

## Women and the Gulf War: A Personal Perspective

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**W**AR HAS ALWAYS HAD A PARTICULAR MEANING FOR WOMEN IN ISRAEL, ONE PSYCHOLOGICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF MEN. NOT BECAUSE THE TRAGEDIES OF WAR AND THE INEVITABLE LOSSES ARE ANY LESS FELT by either sex, but because war is a situation of enforced passivity for women. My teenagers go off for three years to secure my safety, my husband leaves me alone for a month every year to work as a communications officer for civil defense, and I sit home and make sure there is food in the house and sufficient hot water for a necessary shower when they return. I bake their favorite cakes and cook a special lunch and drive down to the base on Saturday in what sometimes appears to me to be a national activity—at least for people my age.

All parents feel the strangeness of this in Israel—some people call it the “Isaac syndrome” in which the sons must be prepared for sacrifice. And it is the children who are responsible for protecting the parents just at the time in their lives when parents are reluctant to release their own responsibility of protecting their children.

My sister-in-law calls these Saturday excursions of mothers (and fathers) to army bases—to feed their sons (and sometimes their daughters) and/or to exchange clean laundry for soiled—the “Schnitzel Patrol.” I often think of that phrase when asked about women in Israel, because although usually both parents go to visit their children in the army on weekends, this is the mother’s only opportunity to actively participate in her defense and to alleviate her feelings of immobility.

A. in

Women serve in the army in Israel—indeed the army is fond of pointing out how much women have contributed to defense in Israel—but there

is one absolute rule: women do not get put into combat positions. They don't patrol active borders, they don't fight.

Who wants to fight? No one. Not my son who sings in a rock group variations of the peace songs he learned in kindergarten, not my daughter who has been known to join the Women in Black demonstrating for peace on Friday afternoons, not my husband or my friends or anyone else I know in Israel. War has always been considered a defensive activity, one that should be engaged in only under duress, and certainly not for the purposes of heroism. Stealing my daughter's words, I wrote this poem about her going into the army:

#### MOBILIZATION

##### I

A month before mobilization  
my daughter lies beside me and talks  
the way she did at naptime  
when she was three.

When I groan I need to sleep  
she pats my stomach  
and sings the tuneless lullaby  
my mother sang to me:

Like blinds my eyes  
flash open: How  
does she know it? She laughs, chattering  
in that tongue she never learned.

##### II

The night before her mobilization  
friends come to say goodbye  
as if she were embarking on a long journey.

But there is only a kitbag, 3 pairs  
of socks, long underwear  
and a funny doll

God knows  
where she will hide.

##### III

"Women belong  
in the same jobs as men,"  
she retorts when the Rabbi on TV  
calls for a demobilization of all women  
from the army. Then "Men belong  
in the same jobs as women,  
in their homes, in the kitchen,  
in safe places  
away from the borders."

There is a power granted to those who are in a position to defend: they feel that they have some choice in what will happen to them, that they are not entirely victims. The concept of "victimization" is very sensitive, particularly to survivors of the Holocaust. The terrible helplessness of the victims of the Holocaust has bequeathed a general fear of being defenseless. Perhaps also because of this Israelis were so affected by the rumors of chemical warheads on the SCUDs bearing the same gas as was used in Auschwitz. Even when the action is an unhappy compromise, the possibility of acting in itself alters the perception of victimization.

In this context, the position of women is, regrettably, merely a supportive one. This support can manifest itself in many ways. From age eighteen to twenty women can, for example, be tank instructors in the army, teach military tactics and other functions. But once out of the army, their chief role in the defense of their country is to support emotionally and physically the regular soldiers and their male counterparts whose duty it is—until the age of 54—to serve one month each year in the reserves. This of course creates a unique position for women in society—where the only empowerment is compliant support.

But in the Gulf War, this situation was very different. Not because women had control but because no one had any power. I still can find no words to accurately describe the feeling of total powerlessness that possessed all people—men and women, Arab and Israeli—living in Israel during the nights of the SCUDs. I wrote a poem, inspired by a line from the social philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

"Fear and I Were Born Twins"

-T. Hobbes

And mother dressed us the same  
so no one could tell us apart

And some days I come out  
and some days she  
and some days both of us walk  
together so close we can change  
places without missing  
a step  
and I become my fear  
and fear is me

The summer after the war I was invited—along with some other Israeli and Arab writers—to an Arab village north of Haifa. The moderator opened the evening by explaining to the audience that we had been invited to read poetry about coexistence. I realized I had not been sufficiently informed of the purpose of the evening, and had no poem on hand to read on that subject. As that revelation dawned, I heard my name being called out to read, and I grabbed my nearest poem. It was apparently inappropriate—a poem about an evening in Tel Aviv during the Gulf War, called "Custom."

Tonight we wait for the alarm.  
Who wants to get caught in the shower  
or the toilet or in the middle of love?  
You say, "I'll wash my hair after  
the attack" and I decide to put off  
lacquering my nails, read  
short poems about decadence instead  
into the night—And it doesn't come—  
And we take off our shoes and lie down  
fully clothed, alert, prepared  
for the sudden race to the shelter.  
Even towards morning while the radio clock

shines out 3 and 4, illuminating  
the passing minutes, we wait,  
remember the shock of the 7:00 a.m. surprise.

Although I try to weary us with chapters from Jeremiah,  
"I need my nightly missile," you say, "to fall asleep."

Afterward, two very noble-sounding poems were read in Arabic—I recognized the words for "politics," "Saddam," "peace." The poems dealt with large issues, with changing the world, with the desire that war would never again control our lives. The audience responded enthusiastically, discussing in detail the issues and the form of the Arabic poems, while my poor little English verse drew not a single comment. I remember sinking deeper and deeper into my chair on the dais, wishing I had not appeared so trivial before an audience so politically involved, fearing I had shamed my people and my sex. Perhaps my discomfort showed and generated some sympathy. For suddenly, near the end of the discussion, a man wearing a kaffiyah raised his hand and asked to comment. He had listened with enthusiasm, he said, to all the poems, but could understand most immediately the one I had read. "The most important thing we all understood and shared this winter was that feeling that we could only await our fates."

We were all equal during that war—Arab, Jew, fathers, mothers, daughters, sons. No one could predict what would happen, no one had privileged information, no one could protect another, no one could even be sure about the best methods to follow for self-protection. Everyone was in the position women had held for the past forty-five years.

This situation came upon us all at once. During the autumn of 1990, when the possibility of war seemed as unreal as sudden death in the midst of a healthy life, we thought as little about provisions for the future as a person who takes out life insurance. We were told to seal off one room of the house, to designate that the "Safe Room." Our family bought plastic sheeting and taped it over the kitchen window with masking tape, and prepared the door for sealing. We stood in line for our gas masks and watched a demonstration of injecting atropine in the event of poison gas. We felt prepared, knowledgeable, in control.

A few days after the SCUDs began, however, all orientation was lost. It was no longer clear that we were even in the right place. What if there were no

chemical warheads and we were in greater danger of explosion than gas? We were in a double-bind, where either decision would be wrong. I wrote this poem:

CIVIL DEFENSE-JANUARY 1991

Here is your family  
gas mask kit. It will do  
good only with  
the right gas. Of course,  
with the other gas—  
that infiltrates the skin—  
you must stay inside  
the nearest third story  
flat you can seal. You  
don't want to go too high,  
however, in case  
of conventional  
bombs. Because gas  
is heavy, it will invade  
the lower  
floors and shelters.  
But if gas and bombs are used together,  
you have what we define as  
a problem.

In response to the situation, we tried to define new rules. Our family developed unwritten laws like (1) try to be home by six when the first SCUD could fall; (2) make plans for the evening only if there has already been an attack; (3) never undress after 6 p.m. But these were rules of impotence, and many people chafed at such imperatives.

The passivity contributed to the general malaise. Men were suddenly in the situation that women had always lived with—unable to defend themselves, forced into inactivity “for their own good,” and threatened constantly with invasion of their most private and holy sanctuary, their home.

The results were very strange. While mothers who work (by far the majority of mothers in Israel) felt even more burdened by the constant threat of

schools closing mid-day, they also found that the significance of their role as mother had increased greatly.

Many women found that the functions they had always fulfilled—cooking, caring for the home, bringing together the family—were suddenly prized, providing a measure of comfort that had been taken for granted in years past. The concern that women traditionally display towards their family's whereabouts and activities was now appreciated. A Tel Aviv woman calling her boyfriend “just to see if he was all right” would not be considered too pushy. A mother asking her soldier son to let her know where he would be sleeping would not be shrugged off.

Many men, on the other hand, felt impotent—literally. There were countless discussions in the newspapers about sex and SCUDs. The technical problems of having sex despite the possibility of a violent interruption were deliberated at length. The symbolic impotence was also clear:

XVII

THE MOTHER OF ALL WARS

Oedipus tries to get to  
the heart of all wombs  
with 400 pound missiles  
and we sit here, breathless  
waiting for the next  
thrust

XVIII

“No, no sex,” Eyal says. What man  
can compete? This missile  
gives it to all of us at once.  
A war with no heroes, every man  
for himself, every woman  
fearing her own life,  
everyone divided  
from the others,  
and with so many faulty options—  
everyone divided against themselves.

Even jerking off  
can't do it.

The balance had been altered, even though the roles had remained the same: the techniques women generally use to cope with their lives were suddenly suitable and those of the men were inappropriate and demeaning.

Some men found themselves trying to reclaim their position as providers and protectors whatever the consequences. I recorded one typical conversation in a poem:

XXII

Mike and his wife can't stop  
fighting. Why does she leave  
him every night to sleep  
in some distant village?  
Why can't she trust her husband  
to protect her?

Our phone conversation is interrupted by a siren.  
Two hours later, back in place, he calls to gloat:  
the missile fell near her village.

After the war, I tried to find out from fellow poets whether their work had been affected either by the war or the alterations in their lives, or whether they were registering a change of attitude in general. At first I was told that it was too early, and then later that poems about the war were no longer relevant. After all, there are so many other events here to raise the panic level, to focus immediate and undivided attention.

But it seems to me that the universal sense of enforced passivity during the Gulf crisis—a passivity usually reserved for women during war—can also be the means for furthering some understanding and perhaps even the prospect of peace in this area.

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