A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS: MY FEMINIST JOURNEY INTO HEBREW LITERATURE

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In the early 1980s when I began to publish my articles on women in Hebrew fiction, there were no models I could follow nor was there a women’s caucus, nor a Jewish or Israeli feminist scholarly community I could draw on for support and inspiration. I was aware of several articles in sociology on Israeli women, and of a growing critical consciousness in feminist activist pockets in Israel. Moving from the structuralist approaches I used in my work on S.Y. Agnon to the political and postmodern perspectives of feminist criticism was quite a leap for me. As a newly hired Assistant Professor at the University of Texas in Austin, I was invited to offer perspectives on Hebrew literature at the (Postmodern) Feminist Forum, and needless to say, I had to create and invent an approach to Hebrew literature, I had to invent a context. I could not explain how my approach “differed” or “superceded” or “contributed” to other feminist theories in Hebrew literature. At the time, there were none. There were none. Presenting my papers at the Association of Jewish Studies on hegemonic masculinities in Hebrew fiction was a daunting task in the early 1980s. There was much confusion and resentment in the audience, and several leading critics were openly hostile. The cold shoulder treatment continued even after the publication of my book, Israeli Mythogynies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction (1987). Though work on women’s writing in modern Hebrew literature evolved over the years, resulting in impressive analyses and theoretical forays, little if anything has been done so far to trace the brief history of this field and take note of the ways in which the earlier work by feminist critics paved the way to the present. Male “feminists” who have adopted feminism as a theory in the early and mid 1990s (Dan Miron, Michael Gluzman, Hanan Hever) have elaborated the approach I pioneered without explicitly offering recognition or acknowledgment. My feminist interpretation of Amalia Kahana-Carmon was absorbed into a growing body of work on women authors in Israel. It is my argument that a historical awareness of the pioneering beginnings of feminism in Hebrew literature is crucial if we want to map a trajectory for a radical transformation of the field, rather than “add women and stir.” A historical perspective on the early days of feminism in Hebrew literature will help us evaluate how far feminism has come in modern Hebrew literature, and how much more needs to be done.