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**SPRINGING TO LIFE: WOMEN IN BLACK IN ISRAEL PALESTINE**

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**This is a very provisional draft of Chapter 1 of our proposed book on WiB. In the Introduction which will precede this chapter, the reader will have had a summary outline of what WiB is and does....**

Women in Black, then, began in Israel – and specifically in West Jerusalem - on the first Friday in January 1988. The call its demonstrations made, to the Israeli public and government, was not a generalized call for peace and non-violence, but rather an appeal to ‘End the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza’. In this context, the conflictual relationship its message addressed was that between Jews and Palestinian Arabs in the region. The stressful history of these neighbouring peoples is long and eventful. The following very brief historical sketch may be helpful when it comes to understanding Women in Black. [Footnote 1]

The Jews of today originate in an ethnocultural group, the Judaians, of whose emergence in the lands between the River Jordan and the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean Sea there is evidence from the middle of the second millennium BCE. They claimed common descent from a patriarch named Abraham, developed a monotheistic belief in a god they called Yahweh, and created a religious code embodied in a holy book, the Torah. This people consolidated their religious and cultural identity, their Judaism, within a region of ‘others’. One significant ‘other’ comprised those who, in the first century CE, abandoned polytheism for Christianity, in the worship of a sole God and his supposed son Jesus Christ. Another was those who, seven hundred years later, would similarly adopt monotheism with the creation by the Prophet Mohammed and his followers of Islam, its worship of the deity Allah and its holy book, the Koran. The Christians and Muslims, like the Jews, believed themselves to be descended from Abraham. Jerusalem was a holy centre for all three Abrahamic religions.

Over the ensuing millennia, the region comprising Judea and neighbouring lands was subject to Roman and, later, Ottoman rule. Jewish people migrated far and wide from their turbulent birthplace in the Middle East. Some travelled west and north, to Europe and across the Atlantic, to become the Jewish population known as Asheknazi Jews. Many likewise moved east, south and along the southern shore of the Mediterranean, settling in to become (or perhaps one should say to remain) ‘Arabs’. They would come to be known as Misrahi Jews. Many Jews experienced persecution in the diaspora. There thus arose, in the late 19th century CE, a movement, termed Zionism, to recover a Jewish homeland back in Judea, now known as Palestine. Between the First and Second World Wars, when Palestine was administered under Mandate by the British, who were supportive of the Zionist aspiration, many Jews, from both the Ashkenazi and Misrahi diasporas, ‘returned’. There resulted armed conflict between Jewish and Arab nationalists, both against each other and the British. The genocidal persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s strengthened international support for the creation of a Jewish state in the aftermath of the Second World War (Laqueur 2003:40).

In 1947 the British Mandate was about to end. The United Nations stepped in, adopting a Partition Plan for Palestine that affirmed a Jewish state on 57% of the Mandate territory and a separate Arab state on the remaining 43%, on the West Bank of the river Jordan, the Sinai Peninsular and the coastal strip of Gaza close to Egypt. The Jewish authorities accepted the UN plan, but the Arabs rejected it. Thus, when, on 15 May 1948 a UN-sanctioned State of Israel was unilaterally declared by the Jews, it was attacked by regional Arab forces. The Jews prevailed however, and in the fighting they extended the boundaries of the Israeli state to encompass 68% of the Mandate area. Four-fifths of the Palestinian Arab villages therein were totally destroyed, and the Palestinian residents scattered, an event Palestinians commemorate as their ‘*Nakhba*’, or catastrophe. An estimated 156,000 remained, although displaced, within the State of Israel, constituting a disadvantaged minority among its predominantly Jewish citizens. But 700,000 fled, some to far distant countries, others encamping just outside the Green Line – as the state border was termed – in Jordan and Egypt. Two decades later, in 1967, the Arab states of Jordan, Egypt and Syria again attacked Israel, but the Israeli armed forces once more defeated them and the war ended with the Israeli state establishing a military occupation of the Palestinian-populated ‘Territories’ – the West Bank of the Jordan, the Gaza Strip and, somewhat later, the Syrian Golan Heights (Davis 1987). The Occupation – let’s give it the capital initial it so often carries – was military, tough, and unremitting. It inflicted mental and physical suffering on the already-traumatized Palestinians who had found refuge in the Territories twenty years before. The occupiers imposed frequent curfews, closures of schools and nurseries, arbitrary arrests, and detention without trial often involving torture. Nonetheless, it seems that women rose to meet the new oppression in a positive way. Women’s illiteracy in the West Bank decreased significantly between 1970 and 1983, falling from 65% to 37%. Education improved too. The percentage of women who had completed nine years of schooling rose in that span of years from 9% to 26% in the West Bank, and from 19% to 37% in the Gaza Strip (VLD 1988:29).

**Against a heritage of gender and political oppression**

As we shall see repeatedly affirmed in this book, Women in Black is a feminist pacifist movement notable for making explicit a connection between violence in gender relations and violence in society at large, culminating in war. It is helpful, therefore, to see something of the gender relations prevailing in the Israeli and Palestinian societies whence the movement sprang.

The Declaration of Independence in 1948 stated that the Israel would maintain complete social and political equality for all its citizens regardless of religion, race or sex. [Footnote 2] For all this, ‘leadership, influence and dominance in virtually every area remained, indeed remains to this day, firmly in the hands of men’ (Golan 1995:13). For one thing, the powerful religious establishment was a force sustaining the traditional gender division of roles in the Israeli state. As Galia Golan put it, ‘they succeeded in blackmailing virtually every governing coalition in the country to maintain religious control over vital aspects of citizens’ rights’ (ibid:14). For another, Labor Zionism, the dominant political philosophy of the period, promoted the ideal of the Jewish *sabra*, the combative manly man. This masculinist ideal was served very well by the continuing militarization of Israeli society. Every citizen was, had been or would be a soldier or a soldier’s partner, mother or child. Jewish women too are required to perform military service, but have only gradually acceded to active roles, so that the army somehow remains, as Golan has put it, ‘the quintessence of a patriarchal institution’ (ibid:15.) The Occupation redoubled the emphasis on militarism, and thus made yet more visible, in Simona Sharoni’s words, ‘the connections between, on the one hand, the social construction of gender identities and gender relations in Israel, and, on the other, the use of violence in the Occupied Territories and on the Israeli homefront’ (Sharoni 1994:122). One very tangible outcome was that ‘a soldier who serves in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and learns that it is permissible to use violence against other people is likely to bring that violence back with him, upon his return to his community’ (Sharoni 1995:120).

A women’s movement seeking gender equality gathered momentum in Israel, as it did in Western Europe and the USA, during the 1970s. In the early years however it engaged mainly Ashkenazi middle-class women, and stressed equality of race and class as much as sex equality. In the 1973 elections a Citizens Rights Movement led by Knesset member Shulamit Aloni won three seats in the Knesset, and one of those elected was Marcia Freedman, an active feminist. She in turn led a movement for a Women’s Party to compete in the ensuing elections in 1977. The Women’s Party message made a clear connection between its goals of women’s liberation and Palestinian freedom. ‘We see Arab women...’, they wrote ‘as sisters in a joint struggle for equal rights and equal opportunities, and we wait for the day when we will be able to shake hands across national boundaries’ (ibid:105).

This same decade of the 1970s saw a peace movement too forming in Israel. In 1977 a group of Israeli soldiers and reservists established *Shalom Achshav*, Peace Now. Peace Now was not exactly pacifist, nor particularly pro-Palestinian. It did however take a strong position on the issue that was deeply dividing Israeli Jews: what to do about the Occupation. Amos Oz wrote,

It is a fact that hundreds of thousands of Israelis are convinced – intellectually and emotionally – that if Israel keeps hold of the Occupied Territories then it will cease to exist. Nothing less than that. While hundreds of thousands of other Israelis are convinced that if Israel pulls out it will cease to exist. Nothing less than that (Oz 1994:48).

Peace Now united those among left-wing radicals, liberals from the centre, conventional Zionists and religious people who believed that Israel should refrain from annexing the Occupied Territories. Rather, it should accord their inhabitants self-determination and national independence (ibid:80).

As an organization, Peace Now appears to have been every bit as masculinist as Israeli society itself. Women, when present at all, played support roles. They were ‘the envelope-stuffers and stamp-lickers’, as Hannah Safran put it (Safran 2005:193). A specifically women’s peace movement only began to come into existence when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. Many women were incensed to see their sons packed off to fight a war that, this time, the Israeli state had initiated. This explains why some in the ensuing women’s peace activism identified specifically as ‘mothers’. Other women however found it distasteful to use ‘motherhood’ as a political argument, and chose instead a radical feminist expression of resistance.

Yvonne Deutsch points out that the women of the Israeli women’s peace movement held deeply contradictory feelings about the Israeli military. It was taken for granted, given the enmity of the surrounding Arab nations, that to be well armed was essential to Israel’s survival. Thus, they did not call for disbanding the Israeli Defence Force. As pacifists they might be necessarily unenthusiastic about how militarization shaped the character and behaviour of Israeli Jewish men. Yet this conflicted with the need to value masculine military strength as the antithesis of the hated image of the weak, persecuted Diaspora Jew. This ambivalence obscured women’s perception of their husbands and sons as oppressors in the context of the Occupation.

**The *intifada:* rising up and shaking off**

It took the Palestinian uprising against the Occupation, the *intifada*, which broke out in 1987, to galvanize women’s activism for peace. The Arabic word *intifada* implies ‘rising up’ and ‘shaking off’. It was an upsurge of impatience among the oppressed population of the West Bank and Gaza against twenty years of Occupation. Over there across the Green Line was an increasingly organized Palestinian political entity. The population had become more vocal, drawing the attention of the world to its pursuit of justice. Already, back in 1974, Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, had won from more than half the United Nations member states recognition of Palestinians’ right to independent statehood. Israel however remained intransigent. Then, in December 1987, Palestinian patience ran out. Their chaotic insurgency involved strikes, boycotts of the Israeli civil administration, withdrawal of labour from Jewish employers and the widespread deployment against the Israeli Defence Forces of the minimal weapons available to the Palestinians – stones, slingshots, Molotov cocktails. By the time the *intifada* ended six years later, 1,083 Palestinians would die at Israeli hands, of whom 282 were under the age of sixteen (Orr 1994:168).

The outbreak of the i*ntifada* was a watershed for women on both sides of the Green Line (Sharoni 1995). It galvanized Palestinian women in the Territories into action. And despite the increased oppression and suffering, strangely they were in some ways strengthened thereby. Due to many Palestinian men being absent from the home – participating in the uprising, imprisoned, disappeared or in exile – more women were obliged to go out and earn an independent living to support their children, and many gained in knowledge, skills and confidence this way. The *intifada* also brought Israeli women a greater awareness of what Palestinian women in the Territories had been suffering, due both to their positioning as women in relation to Palestinian men, and their harassment by the Israeli Defence Forces. Now they saw those women participating to the full in the uprising. In 1973 Palestinian women had founded a body, the Palestinian Union of Women’s Work Committees (PUWWC), to bring together women’s organizations into a more effective force. The political aim of the PUWWC was two-fold: national freedom and women’s liberation. Its activist women contributed to the national struggle for the overthrow of the Israeli Occupation and statehood for Palestinians. But they also addressed women’s oppression in an underdeveloped socio-economic structure and in the context of religion, that positioned women as the appendage of men, to serve the husband in the house and rear the children. The PUWWC were particularly effective in organizing women working solely in the home. While ‘housewives’ (for want of a better word) were 55% of Palestinian women in the Territories, they were 73% of the membership of PUWWC (VLD 1988).

Ebba Augustin, a German-born feminist and writer, was in the Occupied Territories conducting research in 1987 when the uprising began. She wrote,

Witnessing the *Intifada* shaping the life of people I was amazed by the sudden power of women. Women of all ages were at the forefront of the demonstrations, they organized food, clothes and equipment for their besieged communities, with never-tiring effort they queued for papers, for stamps, for visits to their arrested menfolk and children. Women showed an amazing ability to sustain the spirit of survival in their families during days and weeks of curfew, under gas attack and siege... (Augustin 1993:ix).

There was a steep increase in violence by Israeli men against Israeli women during the i*ntifada*. It made starkly clear how ‘the violent patterns of behaviour that are used by the Israeli army against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza strip are part of a culture of unchallenged sexism, violence and oppression which women face daily on Israeli streets and in their homes’ (Sharoni 1994:126). This sense of sisterhood caused many peace-minded women in Israel to get involved in support work among women in the Territories. They formed organizations to aid the growing number of Palestinian women political prisoners and families of deportees. And the suffering they saw being inflicted on Palestinians made them increasingly alert to their own sexual subordination. It is not surprising, then, that women were now inspired to action simultaneously as pacifists *and* feminists - as we see so clearly in the case of the Jerusalem women who started Women in Black.

**Jewish and Palestinian women: reaching across two borders**

Women in Black involved the relationship of Jewish women and Palestinian Arab women in two distinct ways. First and foremost, as described above, it was a project calling for an end to the Occupation by the predominantly Jewish State of Israel of the predominantly Palestinian Arab populated territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Thus Israeli Jewish women were reaching out to Palestinian Arab women across the border of the Green Line. Women in Black was also, however, a partnership of Jewish and Palestinian Arab women in a different sense. Women of the Palestinian Arab minority of the Israeli population were involved in the vigils alongside Jewish women. Women in Black was thus a partnership that reached across the internal border between the majority and minority peoples of Israel.

We have already seen, above, that 156,000 Palestinians displaced in the fighting that accompanied the creation of the Israeli State in 1948 had remained in the new country, constituting around one-fifth of the population. In that fighting however the Israeli forces made a point of demolishing Palestinian villages in order to block any possibility of return. The result was that in 1954 more than one-third of Israel’s Jewish population was living on absentee property (White 2012). In *Sleeping on a Wire*, published in 1993, David Grossman, an Israeli Jew, native of Jerusalem, reports conversations he carried out among Israeli Palestinians three decades later in the early years of the *intifada* (\*Grossman 1993).For the preceding forty years, these Palestinian ‘remainers’ in the newly-created State of Israel had lived quietly subordinated to the Jewish majority. They farmed small holdings, laboured for Jewish employers in the settlements, created small enterprises, reared their families and maintained their cultural lives as best they could in local communities predominantly but not only in the northern reaches of Israel. Constitutionally, they were less than equal as citizens. While Israel’s Law of Return guaranteed citizenship to any and every full-born Jew in the world, Israel’s Arabs had no right of return even to their own former properties and were governed by military law until 1966. Israeli Palestinians, Grossman concluded, ‘are half citizens and the state, for them, is half democratic. They are in the middle – between citizenship and subjection’ (ibid:181). They were excluded from political power and influence. Only 17 out of 1,310 senior positions in the government ministries and associated bodies were held by Palestinians, and there had not yet been a Palestinian member of an Israeli cabinet. The Israeli state does not require, nor does it permit, Palestinian citizens to serve in the armed forces. Given the high value placed on the military and military service in Israel, this is not the privilege it might seem, but on the contrary damaging discrimination. Palestinians’ disadvantage was economic too. Only 2.4% of the water available to Israeli agriculture was allocated to Palestinian farmers, even though they were cultivating 17% of the country’s agricultural land. Drawing on statistics for 1989, Grossman estimates that 92% of Israeli Palestinian wage earners that year were on the bottom half of the social scale. Half were living below the poverty line. Six out of ten Palestinian Arab children (as opposed to one out of ten Jewish children) were living in poverty. As a result, twice as many Palestinian as Jewish babies were dying soon after birth (ibid:110). Eighteen years on, in 2006-7, Israeli Palestinian organizations would publish a series of papers that became known as the ‘Vision Documents’. These were proud and defiant assertions of Palestinian rights and called for historical redress, equity and power-sharing in the Israeli state. They were angrily denounced by Israeli Jewish politicians and media. Nothing had changed (Peleg and Waxman 2011).

Grossman found many of the individuals he interviewed when writing *Sleeping on a Wire* to be on the defensive, because they were hearing the ‘genuine’ Palestinians, the ones who left Israel when the state formed, telling them, ‘You stayed on to serve the enemy, like a woman who, raped by a man, agrees to be his mistress’ (ibid:39). Another said, ‘After all, our whole story, of the Arabs in Israel, is no more than the struggle to survive. That’s not such a heroic struggle. It was largely a story of cringing, lots of toadying and opportunism, and imitation of the Israelis. And when the Arabs here finally started feeling a little more sure of themselves, they had already turned into Israelis’ (ibid:18). Thus, one of the Palestinian remainers told him, ‘I’m caught in the perfect paradox – I have to be a loyal citizen of a country that declares itself not to be my country but rather the country of the Jewish people’ (ibid:16). So when the *intifada* began, the Israeli Palestinians had to make a quick and clear decision. ‘Are we part of it or not part of it? Period. And we discovered that our aspirations branched off at this point from the aspirations of the Palestinians in the territories’ (ibid:15).

As we have seen, Palestinian women in the Territories were a significant factor in the mobilization of the i*ntifada*. Seeing them so fully engaged in the uprising inspired many more Israeli Palestinian women to self-awareness and activism. Nabila Espanioli, herself an Israeli Palestinian, born in Nazareth, described how it awoke in them both a feminist consciousness and what she called a ‘re-palestinianization’, resulting in a greater willingness to demand rights both as women and as an ethnocultural minority (Espanioli 1994:112). Interestingly, she remarks on a difference she noted in October 1989 between the political messages of the WiB vigillers on the one hand in Haifa, a largely Jewish city, and on the other in Nazareth, largely Arab. In Haifa,

...Women in Black wrestle with the questions of how to make a bigger impact, how to recruit more women, how to change the hostile attitudes toward our activity on the Jewish street, how to make Jews in Israel aware of the effect of the occupation, how to make them see the connections between the occupation and unemployment and other social ills (Espanioli 1993:147).

Nazareth, on the other hand, is a centre of Palestinian Arab population. Here, from the start, there were Palestinian women alongside Jewish women on the vigils. As it happened, the vigillers on Saturday 11 October 1989, were entirely Palestinians. And Nabila, writing as one of them, noted

In Nazareth, we Women in Black... ask ourselves the same questions [as the women in Haifa], but also others: how to find new ways of expressing our solidarity with the struggle of Palestinians in the occupied territories, how to persuade the government of Israel to negotiate with the Palestine Liberation Organization, how to help our brothers and sisters in the occupied territories, how to involve more women in our activities, and how to develop actions in keeping with our culture that would have an impact on the Arab street (ibid).

**Women in Black gets under way**

On 9 December 1987 an Israeli Defence Forces truck in the Gaza Strip collided with a civilian car, killing four Palestinians. This was the spark that fired the *Intifada*, the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli state that would continue for six years. The *Intifada* galvanized the Israeli peace movement into action. Peace Now was re-energized, and scores of new peace groups started up, most local to a town or city (VLD 1988). One of earliest was Dai LaKibush. It called for the Israeli government to negotiate with the representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization, for the purpose of creating of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. Its branch in West Jerusalem began holding a weekly Friday demonstration, precisely on message: their Hebrew name translates as ‘End the Occupation’. Gila Svirsky recounts how, at their very first demonstration, on the last Friday in December, the Dai LaKibush organizers proposed that, to heighten the drama, the men should come dressed in white and the women in black. ‘It sounded like a good idea and the women did don black,’ Gila writes. ‘But somehow the men couldn’t bring themselves to dress for the occasion, showing up in their usual garb’ (Svirsky 1996:Ch1). She continues,

The women, though, looked dramatic – like a classical Greek chorus. To take advantage of the funereal effect, it was decided that the women would stand separately from the men. A little more interest was, indeed, generated among spectators, which encouraged the group to try again the next week, this time at the Jerusalem Cinematheque, only women, wearing black (ibid).

I will continue to draw from Gila’s valuable and thorough book on Women in Black in its early days, written as it is from very close to the action. [Footnote 3] She tells how the following week, on 2 January 1988, the first vigil was held that intentionally comprised women alone, eight of them, dressed in black. A few supportive men remained nearby to distribute leaflets to onlookers. Two of the women, Ruth Cohen and Ida Bilu, had prepared large black signs in the shape of hands, with the Hebrew words ‘Dai LaKibush’ - End the Occupation – in bold white lettering. One of the women who attended that vigil was Raya Rotem. A war widow herself, she was particularly keen on the idea of the women wearing black. She now called on a wider circle of women to attend the demonstration of the following week. Thus on 9 January, as Gila puts it, ‘the women made the plunge from anonymity into mob recognition’. The vigil site was in the heart of downtown Jerusalem, on the busy corner of Jaffa Road and Ben Yehuda Street. Around fifteen women attended this time (Svirsky 1996:Ch.1). [Footnote 4] The signs were now in three languages, Hebrew, Arabic and English. Ruth Cohen displayed a big drawing she had made of an Israeli soldier violently clubbing a Palestinian. This time the vigil drew a heavy reaction from passers-by. The location exposed them to public fury. ‘I came home covered with spit’, Hagar Roublev recalled later. A decision was made to move the weekly vigil to Paris Square, where they were still visible to many drivers and pedestrians, but were able to stand raised above the pavement, on a low wall, and were a little more distanced from harm. So, writes Gila,

Although the vigil was held weekly as a woman’s action and developed its own momentum, the Dai LaKibush organization continued to regard it as one of its activities. It was not easy for them to relinquish parental control and ownership of their all-woman spinoff. At an organizing meeting held several months into the vigil, one of the leaders of Dai LaKibush announced that a number of decisions would have to be made about the Women in Black vigil. ‘You’re relieved of all decisions about Women in Black,’ the founding mothers told him. ‘We don’t belong to you anymore’. Thus, Women in Black was launched as an independent, all-woman enterprise (Svirsky 1996:Ch1).

The idea of a women-only, black-clad, silent vigil spread from Jerusalem, first to cities of Haifa and Tel Aviv. The women in Haifa began vigilling on International Women’s Day, 8 March 1988. They initiated a telegram campaign to address their messages to the Israeli government and military. The women in Tel Aviv, for their part, took a projector and screen into the street and showed videos illustrating the oppression occurring in the Territories. After a few weeks of this, their action too morphed into a Women in Black vigil. Their messages were bold, including a call for ‘international surveillance of the Occupied Territories’. The vigillers in these two cities included women experienced in feminist projects such as rape crisis work and Haifa’s noted women’s centre, Isha l’Isha. They became something of a vanguard element in Women in Black in Israel. Their vigils attracted a good deal of abuse from passers-by. Often the insults were expressed in strongly sexualized terms. ‘Whores of Arafat’, passing drivers yelled. People threw eggs, fruit, water at the vigillers. The women were often harassed by street gangs of young men of Kach, a ‘Kahanist’ movement of rabidly anti-Palestinian Jews.

The next vigils to spring to life were mounted by women of the kibbutzim. First was Kibbutz Nahson, soon followed by Kibbutz Gan Shmuel, and, in the south, Samar. The women of Kibbutz Megiddo provocatively positioned themselves at a busy road junction adjacent to a prison where many Palestinians were locked up. Not all kibbutz members were supportive of the vigils. Some indeed were highly critical, and would come out and confront the women, shouting abuse: ‘you are traitors’, ‘death to Arabs’, and so on. Gila Svirsky recounts how a group of WiB decided to approach the Ideological Coordinator of the kibbutz movement and ask him to express support for the vigils. He responded by calling on the women to sign a statement expressing loyalty to the Zionist vision. They refused, and asked to meet with him. Six women sat down with him in his office. Three hours later he was so well persuaded of their case that he issued a letter to all kibbutzim encouraging women to join Women in Black vigils (Svirsky 1996:Ch5).

The number of vigils and the number of vigillers grew steadily thereafter. The WiB process and style was after all easy to emulate. The principles were somehow informally but swiftly agreed and passed on. First and foremost, there was the wearing of black. This symbolised mourning and it counteracted any tendency to present women as ‘sexual’, ‘feminine’, or ‘pretty’ – no pink here. Secondly, there was the maintaining of silence. The vigillers allowed their bodily presence to speak for them. Third, there was the regularity of hour (from 1 – 2 pm) and day of the week (Friday) and consistency of place (a prominent street side or crossroads position visible to both pedestrians and car drivers). There was agreement that decision-making must be consensual, and that each vigil would be autonomous. The only variation was one of signage. Some vigils stuck simply to ‘End the Occupation’ while others ventured other messages, such as ‘Listen to Women Speaking Peace’, or ‘End the Violence’. By December 1988, a year after the very first WiB vigil, Gila Svirsky estimates there were around 500 vigillers in 23 vigils. A year later still, in December 1989, there were 120 women standing regularly in Jerusalem, and an estimated 39 vigils country-wide. Six hundred women travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate that anniversary.

**WiB gathers partners and extends its activities**

In addition to vigils, the women organized or participated in a number of sizeable events. As early as January 1988 a group emerged, with many vigilling participants, to organize the making of a ‘Peace Quilt’, containing hundreds of panels embroidered with women’s peace messages, imagined as a symbolic cover for a future negotiation table. The outcome was a piece of fabric more than a hundred metres long, That June, a date that marked the 21st anniversary of the start of the Occupation, four hundred Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian women marched and demonstrated, carrying the Quilt around the Knesset building, seat of the Israeli Parliament (Safran 2005). On the first anniversary of the start of the *intifada* they mounted a conference titled ‘Occupation or Peace: A Feminist Perspective’. Several hundred Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women from both Israel and the Territories attended. Simona Sharoni was there. Later, she wrote, ‘All the speakers made explicit connections between women’s struggles for liberation and equality and the Palestinian struggles for national liberation and self-determination. Another set of connections made explicit was that between the violence of war and occupation and violence against women (Sharoni 1995:117). Then in May 1989, around fifty women from Israel and the Territories, including women representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization, attended an international conference held in Brussels. ‘Give Peace a Chance: Women Speak Out’ was its title (ibid). A few months later, on 9 September 1989, Women in Black themselves organized a national conference at Kibbutz Harel, attended by three hundred women. Among the topics they discussed were cooperation of Jews and Palestinians on the vigils, use of the media, self-defence, and relations with the police. This would be the first of a series of annual conferences (Svirsky 1996:Ch6).

A lot of activity occurred around the end of 1989 and the start of 1990, at which moment Women in Black was turning two years old. On Friday 29 December 1989 a women’s peace conference was held, jointly organized by Jewish and Palestinian women, co-sponsored by Peace Now, and attended by a number of women from Italy, other European countries and North America. It ended with demands on the Israeli government for a negotiated peace with the PLO and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. The vigil in Jerusalem that day attracted an estimated two thousand women. It was followed by a march through Jerusalem, from Paris Square in the West to East (Arab) Jerusalem where it was joined by several thousand women from the Palestinian territories, likewise dressed in black. This event was surpassed however the following day, when a demonstration ‘Hands Around Jerusalem’ brought a human chain of 30,000 men and women to encircle the Old City of Jerusalem to express the desire for Jews and Palestinians to live amicably side by side. WiB was fully part of this mass event, alongside Peace Now and every other Israeli peace group. Gila reports that it was met by ‘an onslaught of police brutality – billy clubs, water cannons, tear gas and rifles’ (Svirsky 1996:Ch6). The coming year of 1990 however was to bring a rapid decline in Women in Black activity. This was largely due to the crisis in the Persian Gulf, which began in August and broke into international armed conflict in January 1991. Of this period, more below.

In the meantime we need to look closer at the vigilling groups and ask, who, exactly, were the Women in Black vigillers? Gila Svirsky calculated that 84% were higher educated (mostly in the humanities, many with higher degrees). No less than 85% were in income-producing work, compared with 48% of women in Israel as a whole, though most were in low-paying jobs, for example in kibbutzim. They were predominantly Asheknazi (thus ‘white’ and mainly middle-class) Jews. Fully 87% were not religious. More than half were living without a partner and a quarter had no children. Gila points out that these latter are very high proportions ‘in a country addicted to marriage and children’. As to age, the span was very wide, from teenagers to women in their nineties, making an average of 47 years (Svirsky 1996:Ch7). A separate study, by Hanna Safran, reckons that a remarkable 30% of WiB vigillers were lesbians (Safran 2005). [Footnote 5]

Politically, WiB was a mix of more and less leftist women. Its members were also more and less Zionist. Most vigils did not fly the Israeli flag, but some chose to do so. Some vigillers sought an end to the Occupation by means of a ‘two state solution’, with a Palestinian state sitting alongside the Jewish one. Others – such as members of the extreme leftist Nitzotz group - wished to see a shared multi-ethnic state comprising Israel and the Occupied Territories (Svirsky 1996:Ch7). Despite such differences between vigils, and among the individuals in any one of them, WiB managed to agree, more or less informally, a series of principles. All were agreed for instance that they should not respond to the abuse thrown at them, nor tangle with the young men of Kach, nor in any way provoke the police. Indeed they proactively contacted the police seeking their protection. They also took care to avoid any charge of anti-semitism, by highlighting the historic oppression of Jews as well as the wrongs done to Palestinians. Thus, the Jerusalem vigil group hammered out an agreed statement that read,

We, Women in Black, citizens of Israel, have held our weekly protest vigil since the beginning of the Intifada. This vigil has grown out of Israeli society and expresses our need to actively and strongly oppose the occupation. *The black clothing symbolizes the tragedy of both peoples, the Israeli and the Palestinian* (Svirsky 1996:Ch7) (my italics).

Erella Shadmi, an Israeli Jewish researcher and writer, is one vigiller who has been somewhat critical of Women in Black as it got going in Israel. She stood with the Jerusalem vigil from 1990 to 1995. It was, she admits, very different, in its silence, its black dress, and repetitive weekly occurrence at a constant time and place, from anything else going on in Israel at the time. But she notes several weaknesses. For one thing, despite WiB’s apparent commitment to structure-less-ness and inclusion, it tended to be hierarchical, she felt, and to use unnecessarily ‘lofty language’. Only a small proportion of the women vigillers took the decisions. Naomi Chazan adds to this analysis, ‘Lower income women and residents of development towns and the poorer neighborhoods of the major cities are distinctly under-represented, indicating a close link between personal background and peace activism...’ (Chazan 1993:157). Shadmi continues to stress that the Jewish vigillers were almost all Ashkenazi, which is to say ‘white’ and middle-class. They seemed to be unable to accommodate the duality Mizrahi people feel between their Jewish and Arab identities, and their consequent discomfort with Ashkenazi Zionism. Consequently WiB was incapable of attracting and holding more than a very few Misrahi women, who felt alienated and somehow ‘unfit for WiB’. The dominance of Ashkenazi and absence of Misrahi women was in contradiction, Shadmi pointed out, with WiB’s apparent aim of challenging the existing order (Shadmi 2000 and 2004). Secondly, WiB fell short, she felt, on the feminist front. The movement declined in part because

they refused to expand their strategy and to enlarge their political statement beyond the slogan ‘Stop the Occupation’ or to incorporate any clear feminist or other message into their protest. In fact, they refused to capitalize on their own achievements. Consequently, the feminist practice they developed remained confined to the vigils and did not become an integral part of Israeli politics in general (Shadmi 2000:31).

Although, Shadmi admitted, WiB was a ‘unique and vanguard action’ and ‘a vital and passionate social discourse with the street’, ultimately she felt,

the political practice the women developed remained their own, enclosed within the group itself, incapable of being incorporated into politics. Consequently, its transformative power...was neutralized and circumscribed, and the women remained on the margins of politics (ibid:31).

Nonetheless, others have seen WiB in a more positive light, as ‘a unique phenomenon in the history and politics of Israeli society’, to quote Hanna Safran (Safran 2005:192) WiB’s persistence and spread, and the working partnership the vigil groups established with several other women peace initiatives during 1988, resulted in the creation, that November, of an enduring umbrella body, the Coalition of Women for Peace, in which they would go on to play a leading role. An early member of the Coalition was TANDI, the Movement of Democratic Women in Israel, based in Tel Aviv, which had been founded in the early years of the Israeli state as a very unusual partnership of Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women. The Peace Quilt group, mentioned above, was involved in the Coalition. So was the feminist magazine *Noga*, published in Tel Aviv, that often wrote of Israeli atrocities in the Territories (ibid). From May 1988, first in Tel Aviv and later in Jerusalem, a group named Women for Women Political Prisoners (WFWPP) was formed, to provide practical and legal help to Palestinian women in the Territories incarcerated by the occupying Israel forces and this too joined the Coalition (Deutsch 1994). The venerable Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), founded just after the First World War, had a branch in Israel and this too signed up. Women of the Jerusalem vigil group, together with WFWPP, founded Shani, which comprised both Jewish and Palestinian women and conducted study groups for political education and to discuss solutions to the Occupation. Shani joined the Coalition. So too, in 1989, did Reshet, the Israeli Women’s Peace Net, formed that year by women of the political centre, and academics (ibid; Mayer (ed) 1994). The Coalition soon began organizing annual conferences.

**WiB’s decline and change: the Gulf War and ‘Oslo’**

As noted above, the war in the Persian Gulf, during 1990 and 1991, was seriously challenging for Women in Black. Iraqi forces, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, occupied Kuwait in August 1990, and some months later, in January 1991, the combined forces of the USA, the UK, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, among others, launched a five-week aerial and naval bombardment, followed by a ground assault, to expel them. Yasser Arafat and the PLO voiced support for Saddam Hussein. Israel on the contrary was part of the Western alliance, and in response Saddam Hussein fired Scud missiles on civilian targets in Israel.

At first WiB paused its vigils, in obedience with police orders, but the Jerusalem vigillers held a meeting to discuss their response. The women were divided. Many women felt that the war was entirely wrong and they should vigil against it. Others supported American involvement, feeling that the USA was fighting the war on behalf of Israel (Svirsky 1996:Ch7). In particular, Jewish and Palestinian women found themselves on opposite sides in this conflict, and this greatly challenged the WiB alliance between them. The Coalition of Women for Peace did organize a demonstration against the war, but vigils ceased for three weeks. Although Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv subsequently led a small come-back to vigilling, it never really recovered. Ironically, WiB was awarded the Aachen Peace Prize in September 1991. The Jerusalem group organized a conference to discuss how to revive the movement. But by the end of the year WiB was virtually dead. Only a handful of vigils struggled on (Deutsch 1994).

What little of WiB remained was further challenged by the peace process that began between Israel and the PLO. It was announced on 29 August 1993 that representatives of the Israeli government had been secretly meeting with representatives of the PLO in Oslo, Sweden. The Jerusalem women responded with a vigil saying ‘Yes to Peace’. At last they could use such words! (Svirsky 1996:Ch7). On 13 September the world’s TV carried pictures of President Yitshak Rabin and Yasser Arafat singing a Declaration of Principles, and shaking hands on the White House lawn. It was five and a half years since the start of the *intifada* – and of WiB. The Oslo Accords, as they were known, looked like ending the Occupation. WiB would be left without a job. We now know better of course. But on 20 October Jerusalem WiB voted to end their vigil. Most of the few remaining vigils followed suit. The following year, in October 1994, Hanna Safran records that there were only two vigils left in Israel and that in 1996 WiB was dismantled entirely. It seemed Women in Black was dead (Safran 2005). There was indeed a pause. But it was not in fact the end of Israeli WiB. We shall see in Chapter 2 that in December 2000, when the second *intifada* broke out, WiB sprang back to life and vigilling started up again in Israel. In the meantime let us move on now to WiB’s adoption by Jewish women in the USA, and its productive relationship with Italian women peace activists, by means of whom it spread to Europe.

**FOOTNOTES:**

1 For further elaboration see for instance Davis 1987.

2 See <http://www.archives.gov.il/chapter/the-declaration-of-independence/>

3 Footnote about Gila and her book

4 They were Dafna Amit, Mimi Ash, Judy Blanc, Ruth Cohen, Yvonne Deutsch, Ruth Elraz, Hava Halevi, Dafna Kaminer, Lily Moed, Tikva Honig Parnass, Maya Rosenfeld, Raya Rotem, Hagar Roublev, Hagit Segal and Hagit Shlonsk.

5 Safran was sharply critical of WiB for what she called its ‘erasure of lesbian existence’. WIB, she felt, did not use their potential ‘to remain on the explosive side of society’ (Safran 2005:200).

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