



THE BLOGS

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FEATURED POST

Drawing a blank: On despair and hope at the ballot

Israelis must resist apathy to fight the creeping exclusion of women and narrowing vision of Jewish life in this country



Don't give in to the impulse to cast a blank ballot.

For many Israelis, an insistence on optimism and hope in the political system at the moment feels simply naive. The political climate feels particularly bleak in light of Israeli leaders' failure to form a government within the time allotted by law, resulting in a new set of elections in September. And the ultimate symbol of this exasperation is the blank ballot. An unmarked white slip inserted into the ballot box automatically counts as an additional vote for the winning party. But beyond the technical meaning, the white slip has become a symbol of quasi-rebellion, borne of frustration but resulting in no meaningful outcome.

This symbolic blank paper has long baffled me, striking me as a proclamation about as pointless as a sullen teenager's slammed door. And yet, the sentiments behind the "white slip" appear better understood these days. I too struggle to muster the hope for true progress in our society. And yet, I refuse to allow the severity of the political climate to silence me. When despair looms, *we must be the hope.*

We are faced with a situation in which the choice “not to get political” is no longer on the table — our very existence as women, as Israelis, as Jews, is disputed and negotiated at every corner of the public sphere. Elections until now have focused on issues of security, but safety also includes being able to walk freely in the streets of Israel without anxiety about appearing as a hazard to the public’s standards of “modesty.”

Recently, a teenage girl was removed from a public bus for wearing shorts in the summertime. What frustrates me more than the case itself is the denial I hear in reaction — “Okay, fine, but that only happens on ‘their’ bus lines, the Haredi ones, and it’s just the way things are.” Such an attitude essentially relinquishes the situation of the public sphere to the hands of the minority, extreme forces. After all, Egged is a *public* transportation company, regardless of the populations that most frequently utilize particular routes. Once we accept these everyday occurrences, we are complicit in the escalation of women’s exclusion and erasure.

Gradually, the situation has transformed such that there is scarcely a place of refuge to escape this creeping phenomenon of exclusion of women and a narrowing vision of Jewish life in Israel. We already know that any possibility of remaining safely confined to one’s “*daled amot*,” one’s immediate quadrant of private life, is a deluded fantasy. We are all connected and affected by the terms of our shared society. Indifference now will cost us exponentially later.

The despair permeating Israeli discourse is understandable. However, it is a luxury we simply can no longer afford to indulge. Our commitment to equality must outweigh our sense of hopelessness — instead of “accepting what we cannot change,” we must change what we refuse to accept.

The temptation of the “blank slip” pervades beyond the ballot. We are each faced with the challenge of resisting the pull toward apathy and must insist on the value of our voices being heard. When we are complacent, whether through

inserting a blank ballot, ignoring current events, or sheltering ourselves from the world beyond our front doors, we are forfeiting our power and declaring our submission to the “way things are.” On the converse, when we refuse to let despair dictate our next steps, we cast a vote for progress, for a society in which upward change is always possible. And we must be the change.



(Danielle Shitrit photography)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yochi Rapoport is the executive director of Women of the Wall. She was born and raised in the Orthodox environment of the Safed Old City. Upon turning 18, Yochi joined the IDF and served as a commander in a course for Judaism and Zionism for soldiers who aren't Jewish and new immigrants. Following her service, she studied Political Science and Middle Eastern studies at Bar Ilan University, and then served as an executive assistant at an Israeli news agency. Realizing she wanted to be a part of something more meaningful, she happily started working for Women of the Wall in 2016, as director of Education and Community Outreach. Today, Yochi lives in Jerusalem with her husband and daughter, where they live an open-minded and feminist Orthodox lifestyle.