



Wonder Woman and the Jews: *Exploring Zionist Female Role Models*

Photos by Isaacs Skidmore

Jewish history has been full of strong, dynamic and powerful women. From Miriam the prophetess, to Deborah the Judge, to Queen Esther in biblical times; Hannah Senesh, Henrietta Szold, Sarah Schenirer and Golda Meir in more modern history; women have played a profound role in charting the course of Jewish history and destiny.

Today we still have strong women leading the way in Israel and internationally, waving the flag as proud Feminists and Zionists. For example, in popular culture Rita (singer) and Gal Gadot (actress) are two key Israeli women who have broken into international consciousness as leaders in their fields. Shachar Pe'er (Tennis), Linoy Ashram (Rhythmic Gymnastics), and Yarden Gerbi (Judo) are Israeli female sports stars that have represented their country wearing the Star of David with pride and honor.

What challenges did these role models face? How would you deal with the situations they faced? How are our lives today influenced by the actions of those who came before us?

This activity was designed to help you explore what it means to be a proud Zionist Feminist as a dynamic group discussion and debate on the topic Zionist female role models, appropriate for teenagers and older.

RUN THE ACTIVITY:

Step 1:

Divide participants into groups, either with 4-6 people per group, and each person chooses a female personality or 4-6 groups, where EACH group chooses ONE personality

Step 2:

Print and distribute the list of Women of Israel below as well as paper and pencils/pens so they can document their conclusions at the end of the discussion.

Step 3:

Each group should answer the questions provided to open up discussion among the participants.

Step 4:

All the groups come together at the end to discuss the conclusions of the individual group.

CHOOSE THE FEMALE ROLE MODEL THAT SPEAKS TO YOU THE MOST:

MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS - THE DECISIVE DECISION MAKER

Miriam, Moses's sister first appears in the Torah in the Book of Shemot. She is sent to watch over Moses as he is put into the protective basket and placed in the Nile. The next time we meet Miriam, she leads the Israelite women in song and dance after the Jews successfully cross the Red Sea whilst fleeing from the Egyptians. Miriam is a constant presence throughout the 40 years that the Jews are in the desert. It is in her merit that the Jews have a constant source of water during this time.

Miriam is a fearless and courageous figure in the bible, central to the Israelites survival through her provision of water. Consequently, even when she is punished after talking slanderously about her brother Moses, the whole encampment of Israel waits for her leprosy to heal until they continued on their journey.

DEBORAH THE JUDGE - THE WISE

According to the Book of Judges chapters 4 and 5, Deborah was a prophet and the fourth Judge of pre-monarchic Israel and the only female judge mentioned in the Bible. She rendered her judgments beneath a date palm tree between Ramah in Benjamin and Bethel in the land of Ephraim. As Deborah prophesied, a battle is fought (led by Barak head of the army) against Sisera who is completely defeated. As a result a victory hymn is sung "The Song of Deborah" by Deborah and Barak. Though it is not uncommon to read a victory hymn in the Bible, the Song of Deborah stands out as unique in that it is a hymn that celebrates a military victory helped by two women: Deborah and Yael.

Deborah is an example of female leadership that was respected by all, due to the value her wisdom brought to the community,

QUEEN ESTHER - THE BRAVE

Queen Esther is the archetypal Jewish heroine. We trace her growth from a shy young girl being raised by her uncle, to queen of the Persian Empire and in a position to save her people from ultimate destruction. Esther understands her unique position and despite fear and trepidation uses her position to the benefit of her people. She displays strength, courage and uses her femininity for divine purposes.

Queen Esther is not described as particularly brilliant or talented. She is the example of a regular woman who changed the world through the skills of a regular person - her big heart, female intuition and willingness to put the safety of her people above her personal safety and convenience. She was brave, not because she was fearless but because she was fearful and took the necessary actions despite the risks involved.

HANNAH SENESH - THE PIONEER AND RISK-TAKER

Hannah Senesh was a poet and Special Operations Executive (SOE) paratrooper during the Second World War. She was one of 37 Jewish parachutists of Mandate Palestine, who was parachuted by the British Army into Yugoslavia during the Second World War to assist in the rescue of Hungarian Jews about to be deported to the German death camp at Auschwitz. Senesh was arrested at the Hungarian border, then imprisoned and tortured, but refused to reveal details of her mission. She was eventually tried and executed by firing squad. She is regarded as a national heroine in Israel, where her poetry is widely known and streets are named in her honor.

Her willingness to take on a role usual filled by men and ability to withstand the same consequences (capture and torture) makes her an example of female determination and willpower.

HENRIETTA SZOLD - THE VISIONARY

Henrietta was a U.S. Jewish Zionist leader and founder of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. In 1942, she co-founded Ihud, a political party in Mandatory Palestine dedicated to a binational solution. Henrietta Szold was born in Baltimore, Maryland. She was the eldest of eight daughters. In 1877, she graduated from Western High School. For fifteen years she taught at Miss Adam's School and Oheb Shalom religious school, and gave Bible and history courses for adults. Highly educated in Jewish studies, she furthered her own education by attending public lectures at Johns Hopkins University and the Peabody Institute. Szold established the first American night school to provide English language instruction and vocational skills to Russian Jewish immigrants in Baltimore. Beginning in 1893, she worked as the first editor for the Jewish Publication Society, a position she maintained for over 23 years. The sole woman at the JPS, Szold's duties included the translation of a dozen works, writing articles of her own, editing the books, and overseeing the publication schedule. In 1899 she took on the lion's share of producing the first American Jewish Year Book, of which she was sole editor from 1904 to 1908." She also collaborated in the compilation of the Jewish Encyclopedia.

In 1902, Szold took classes in advanced Jewish studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, However, its rabbinic school was for men only. Szold begged the school's president, Solomon Schechter, to allow her to study, he did only with the provision that she not seek ordination. Szold did well at the seminary, earning the respect from other students and faculty alike. Her commitment to Zionism was heightened by a trip to Palestine in 1909. She founded Hadassah in 1912 and served as its president until 1926. In 1933 she immigrated to Palestine and helped run Youth Aliyah, an organization that rescued 30,000 Jewish children from Nazi Europe. The impact of her work is lives on to this day.

SARAH SCHENIRER - THE EDUCATOR

Sarah Shenirer was a pioneer of Jewish education for girls and began to change the way women were perceived in Orthodox Judaism. In 1917, she founded the Bais Yaakov school network in Poland. Sarah Schenirer was born into an influential rabbinic family in Krakow, Poland on July 15, 1883. Her father provided her with religious texts that he had translated into Yiddish. In her memoirs, she describes herself as the unassuming and withdrawn daughter of Belzer Hasidic parents. She was intelligent and had a strong desire to learn, and was envious of her brothers' opportunity to learn and interpret the Torah. Her friends teased her for her desire to learn the Torah and called her "the little pious one". She attended elementary school for eight years. She then became a seamstress. Schenirer would write later in life:

"And as we pass through the days before the High Holy Days...fathers and sons travel, and thus they are drawn to Ger, to Belz, to Alexander, to Bobov, to all those places that had been made citadels of conceited religious life, dominated by the figure of the rebbe's personality. And we stay at home, the wives, daughters, and the little ones. We have an empty festival. It is bare of Jewish intellectual content.

The women have never learned anything about the spiritual meaning that is concentrated within a Jewish festival. The mother goes to the synagogue, but the services echo faintly into the fenced and boarded-off women's galleries. There is much crying by elderly women. The young girls look at them as though they belong to a different century. Youth and the desire to live a full life shoot up violently in the strong-willed young personalities. Outside the synagogues, the young girls stay chattering; they walk away from the synagogue where their mothers pour out their vague and heavy feelings. They leave behind them the wailing of the older generation and follow the urge for freedom and self-expression. Further and further from the synagogue they go, further away, to the dancing, tempting light of a fleeting joy.

GOLDA MEIR - THE PRIME MINISTER

Golda Meir was born in Kiev (present day Ukraine) and grew up in Milwaukee, USA. As a highschool student she was already a leader and an activist he organised a fundraiser to pay for her classmates' textbooks. After forming the American Young Sisters Society, she rented a hall and scheduled a public meeting for the event. She went on to graduate as valedictorian of her class. On March 17, 1969 Golda Meir became the fourth Prime Minister of Israel, as well as the fourth woman in the world to become a country's elected leader. She was often portrayed as the "strong-willed, straight-talking, grey-bunned grandmother of the Jewish people". Former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion used to call Meir "the best man in the government", a statement that sounds terribly sexist today but at the time was meant as a compliment and a reflection on her strong character.

Golda was also an Israeli teacher, kibbutznik, stateswoman, politician. Among her best known statements are important gems of wisdom:

About sexual assault:

When there was an outbreak in assaults against women at night, a minister in the cabinet suggested a curfew to keep women in after dark. "But it's the men who are attacking the women," Golda responded. "If there's to be a curfew, let the men stay at home, not the women."

About peace:

"We will have peace when the Arabs love their children more than they hate us [Jews]"

And:

"When peace comes we will perhaps in time be able to forgive the Arabs for killing our sons, but it will be harder for us to forgive them for having forced us to kill their sons."

About life:

"Trust yourself. Create the kind of self that you will be happy to live with all your life. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny, inner sparks of possibility into flames of achievement."

SARAH AARONSON - THE REVOLUTIONARY

"Believe me I no longer have the strength to suffer and it would be better for me to kill myself than to be tortured under their bloodied hands...if we do not remember, you should [illegible]. As heroes we died and did not confess. ... I aspired for my people and for my people's well-being, and if my people is base—so be it." These fragments from the 1917 suicide note of Sarah Aaronsohn, nationalist activist, coordinator and later local leader of the Jewish pro-British underground "Nili" (established to liberate Palestine from Ottoman rule), represent a new interpretation of the role of women within the national project of resettlement and regeneration in Palestine after 1881.

Sarah Aaronsohn was born on January 5, 1890, in Zichron Ya'akov on Mount Carmel. The Aaronsohns became one of the colony's most prominent families, not least because of the career and reputation of Aaron (1876–1919), Sarah's eldest brother and mentor, a world-famous agronomist and botanist.

Sarah exemplified a new kind of woman. She became an accomplished rider, knew how to shoot and often dressed in men's clothing. Through her brother's encouragement she became fluent in Hebrew, Yiddish, Turkish and French, had

reasonable command of Arabic and taught herself English.

In November 1915 Sarah joined the underground. From at least the end of 1916 until her capture and death in October 1917 she coordinated and virtually conducted its activities in Palestine and the Lebanon area, handling Nili's core of about forty agents, its larger circle of supporters and informers and the organization's finances. She decoded and sifted information, encoded it and communicated with British intelligence headquarters in Cairo, making contact from the Atlit station with the British warship Managam. She also supervised the transmission by Nili of Jewish American money converted to gold to aid the Jewish population, which was suffering destitution, hunger and dislocation. In addition she liaised with the Turkish authorities (who were unaware of the underground until late 1917), the increasingly hostile community of her native colony and the formal leadership of the Yishuv which distanced itself from the organization. Though Hebrew sources compiled during the aftermath of the war present her leadership as familial, drawing on her position as the sister of the powerful Aaron Aaronsohn, British and Turkish intelligence sources never regarded her as a strong man's aid and proxy. She refused the advice of British intelligence to leave Palestine by sea to save herself, remained in Zikhron after Turkish intelligence uncovered Nili's activities, dispersed the network and was arrested on October 1, 1917. During rigorous interrogation and torture, she did not disclose any information. Having learnt that she would be transferred to Damascus prison and fearing she would break down, Sarah committed suicide, using a pistol hidden in the washroom in a wing in her parental home which Aaron occupied. She lay dying for nearly four days before expiring on October 10, 1917.

SHACHAR PE'ER - THE ATHLETE

Shachar is a retired Israeli professional tennis player. Pe'er has won five singles and three doubles titles on the WTA tour, as well as four singles and three doubles titles on the ITF tour in her career. On 31 January 2011, she reached her best singles ranking of world number 11. On 12 May 2008, she peaked at world number 14 in the doubles rankings. Pe'er is widely regarded as the most successful Israeli female tennis player in history, having twice reached a Grand Slam quarterfinal in singles and appearing in the doubles final of the 2008 Australian Open with Victoria Azarenka of Belarus. Playing for Israel at the Fed Cup, Pe'er has a win-loss record of 39–28.

At the age of 19, Pe'er was conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces. When not abroad participating in tennis tournaments, she spent her mornings working as an administrative secretary for the IDF, and her afternoons practicing tennis.

LINOY ASHRAM - THE RISING CHAMPION

Linoy is an Israeli rhythmic gymnast, and the most decorated Israeli gymnast in history, having earned medals in all 4 rhythmic events - ball, hoop, clubs, and ribbon - as well as several all-around titles. Since 2015, she has won 25 medals in international competitions, including 12 at the World Championships. This significantly raised Israel's overall medal count; outside of Linoy, Israel had won a total of 3 World Championship medals throughout history.

In 2017, in addition to winning all 5 gold medals in rhythmic gymnastics at the Maccabiah Games (not included in the international medal total above), Linoy made history by being the first Israeli gymnast to earn an all-around title at the World Championships. Unsurprisingly, she was also given the title of 2017 Israeli Sportswoman of the Year.

In 2019, she won her 3rd consecutive all-around World Championship title and secured a place to compete at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. She is one of the global favorites to medal in the sport, and one of Israel's favorites to medal at the Games as a whole.

When she was 18, Linoy was drafted into the IDF, where she serves as a secretary when she is not training or competing.

GAL GADOT - THE REAL-LIFE WONDER WOMAN

Gal Gadot is an Israeli actress and model. She is primarily known for portraying Wonder Woman in the DC Extended Universe, starting with *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), and then the solo film *Wonder Woman* and the ensemble *Justice League* (both 2017), and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020).

Gadot was born and raised in Israel. At age 18 she was crowned Miss Israel 2004. She then served two years in the Israel Defense Forces as a combat instructor. She began studying for a law degree, but decided to put it aside when she fell in love with acting. Her big screen debut came in 2009 with a role in *Fast & Furious*, Gisele, which she reprised in the next two of the franchise's films (as well as doing all her own stunts - she has openly credited her IDF service for helping her secure the role). She also "revisited" the role while voicing the role of Shank, who was heavily influenced by Gisele, in Disney's animated *Wreck-it Ralph 2: Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). But it was her 2016 big-screen portrayal of Wonder Woman that rocketed her to superstardom. Gal Gadot instantly became an icon for women, Israelis and fans around the world.

Gal's success and her handling of fame makes her a role model, but it is the way she represents the Nation of Israel that makes her a hero. While other Israelis have felt it necessary to minimize their Judaism and/or connection to Israel, Gal presents her complete identity, without hiding who she is and where she comes from. Instead, she remains down-to-earth, naturally and unapologetically Israeli. In doing this she conveys the message that Israelis are not an "issue" but rather real people.

By being her true self, in an honest and natural way, Gal has done the extraordinary – captured the hearts and minds of people around the world, shown Israelis as they really are and made the people of Israel very proud.

DISCUSSION:

Read the introduction about your selected Zionist woman as a group. Consider together the time period they lived in and the unique circumstances that might be an influence on their self-image. Try to put yourself in their place, imagining what it was like to live their life and answer the following questions:

Suggestion:

Write down the answers to the questions so that they will be easier to discuss later as a group.

Each individual can write down his or her own answers or one person can write down the answers for the entire group.

1. How have you expressed your Jewish identity?
2. What role does the concept of Israel play in your life? A "people," a nation, a state, or something else entirely?
3. How have you expressed your femininity in your life? Would you define yourself as a feminist?
4. How have Israel, feminism, and/or Zionism influenced your life? Which element of your identity most stands out as a key motivator for your success?
5. Has society during your lifetime appreciated your impact in each of these areas?

Think about the answers your personality have given.

Now try to answer the same questions as YOURSELF, from your perspective today.

Next, explore these next questions as a meaningful conclusion to the discussion:

- How are the answers you gave from the perspective of the female Zionist similar to the answers you gave from your personal perspective? What makes them different?
- Think of someone who might offer a completely different set of responses. Who is it? What would their answers be?
- How might the differences in the answers you've shared reflect the changing relationship of Jewish women in society? How do you think this might change in the future?
- What are some challenges, expectations and/or benefits to being a female "representative" of Israel?

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

After everyone has presented, review the following questions together:

- What did this activity teach you? What is something you learned and will remember?
- How does this information empower you to counter lies about Israel and/or Zionism?
- Zionism and feminism have at various points been considered incompatible (for example, the banning of Israeli flags at women's marches). Do you agree or disagree? How does what you learned today support your argument?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Being a Zionist and a feminist can be either a source of pride or a source of conflict, depending on how you look at it. We hope this activity helped you be proud of these women, and be a more ZionProud feminist yourself.

NEXT STEPS

Learn more about the important role of women in Israel's history and society with our other [Zionism & Feminism](#) resources. Run the [Intersecting Identities](#) activity to continue the discussion of the interaction of Zionism with various aspects of your identity.

ABOUT THE ISRAEL FOREVER FOUNDATION - YOUR HOME FOR ISRAEL ENGAGEMENT

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We hope you have enjoyed using this resource. Please take a minute to fill out our [evaluation form](#) and help us be as effective as possible in providing the resources and tools you need to make the personal Israel connection come to life, whatever the age, wherever you are in the world.