School, which is located next to an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in the city, suffer from repeated harassment by the ultra-Orthodox population there, and now my daughter comes and tells me about the demand to move to the back of a public bus.

I chose to live in Beit Shemesh – an open and mixed city with a diverse population – not in Bnei Brak or in Meah Sha'arim. It is inconceivable and I cannot accept the fact that in such a city, I would have to protect my daughters. My daughter understood that she had been treated unjustly and that the demand made of her was wrong. I asked her why she still got up and moved to the back. She replied that she was afraid that if she refused, the bus driver would make her and her friends get off the bus.

I had heard about these “mehadrin lines” and I know that they are illegal. I called the Superbus company, which operates the line in Beit Shemesh, and I lodged a complaint. I began to look into the matter and I heard that I could file a lawsuit against the bus company and the driver who had illegally ordered my daughter to sit in the back of the bus. I was referred to attorney Orly Erez-Lachovsky of the Israel Religious Action Center and she offered me assistance in filing the complaint.

I asked my daughter if she was prepared for that. She replied affirmatively and said that she was not prepared for it to happen again and that she wanted to do something about it. I was glad that she was prepared to take responsibility.

My daughter told me after the complaint was filed that the process had given her a sense of power. She even told me about another case in which she had gotten on the bus and sat at the front. An ultra-Orthodox man told her that it was a segregated “mehadrin line” and she replied: “There is no such thing as a “mehadrin line.”

I can tell about another occurrence in which my son got on the bus together with his sister because their schools are close to each other. He saw Ariela sitting in the back and went to sit with her. After several stops, the ticket taker of the Superbus company boarded the bus and asked my son why he was sitting with the girls at the back, and said that it was a “mehadrin line.”

I only want my daughters to be able to get on the bus and get home safely, without any disturbances by the driver or other people.

RED LINE / Shulamit Aloni

Anat Hoffman, the head of the Israel Religious Action Center, recently proposed that I check the treatment of women on one of the formerly segregated “mehadrin” bus lines. The High Court of Justice recently ruled that the segregation on those lines is illegal and should be stopped. And so I boarded Egged bus line 418 from Ramt Beit Shemesh to Jerusalem. The bus was full and I am an elderly woman, over eighty years old, so I looked for an empty seat. The men did not appear ill to me, but no one gave up his place and offered me a seat. Is it not possible to show a little decency? I finally found a place at the front of the bus. I sat down and there was an immediate shout: “Women go to the back.” They yelled, but I smiled and sat. There was an uproar, and the bus driver finally said in an emotional response, “Stop it – let her sit where she wants.”

This segregation is disgusting and I condemn it unequivocally. It is a shame that for a bit of profit, Egged is cooperating with this thing, but the problem is not Egged, because Egged is subsidized by the government and it must serve the general public and be open to everyone, without discrimination due to origin, race, religion or sex.

All this happens because of the interference, the ultra-Orthodox man, who decided that they can shackle our public life. Now we are experiencing a “plague,” an awakening of the extreme fanatical rabbinate that brainwashes its students. This is a rabbinate that is striving for power and dominion. They declare that openly and don’t deny it. They are challenging the legal government and the Knesset and are presenting themselves as an alternative, the rule of the Torah.

This radicalization is fed by money and political power and by the weakness of members of the cabinet and the Knesset who only want to find favor with the religious public. This is the retreat of the rational approach. It is not new and began with the pilgrimage of politicians to the rabbis. A negative model for this is Shimon Peres, who went to Rabbi Ovadiah, then praised, lauded and glorified him.

I do not understand the kind of Judaism that defines religiousness as distancing itself from women. Judaism never espoused segregation, and this segregation is a function of prejudice and power struggles. I learned from various rabbis, for example, Rabbi Goren, who followed the historical precedents of the “provisional get” in order to prevent the abandonment of women. Together, we succeeded in preventing injustices that had occurred to many women. Rabbi Goren went above and beyond the call of duty to resolve real problems experienced by people. I also had long talks with Rabbi Avidor Cohen. He was a special man, abounding in associations and when I approached him with the problems of couples who were

not allowed to marry, he spared no effort to iron out the difficulties in a very elegant manner.

Today, in every sphere, I meet successful women at the top of society. I admire their practical and rational dedication to the important goals they deal with. I also view the women of the organization Kolech as smart, Orthodox, wise women who are second to none. But I do think that this is a crazy country, because they are all courting the women, but they won't give them any rights. They want the women to be beautiful, healthy, even good providers, but they have to keep their mouths shut. Only a few of them appreciate women and really care about their rights.

In recent years, the Israeli public has grown weary of battles to change legislation in favor of human rights. But it is precisely now, when the winds of change are blowing and people are joining causes that have a positive impact on a more dignified life for all of us, that we must not forget the concept of equal rights for the entire population. We must take care of others and give every group and every individual the right of expression. We must respect one another, just as God created man and woman in His image and called them "human" on the day of their creation. We are separated by people who are supposed to be intellectuals that respect every person. Well, I have news for them – a woman is a person too.

FREEDOM RIDERS / Netta Ravid

Netta Ravid, earned her bachelor's degree in Physics and Biology and is beginning a master's degree in the Humanities at the Hebrew University. She resides in Jerusalem.

The first time I encountered the "mehadrin lines" was when I boarded the bus from Jerusalem to Arad. A friend and I sat in the front seat and we were immediately treated to shouts and curses from the passengers. They called to the friend who was traveling with me, "Go to the back with your girlfriend." I yelled back at them and argued with them.

Since then, the matter has bothered me and has given me no peace, and I wanted to do something about it. I contacted a friend who is active in all kinds of organizations and I asked her who deals with this issue. She referred me to Anat Hoffman, the head of the Israel Religious Action Center. I called and left her a message. Afterwards, I got a call back from Motti, the field coordinator for the Center, and since then matters have progressed...

Together, we established the "freedom riders," a group of volunteers who travel on the problematic bus lines. We set the goals of the project, recruited volunteers and we're moving it forward.

The main objective of the project is to bring about a change in consciousness in both secular and religious society against segregation of any type in the public sphere. Naturally, as a secular woman, I will not allow any man to tell me where to sit. But it's important to me that an ultra-Orthodox woman will also have the choice of sitting at the front of the bus. There's a lot of talk about pluralism, but pluralism doesn't mean that we shouldn't intervene in cases that require intervention.

On the first trip, I encountered shouting and verbal violence. Since then I have not encountered such uncouth reactions, only people who comment gently. There were groups of Orthodox women who told me, "This is good for us, this is what we want." I know there are many people in ultra-Orthodox society who oppose the segregation, but their voices are not heard. I can tell you about a telephone call I had from an ultra-Orthodox woman from one of the most conservative sects. She spoke anonymously of her opposition to the segregation, and the opposition of many like her among the ultra-Orthodox community. She said that extremist factions coerce her and don't ask anyone. She said that they have made her think for the first time about herself, and to dare to tell herself that they are bothering her. Women like her motivate us to continue our work.

It's true that the real change will only occur when it comes from within the ultra-Orthodox community. It's very difficult to change it from the outside. However, in the trips that we take and the fact that they're becoming accustomed to seeing women sitting at the front of the bus -- the consciousness is rising and the change is penetrating. We're hoping that we'll also be able to influence legislation on the issue and we hope that at the end of the trial year, the High Court of Justice will also prohibit boarding the bus from the back door.

I view this struggle as something that does not stand alone, but as part of a far broader change in perception of the status of women. The segregation is a symptom, a test case behind which there are many issues connected with the status of women, and the way in which women view themselves. A woman's dignity is not only internal and a woman should not have to be silent and hidden in any society. How is it possible that because of a decision made by just a few people, an entire society lined up behind them and decided to violate the rights of women? And, even worse, the secular establishment assisted them in doing so. In giving permission for the segregation and in determining in advance that segregation would be practiced at events conducted for the ultra-Orthodox community, it is deciding for them and perpetuating the segregation and the harm done to the women. We are still far from having completely equal rights, and this battle is being waged for that equality.

Did I have any fears or apprehensions before I boarded the buses? No, I did not. And we must not fear. In effect, if we reach a situation in which we're afraid to get on these buses, that's an even greater reason to board them and to continue these actions. If there's fear, it only motivates me to get on the buses, so that we won't find ourselves in a situation in which we will not get on the buses for fear of the forced segregation.

My mother comes from a religious home, and she's very supportive of my actions. From her, I know a different kind of Judaism that also respects the rights of women and opposes segregation. In the course of these activities, I've seen that I'm not small. I was very happy to see that if something is disturbing, it's not that complicated to change it, and it's possible to do so. People step forward for a positive goal, and a citizen is capable of making a difference.

A BAD EXPERIENCE ON BUS LINE 497 / LIGAL ELIAS

My name is Ligal and I have a story about the 497 bus. About a week ago I got on the 497, paid the driver and was about to walk to the back. (Something I most definitely do not agree with, but I do anyways because I'm scared of the reaction of the men) As I tried walking down the aisle, a man barred my way.

At first, I thought that he was just going to pay the driver and let me go through but when I asked him to let me pass, he gruffly said: "No." I asked again, and again he refused.

The bus driver stopped the bus and said that we weren't moving unless he would let me pass. The man said that he didn't care, he would wait. The driver physically tried helping me by walking me passed the man. Then the crowd of men jumped into the aisle, blocking the way of the driver. He couldn't take on all of them.

I didn't want him to get hurt, so I told him to forget about it, I was willing to go and walk on the bus though the back.

Once I did so, all the women in the back gave me hostile stares, as if this was my fault. This was a dehumanizing and humiliating experience. I felt like a second-class citizen and I never want to go through that again. I hope that these things that I am writing will influence people and lead to change.

ROSA PARKENSTEIN HAS ARRIVED... /

Rachel Levin Weinstein

There wasn't much I could really do after learning of my father's death on a Shabbos (Sabbath) 14 years ago; he died in New York and we lived in Chicago. I wandered aimlessly through our apartment, to the front steps, back and forth, and then back and forth some more, all day long. During one of my "stare into space on the stoop" sessions, I saw what seemed to be the world's largest and slowest caterpillar. That little thing chugged away, centimeter by centimeter and I thought that at some point, it would probably turn into a really large, and hopefully beautiful butterfly. Since that day, I've associated butterflies with my father. I'm not sure when I made the connection, but there is something very special, comforting, and real to me about them. Today I saw two butterflies and I haven't seen many in Israel thus far. I've experienced my fair share of infuriatingly persistent buzzing flies, but not butterflies. I've also never in my entire life experienced the kind of traumatic morning I did today. I've suffered through trauma, but this, this was beyond belief. And if I allow myself to relive it, it proves to be as traumatic and unbelievable now as it was then. I suppose the first of the two butterflies I saw today was my father's way of saying, "I'm right here and I have your back."

We live in Beit Shemesh, an area that is populated by both Dati-Leumi (religious-national) and Chareidi ("ultra orthodox") Jews. Within the Charedi group of not so merry men and women, is a belief that the genders should be separated whenever they can be- during food shopping, eating pizza, or riding a public bus. I'd heard and read about "Mehadrin" buses (loosely translated as the 'best of the best') and told myself that I would never take one. One might think that description refers to the bus' navigational system or road handling, but it doesn't. Somehow, someone came up with this nutty idea to have women sit in the back of the bus and men in front, for the purposes of modesty. I don't know whether to laugh or throw up because it's simply unreal. But I learned firsthand today that it is very real. And if you know me, and for what it's worth, I talk how I type, you know that I don't "do" disrespect, prejudice, or inhumane behavior very well at all.

My husband and I had no clue that the bus we boarded this morning was a "mehadrin" bus. Bus segregation for the record, is entirely ILLEGAL in Israel, but still practiced by some... my luck! As I scanned the front of the bus for an available spot after paying my fare, a seated gentleman in Charedi garb told my husband that I had to go to the back of the bus. My answer was simple: NO. He told us it was a Mehadrin bus, as if that would make me skip to my 'rightful' place in the back, but his statement was quickly met with, "Lo bishvili (Not for me)!" A woman sitting in the back of the bus threw in her two shekels and INSISTED loudly, and eventually

up close and personally while yelling at me in front of the other straphangers, that I move to the back out of "kavod (respect)." She told me, "This isn't the US... [you] can't just do what [you] want," and then proceeded to call me "chiloni (secular)." Understand that in Israel, being called 'chiloni' is the equivalent of telling someone they're not even Jewish.

But these folks were messing with the wrong Jewish lady. I stood my ground and told her that she could be a slave but that I choose not to be. I continued to sit in the front of the bus for the very brief period of time we were even on the dang thing, and maintained my not-so-subtle stance: the back of the bus my foot! It was, indeed, my "Rosa Parksenstein" moment, but I made it very clear to myself and the others on the bus, that I will, frankly, be damned if anyone's going to tell me where I can sit or treat me like a second class citizen. There was no way on this planet that I was going to be made to feel like anything OTHER THAN a proud Jewish woman. I had my kubaton in hand in case things got physical, as I wasn't convinced they wouldn't. Proud I am, stupid I'm not.

After exiting the bus, kubaton in hand and religious litany in ear, the tears started to flow from a visceral place deep inside. I cover my hair, I wear skirts, I wear sleeved shirts, and maintain that my most important jobs in this world are that of being a mother and wife. I know where it's "at" and I know that public embarrassment and shame are not. When someone asked me why I was crying, a woman who was dressed much like me, she asked if I was told to move to the back because of how I'm dressed. I told her it wasn't because of my dress, but because I have a uterus. I learned, once again, just how important it is to stand up for what I am. Moments earlier I was able to calm myself briefly by acknowledging that this was just a test. Of what you ask? Perhaps, of seeing how much I believe the phrase, "Don't judge Judaism by its Jews." Perhaps, of seeing how much insanity I'll put up with before I say, "we are OUTTA here!"

I've had my mettle tested before and I don't give up easily. My passion in what I believe in is both my strongest and weakest suits. But today it was the best weapon I had. I know who I am and that being a Jewish woman is something I am extremely proud of. For crying out loud, my kids are Jewish because of ME. I've no intentions of hiding from someone who finds the scent of my estrogen too strong. I will not hide behind my femininity nor, use it destructively. Ironically, I actually LIKE covering my hair (it's like dress-up for grownups) and clothing myself in a way that speaks to my integrity. One might've thought I was dressed like a... or not dressed at all from the reactions I received today. I even find it a bit amazing that the woman yelling at me was upset enough to enter (cue the Star Wars music) "The Verboten Spot" just to give me a piece of her mind- one that she clearly needs to keep to herself. Perhaps passion is her yin-yang, too.

I cried from what seemed like the depths of my soul. The assault hurt in a way that I still can't entirely explain but feel in the pit of my stomach, core of my being, and fabric of my soul. In my opinion at least, I'm one of the most respectful people I know; it's part of who I am personally, religiously, and professionally. So to not be given the same due, particularly by a hair covering, skirt wearing, Jewish woman, boggles my mind. Our Torah contains stories about women who led the way, navigated uncharted territory, and still made it home for dinner. Women who dressed modestly but were alluring when they needed to be. Women who stood by their men and stood up for themselves. See, I don't want to be as innovative as much as be like them.

I don't want to fight, I don't want to argue, and I don't want to contribute to the divisiveness that is trying to consume us. I don't want to be part of the reason, as my 10 year old so poignantly said, we'll have another Tisha B'Av. I felt undeniably vindicated after sharing this tale with my 16 year old daughter when she said "Good for you!" To me, that means I'm doing something right. It means that my daughter has self respect and, like her mom, won't take these things lying down, or forcefully seated in the back of a bus. I take solace in having done what I feel was the absolute right thing to do, as well as from the butterfly that flew past and then perched itself near me as I cried.

A PERSONAL LETTER / Batzion Ben-David

Today, unlike other days, I had to take bus line 497 (from Beit Shemesh to Bnei Brak) during rush hour. Because there were other people at the bus stop, and when I say people, I mean men, the driver decided to enforce the custom of segregation. When the men began to board at the front of the bus, the back door was opened as a hint to me and another girl waiting at the bus stop that we had to board at the back.

It's hard for me to explain, even to myself, why I am so hurt. After all, I am part of the religious society – which includes the women's section in synagogue, separate schools and youth movements – and none those things have made me feel humiliated. But here it's different, and if anyone doesn't understand that, he (or, more correctly, she, because no man – even if he is a secular anti-Semite – will have to sit at the back of the bus) is invited to join me on the trip to Bar Ilan, and experience it for himself. It's a feeling of being “thrown in back,” like a disturbed child who has to be separated from the other children, like dirty laundry that gets pushed between the bed and closet, to be kept out of sight.

And sometimes it's even worse. Sometimes you board the bus with your husband, who has just returned from two weeks in the army, and the only empty seats are in the front of the bus. And the moment you sit down next to him on the only empty seat, the person in the seat behind turns to him, of course not to you, and says aggressively, “This is a mehadrin bus.” And your husband wants to argue, but you are so stunned and hurt (because they have just banished you to... the floor?) that you leave him there as he continues to argue, and you go to sit on the steps by the back door. Because, apparently, that is your place.

Maybe that's surprising, but the worst feeling is when you actually board at the front of the bus. You pay the driver and begin to pass between two rows of men who conspicuously look away as you pass by, as though you are dressed like a prostitute and not like an average student. The truth is that even the garb of a nun or hijab wouldn't help you because it's not the clothing – it's you. You, as a woman, offend their sensitivities. The very fact that you are walking among them, are cast blatantly into their field of vision, offends them to the depths of their soul. Your feelings? They have long since ceased to matter.

I wonder if there is even one person today who asks whether the segregation between blacks and whites on buses in the US was okay, who wonders if maybe it wasn't humiliating.

I wonder if today someone would think that it's possible to leave the racial segregation "only" in one state, or "only" in one city or neighborhood. I wonder if the excuse that "it's part of our culture" would be acceptable.

And most of all, I wonder how many years will pass before we also understand what an absurd thing is going on here, under the auspices of the state.

Until that time passes, and until we wake up, we will, apparently, continue to board at the back, and sit on the floor, and push our feelings deeper inside. So that, Heaven forbid, we do not offend anyone.

FREEDOM RIDERS / Moriah Shacham

Moriah Shacham, undergraduate student in general and comparative literature in the Amirim program at the Hebrew University. Originally from Beit Shemesh, now living in Jerusalem.

The “mehadrin lines” are not new to me because I am from Beit Shemesh, where they have been operating for a long time. In Beit Shemesh, there is tension and friction among extreme ultra-Orthodox factions, modern Orthodox factions and secular people, which are also reflected in these bus lines. The ultra-Orthodox population in Beit Shemesh has grown significantly in recent years and, as a result, we are unfortunately seeing a variety of violent acts that are committed by religious extremists in the name of the “modesty” requirement. Some of these acts of violence occur around the issue of the Mehadrin buses.

I remember one Shabbat when a group of my friends were standing on the corner of a street in the neighborhood that leads to an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood. Suddenly, a group of extremists attacked them with fists and shouts of “whores!” because both boys and girls were standing together in the group. On another Shabbat, a girl from my neighborhood crossed through an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood to get to the house of a friend, and found herself fleeing from twenty men who were chasing her because they thought that she was not dressed modestly enough. There was also the time when I was waiting for a bus and they spat at me, saying “Here you can’t do whatever you want.” I’ve already ridden several times on these bus lines and I was forced to sit separately from my boyfriend.

I first encountered the “freedom riders,” when I saw an ad that they had placed on the Mount Scopus campus at Hebrew University. The ad was an invitation to a dialogue on the issue of segregation on the buses, but I didn’t go because the whole thing seemed to me to be too aggressive and polemical. Sometime later, I spoke with a friend named Nitzan who volunteers with the project and after talking with her I began to take part in the project. Precisely because I’m religious and live in Beit Shemesh, and I routinely ride on those buses, this issue bothers me, and for that reason I have an obligation to act in the matter. Now I’m the coordinator for the Freedom Riders Program in Beit Shemesh.

I come to the project not from a place of coercion but, rather, from rapprochement and dialogue. I’m trying to bring the project closer to the modern Orthodox public and the ultra-Orthodox public, and not to paint it as anti-religious. I would like the volunteers who travel on the buses to instigate a dialogue on the issue, while still respecting everyone, and to help close the schisms between the communities, and not exacerbate them.

The first time I boarded the bus and sat in the front section, I was afraid and full of adrenaline. I thought to myself that maybe it was a mistake to do so. But slowly I got used to it. During those trips, I experienced all kinds of reactions. Once, a group of men yelled at me, "What, are you judging and educating us?!" Another time, an ultra-Orthodox man demanded that the driver stop and take me off the bus. More than once, someone called to me "He who breaches a stone fence will be bitten by a snake." (Ecclesiastes 10:8), and I was asked several times why I was being spiteful. Others addressed me in a polite and courteous manner, "A Jewish woman would move to the back," or a group of women who got together and vacated a place for me and invited me to sit with them at the back of the bus. I want to say that, more than once, I felt that I was impolite, that I was interfering with them. I had conflicts and apprehensions – am I doing the right thing? But ultimately, I understood that the ideology and the direction are more important than the sense of discomfort and being branded as impolite.

It's important to me to talk with the people. Once, I approached a group of women at the back and I told them that they could also sit at the front of the bus. They told me that they did not believe in this segregation either, but they were maintaining it because they wanted to show respect for the men and, out of courtesy, they were obligated to honor that custom. I think there is value in this, trying to change an outlook, not necessarily among the extremist entities, but among the people who don't feel entirely comfortable with the reality that's forced upon them, but are afraid to object. We're helping them to create a reality in which this thing is ordinary and natural. I've heard that since the project began, the reports of harassment and screaming have decreased. It's very important that we continue. We, the religious and the secular, must not consent to the kind of character that our public spaces are assuming.

I've received various responses to e-mails that I've sent to my community. Some people asked me why I'm doing this. Why am I increasing unfounded hatred and splitting the nation? Some wrote to me that I should accept these things with courtesy, even if I don't agree with them. I've also received e-mails supporting and encouraging me, with stories about problems that occurred when traveling on the mehadrin lines. And they asked me to send more e-mails and keep them up-to-date on the issue.

My participation in the project has taught me about volunteering and about the power to bring about change. But it has also taught me about the complexity in every issue. Things don't happen all at once and it's sometimes difficult to recruit people for a particular objective, important though it may be. I learned a lot about the ultra-Orthodox community, and I saw that it encompasses different voices. I

think I understand them a little better now. Coming closer to another community that's different from your own, even if it is through disagreement, is important and eliminates stigmas. The women in the project are also from different backgrounds with different outlooks. It's not a monolithic group with one voice. We accept the differences among us and we act together.

BOARDING THE “DISCRIMINATION” LINES / Sarit Hashkes

I sometimes have to ride on these strange bus lines, mainly line 56, which departs from Ramat Shlomo. At first, people usually ignore me. The men at the front don't make eye contact, and don't sit next to me. Sometimes they stand with their backs to me in order to hide me from the other bus passengers. But on almost every trip, some “saint” pops up. The “saint” gets on the bus, sees me sitting at the front, and announces contemptuously “Women go to the back.” He never talks to me directly. I am air, a ghost who can't be seen, but is still occupying some space. I am a leper.

I don't get angry and I don't yell, I just ask innocently, “Says who?”

I've received many answers. “All the rabbis say so, even Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef,” “It's the law!” “Eged says so.” I contradict the claims, explained that I have the right to sit where ever I want. But the moment the “saint” opens the Pandora's box, other passengers join the attack. Some of them get up and move away for me while muttering in Yiddish, others yell “Why are you insisting on this?” “What kind of behavior is this?”

It's sad, but I'm no longer upset by the insults and the yelling. If the situation begins to heat up, I turn to the driver and ask him “Why are they demanding that I moved to the back?” He answers apathetically with the response that he has learned by heart, “Every passenger has the right to sit where ever they want.”

It's very rare for me to see another woman sitting at the front. Once I saw an elderly ultra-Orthodox woman sitting in the seat behind the driver. The “saint” approached her as well, and demanded that she moved to the back. “My back hurts, leave me alone” she yelled at the “saint” who could have been her grandson. Unfortunately, I doubt whether her granddaughter would have had the courage to act as she did.

I AM AN ABOMINATION AND A SINNING JEW /

Katie Greenberg

Yesterday was a very different sort of day for me. I got to be a freedom rider and ride one of the segregated buses in Jerusalem for the first time. IRAC's field coordinator Motti, drove me and two others to a neighborhood called Ramat Shlomo which is almost exclusively Hareidi and dropped us off at the bus stop.

I learned that I am an abomination because I refused to sit in the back of the bus and sat in the front with the men. When we sat down in the front we were instantly approached by a young man who refused to look at me and my female companion but told us very forcefully that we immediately had to move to the back of the bus. We told him calmly that what we were doing was entirely legal but he refused to hear and told us that we were abominations. Luckily we had a male companion who had joined us who told him to quiet down.

Later I learned that I was still a Jew in the eyes of this man but a horrible one committing great sins. After studying Jewish texts extensively for the past two years at the Pardes Institute for Jewish studies, I wanted to ask him where in the Torah it says that women can't sit in the front of the bus, but I restrained myself as I did not want the situation to escalate.

Finally I learned that I was a shiksa, a very offensive term for a non-Jewish woman. After trying to rip down the sticker on the bus stating it's legal for anyone to sit where they want to, the man came back towards us and with rage told our male companion that it was ridiculous for him to defend two shiksas. A modern orthodox man sitting next to us defended us and even gave us directions when we got off the bus.

What I learned myself is that I can stay calmer in tough situations than I expected that there are good people out there who will stick up for those being unfairly targeted, and that no person can tell me what kind of Jew I am except for myself

TELEPHONE CALL / An Ultra-Orthodox Woman Speaks Anonymously

I am a young ultra-Orthodox woman, and I would like to thank the Israel Religious Action Center for its battle against segregation. I thank Hashem every day for Reform Jews.

There are many ultra-Orthodox women who oppose the gender segregation, but we are not able to express our opposition. I think that most of the rabbis will say that the demands for segregation are nonsense, but no one dares to be the “permissive rabbi,” for fear of the extremists (primarily from the Sikrikim). It drives me crazy that people, such as Amnon Levy, say that the ultra-Orthodox must be allowed to “live their lives,” because no one actually checks to see what the ultra-Orthodox want.

With regard to the buses, the fact that the back door remains open is a catastrophe. If we were to board by the front door, there might be some possibility of sitting up front, but now it's not an option at all. Even as a group, we can't sit at the front of the bus under any circumstances. Only when there's a secular woman sitting at the front does it give us the courage to sit there as well, because many ultra-Orthodox people are afraid to make comments to secular women.

Only once did I see an ultra-Orthodox girl who, when she was told to move to the back, point to the sticker on the bus saying that everyone has the right to choose his or her seat, and that helped her. But the fact that the sticker is there doesn't help at all.

Despite the battle against the segregated bus lines, I don't see any change on them. It's important for me to say that there is no such thing as a voluntary arrangement, and this is done by coercion and against my will.

DISCRIMINATION IN THE CEMETERY /

Orly Erez-Lachovsky

On October 26, 2011, the mother of a good friend of mine passed away. Members of the family and many friends gathered in the Shamgar funeral home in Jerusalem. During the funeral, the men and women were segregated, with clear signs about where the women were to stand, and where the men were to stand. There was a curtain partition, with the eulogy stand, of course, on the men's side. My friend – one of six daughters of the deceased, who had no sons – requested to eulogize her mother, but the men of the Hevra Kadisha told her that that was not possible. The deceased's son-in-law and grandson gave the eulogy in her place.

The funeral procession left the funeral home for Har Hamenuchot cemetery in Givat Shaul, Jerusalem. When the participants reached the cemetery in Har Hamenuchot, everyone gathered around the grave, and then men from the Hevra Kadisha ordered all the women to move away from the grave and stand far off to the side, on the path leading to the gravesites. When I arrived, a short time after the start of the ceremony, only the men were standing around the grave and all the women, including the daughters of the deceased, were standing off to the side. Only my friend – who is an Orthodox woman, who was not prepared to accept her banishment from the site – insisted on standing next to the grave with all the men.

Later, she told me that when she insisted that she would remain next to the grave, the men of the Hevra Kadisha informed her that if that was the case, the burial ceremony would not take place (!) but when she continued to insist, they relented. When I arrived, I stood next to my friend and, slowly, other women came and joined us. It was only after the Hevra Kadisha men left that my friend delivered her eulogy next to the grave.

It is important for me to emphasize that even though this involved an Orthodox family, the segregation between men and women, the prohibition on a woman delivering a eulogy or the expulsion of the women from the funeral ceremony are completely antithetical to their worldview.

I have been handling the issue of segregation for several years in my capacity as an attorney at the Israel Religious Action Center. Despite the fact that I knew about these discriminatory practices, I was dismayed to experience them first hand. This experience shocked me, but it also proved to me just how important it is to be aware of the fact that such demands of women are illegal and that it is important to insist on your right to oppose these humiliating demands.

FREEDOM RIDERS

Freedom Riders is a group of male and female volunteers whose purpose is to monitor the implementation of the judgment rendered by the Supreme Court, and to ensure that the “mehadrin lines” become a thing of the past. The volunteers take short trips on the problematic bus lines, with full funding of the fare, they board the bus at the front door and sit in the front of the bus.

We do this for two reasons:

- A.** To document and report any irregularity and violation of the passengers' rights.
- B.** To change awareness and give a message to the passengers that something has happened and the segregation is a thing of the past, so every man and every woman has the right to sit anywhere on the bus, and to serve as a personal example for ultra-Orthodox women, showing them that they, too, can sit at the front of the bus.

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