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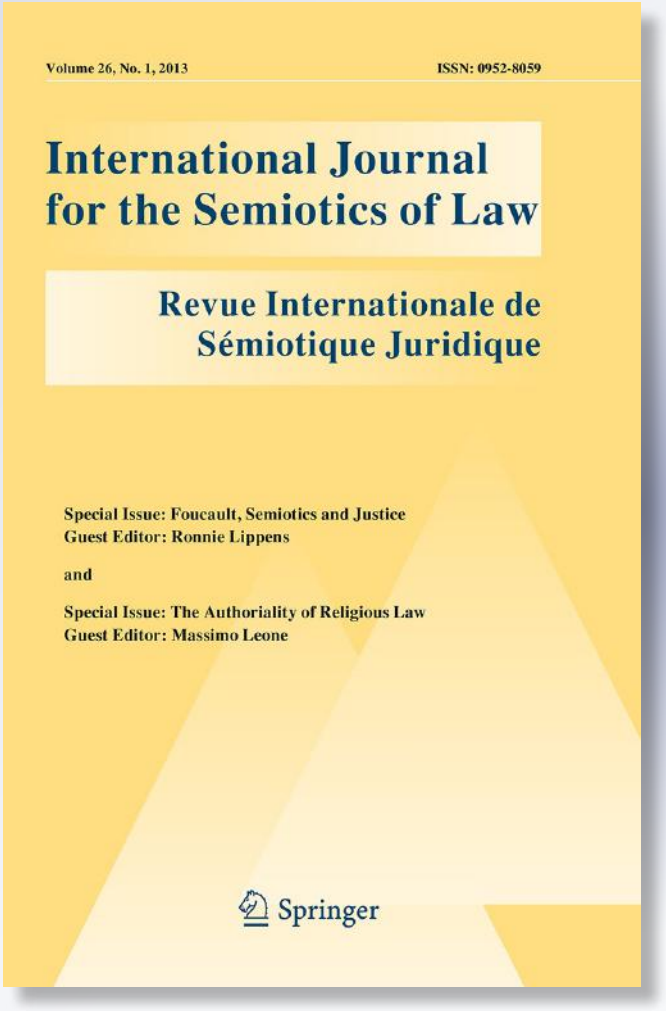

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Contesting Religious Authoriality: The Immanuel "Beis-Yaakov" School Segregation Case

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Abstract This paper will focus on two textual articulations that emerged in the Immanuel "Beis-Yaakov" school segregation case. The first is a declaration of the Admor from Slonim that was published when the ultra-Orthodox fathers who refused to send their daughters to an integrated school were imprisoned. The second is a letter to the Supreme Court that was written by an Ashkenazi mother whose daughter attended the "Beis Yaakov" school. A semiotic reading of the articulations reveals several opposing characteristics. The Admor's audience is determined by his choices of medium and rhetoric, which guarantee hegemonic reading, corresponding with the textual code of his interpretive community. The letter, on the other hand, represents an attempt to break through communal borders, and therefore its writer cannot expect hegemonic reading. Yet, she makes a considerable effort to employ signifiers denoting her ultra-Orthodox affiliation. In light of the hindrances that usually prevent ultra-Orthodox women from contesting the authority of the community, the letter presents a rare feminine voice, which is vigorous enough to attempt subverting under the authoriality of the Admor, and might have a long run affect on the quest for equality.

Keywords Education law · Education policy · Equality · Religion · Ultra-Orthodox · Israel

Shulamit Almog and Lotem Perry-Hazan contributed equally.

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1 Introduction

The Immanuel "Beis-Yaakov" affair is an Israeli cause célèbre. Since 2007, the "Beis Yaakov" ultra-Orthodox school for girls in the city of Immanuel practices ethnic segregation between *Ashkenazi* (Jews originated from Europe) girls and *Sephardic* (Jews originated from North-African or Arabic countries) girls. The segregation in the "Beis Yaakov" School was dictated by a decision of Rabbi Samuel Berzovski a.k.a. "*Admor from Slonim*"[1]—the spiritual leader of the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi group that lives in Immanuel (*hereinafter*: the Admor). In 2009, the school policies were examined by the Israeli Supreme Court of Justice that declared the practice of segregation illegal [21]. After 9 months, following the refusal of the ultra-Orthodox parents whose daughters attended the Ashkenazi track to follow the judgment and to send their daughters to an integrated school, the court ordered to imprison them.

Our paper will focus on two textual articulations that emblemize the gist of the conflict. The first is a declaration of the Admor that was published when the ultra-Orthodox fathers who refused to follow the judgment were in prison. The second is a letter to the Supreme Court that was written by an Ashkenazi mother whose daughter attended the "Beis Yaakov" school.

The next two sections will shortly provide a background in regard to the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel and the Immanuel "Beis Yaakov" case. The fourth section will present the two articulations—the declaration and the letter—and describe their content, their visual representation, and their medium. In the following section we will discuss and analyze the articulations as textual codes. We will contend that the Admor, who ensured his audience identities, can expect that his declaration will be met with hegemonic reading. His rhetoric is juxtaposed with the medium chosen and uses the textual code of his interpretive community. The letter, on the other hand, was written to a much broader audience. The woman who wrote it is attempting to break through the borders that isolate her community and therefore she cannot expect "hegemonic reading". Yet, she makes a considerable effort to employ rhetoric that includes signifiers denoting her basic ultra-Orthodox affiliation. We will conclude by suggesting that in light of the hindrances that usually prevent ultra-Orthodox women from contesting the authority of the community the letter presents a rare feminine voice, which is vigorous enough to attempt subverting under the authoriality of the Admor, and might have a long run affect on the quest for equality.

2 The Ultra-Orthodox Community in Israel

The ultra-Orthodox community in Israel, which is eight to ten percents of the Israeli population [50, p. 7] has unique characteristics, which are represented in various aspects of the community members' worldview and daily lives [9, pp. 224, 227].

[1] "Admor" is a Hebrew acronym for "our master, our teacher, and our rabbi". Admor is a leader of a Hasidic court. He is accepted as such by dint of his descent from a dynasty of previous Admors. Hasidism has never been a movement in the modern sense of having a centralized organization. It is essentially a collective term for a great variety of groups and subgroups that took shape over the centuries. Since the nineteenth century, Hasidic groups have been identified with the dynasties to which their leaders belong, and are generally designated by the names of the East European towns where the courts of those dynasties were established or first became known. The leadership of the dynastic Admor is still the salient characteristic of all Hasidic groups and communities (with the exception of Bratslav Hasidism). *See*: Assaf [4]. *See further*: Rabinowicz [44].

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One of the basic principles of the ultra-Orthodox worldview is the subjection to the authority of spiritual leaders, which are called *Gdoilim* or *Gdoley Hatorah*,[2] to interpret the Torah and indicate what the *Halacha* denotes in any given issue [8, pp. 41, 56]. According to the ultra-Orthodox perception, all community members are supposed to unquestionably obey the guidance of the *Gdoilim*. A person who does not comply is exposed to ostracism threats, and even to physical violence [37, p. 531].[3]

Another principle that characterizes the ultra-Orthodox community is an essentialist perception which takes for granted certain fundamental differences between groups of people [8, pp. 64–65]. According to this perception, there are differences between men and women,[4] which prevent women from participating in the most prestigious public activity—studying Torah[5] or from becoming spiritual or political leaders. This perception also justifies the segregation of women in synagogues, in social events, and even in public buses that are operated in ultra-Orthodox zones.[6]

The essentialist perception also applies to differences between ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews and ultra-Orthodox Sephardic Jews [52, p. 16]. The ultra-Orthodox community is constituted of diverse groups and sub-groups, which are sometimes based on the ethnic origin of their members. The interrelations between the different groups and sub-groups are complicated and not entirely coherent or consistent [9, p. 276]. The ultra-Orthodox Sephardic group is a relatively new category, which was constituted in order to improve the social status of Israeli Sephardic people and develop their identity and self-respect [15]. Their joining to the ultra-Orthodox community was a result of continuous marginalization by the Israeli society [27, p. 214; [46], p. 101].[7] However, ultra-Orthodox Sephardic people were not accepted as equals within ultra-Orthodox society although they fully adopted the norms and behavior of the Ashkenazi world of Torah [36, p. 10; [52], p. 16].

One of the most prominent manifestations of the Ashkenazi approach towards the ultra-Orthodox Sephardis is a discrimination against ultra-Orthodox Sephardic students in ultra-Orthodox schools.[8] Although there are ultra-Orthodox Sephardic schools that were established by *Shas*, the party that represents the ultra-Orthodox Sephardic people in the Israeli Knesset, many ultra-Orthodox Sephardic families prefer to send their children to the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi schools [32, p. 140].

[2] The term derives from the Hebrew word "Gado" which means big. It denotes prominent figures in the ultra-Orthodox world.

[3] Some ultra-Orthodox sects have "Chastity Guards", which confront ultra-Orthodox people who are suspected as too promiscuous. *See*: CC 226/08 [12]. In this case the defandent was convicted of offenses involving violent behaviour and blackmailing during his activity in the "Chastity Guards" organization. The verdict notes as follows:

Among the goals of the organization is to fight phenomena of indiscency, according to the view of its members … In order to fulfill its goals, the "Chastity Guards" organization also uses threats and violence [id., para. 2, our translation S.A. and L.PH]. *See also* Sella [47]; Liss [35].

[4] *See further*: Kehat [31, pp. 26–30].

[5] *See further:* Mautner [38].

[6] *See further:* Greenfield [18].

[7] For a comprehensive research of the Shas movement, which represents the Israeli Sephardic ultra-Orthodox people, *see*: Lehmann and Siebzehner [32, p. 142].

[8] Other manifestations are matchmakings and appointments to important religious positions [52, p. 16].

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Even most of the delegates of *Shas* opt for the elite Ashkenazi schools for their own children [34]. One of the few leaders of *Shas* whose children attend Sephardic ultra-Orthodox schools referred to this phenomenon by declaring that the Sephardic people need a "Harvard" to compete with the dominance of the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi schools [32, p. 149].

3 The Immanuel Case

Almost all ultra-Orthodox schools in Israel are non-public schools. As such, ultra-Orthodox schools can select their students according to their religious affiliations. However, they are not allowed to differentiate between students based on, inter alia, their ethnic origin or social status. Nevertheless, cases of discrimination against ultra-Orthodox Sephardic students in ultra-Orthodox schools are common.[9] Some of them even reached the courts despite the reluctance of the ultra-Orthodox community to use State secular courts, and the various hindrances that prevent ultra-Orthodox people from turning to these courts.[10] In light of the above, the Immanuel case does not represent an isolated incident. However, this case is unique because it gained wide visibility and because of the Court decisions linked to it.

The city of Immanuel is an ultra-Orthodox settlement, located in the West Bank. Approximately 3,000 residents live in Immanuel. Some of them belong to an Ashkenazi Hasidic group that is called "Slonim", and others are Sephardic ultra-Orthodox people who came to live in Immanuel over the years due to the low prices of housing [14]. The separation between Ashkenazis and Sephardis in Immanuel is geographically discernible. The Ashkenazi families live uptown, while the Sephardic families live downtown, where the neighborhoods appear derelict [id.]. The segregation is almost visually discernible.

On 2007, the Immanuel "Beis Yaakov" school for girls was divided into two tracks—a "Hasidic Track" and a "General Track". The division constituted two segregated schools. A wall was erected in the building, the playground was split by a fabric-covered fence, a different dress code was adopted for the "Hasidic Track", and the times of classes and breaks were changed in order to avoid contacts between the girls. Yoav Laloum, a Sephardic ultra-Orthodox activist, petitioned the Supreme Court,[11] which ruled on August 2009 that the "Hasidic Track" amounted to ethnic discrimination and ordered the ultra-Orthodox organization that runs the school to remove the segregation, and the Ministry of Education to enforce the ruling [21].

A couple of months after the court decision, the segregation remained intact. Following contempt proceedings the school was declared as integrated, but the parents

[9] *See, e.g.*: AP (Jerusalem) 241/06 [3]; The State Comptroller and Ombudsmen, Israel [51, pp. 931–986].

[10] On these hindrances, *see*: Hacohen [19].

[11] Laloum established a non-profit organization named "Noa'r Kahalacha" (Youth followers of Torah) in order to fight ethnic discrimination in ultra-Orthodox schools [42]. Most of the religious leaders of the ultra-Orthodox Sephardic group, whose members were segregated, do not support Laloum's association. They did not condemn the compliance of the Ashkenazi parents to their leader's dictate, and some of them publicly criticized the petitioners for turning to a secular court. Even the Sephardic Rabbi who gave Laloum his blessing changed his approach during the legal proceedings [40].

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whose daughters attended the "Hasidic Track" refused to send their daughters to school [22]. After continuing attempts to achieve a compromise, the parents were found to be in contempt of court and on June 17th 2010 they were sent to prison [23]. Tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews took to the streets of Jerusalem to accompany the fathers on their way to prison [30]. The mothers did not appear. On the next day, the court ordered to postpone the mothers' imprisonment [24].

Ten days later, the court decided to release the fathers in light of an agreement to perform a joint seminar during the last three days of the school year [25]. The case was then closed until late August, a few days before the end of the summer holiday. On August 25th 2010 the Ministry of Education announced that it accepted the request of a group of parents whose daughters attended the "Hasidic Track" to establish a new school which will not receive State funds. A couple of weeks later, the Supreme Court reluctantly closed the case. The Court expressed a hope that the aim of the decision of the Ministry of Education was not to achieve the unacceptable goal that motivated the segregation [26].

4 "When Will It Come to My Hand that I May Fulfill It?": The Declaration of the Admor

שמואל ברזובסקי
בהה"צ נוהרש"נ זצללה"ה
מסלאנימא

כ"ה. יום רביעי ר"א בחמה תש"ע

עם ה' חזקו ונתחזקה

לקהל עדתנו אהובים ויקרים, ה' עליהם יהיו, חזקו ואמץ לבבכם כל המייחלים לה'.

בימים קשים אלו חעוברים על עדתנו ת"ו – עצתו אמונה, וזה ה' קיוינו לו נגילה ונשמחה בישועתו.

וזאת למודעי, כי אילו הייתי חושב, ששופטי בית המשפט מאמינים בכח שחם אומרים, שבית הספר בעמנואל יסודו באפליה בוטנית, נראה לי שחייתי נותן אחרת.

אך, מאחר שאין לי כל שמץ של ספק שחם יודעים את האמת, שכל דבריחם בשקר יפרדם. אם כן, אין זה אלא מאבק בין אמונה לכפירה, בין כח הקדושה לכח הטומאה של חסטרא אחרא, – מאבק שתמיד ידענו שיפרוץ באחרית חימים.

ובמאבק על קידוש ה' – גם אם יעמידו אותנו מול כיתה יורים – לא נוותר ולא נתפשר כמלוא נימא!

ה' הוא מלכנו ולו הבנו עבדים עד נשימתנו האחרונה.

ולכל אמותי ישראל אני קורא:

אנא חצטרפו אלינו במאבק חנשגב חזה, חמאבק שדורות חיכו לייחלו אליו "מתי יבוא לידי ואקיימנה".

(-)

(The declaration of the Admor in Hebrew [39])

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The declaration was published on the bulletin board in the Admor's synagogue on June 23rd 2010, when the fathers were still in prison [Laloum, Yoav, Email, May 1st 2011 (on file with authors)]. It was also sent to the Admor's Hasidic followers around Israel [29]. Here is a free translation of the declaration's content:

"Samuel Berzovski
[Initials that denote praises for the Admor[12]]
Of Slonim

The People of God be strong and stronger

Dearly beloved and precious people, may God be with you, and may the heart of all God seekers be brave.

During these difficult days for our people [initials that praise the community][13]—the advice of God we trust, this is the God that we hoped for, we will be rejoice at his salvation.

And this is to notify all, would I have been convinced that the judges of the court believe in what they are saying, that the school in Immanuel is constituted with racial discrimination, I believe that I would act differently.

However, since I have no doubt that they know the truth that all their words stem from a lie. Therefore it is no more than a struggle between faith and heresy, between the power of holiness and the power of impurity of the '*Sitra Hachra*',[14] - a struggle that we always knew is going to break out at the [peril of] end of days.

And in the struggle for the holiness of god – even if we will be put in front of a firing squad – we will not give up [our faith] and will not make even a small compromise!

God is our king and we are his slaves until our last breath.

And for all those who are faithful Jews I call:

Please join us in this exalted struggle, the struggle that generations waited and wished for, 'when will it come to my hand that I may fulfill it?"'

(–)

[12] An approximate translation of the initials is "the son of the Tsadik [A synonym of 'Admor'] Rabbi, Our teacher the Rabbi Shalom Noah [the first and middle name of the father of the Admor], the memory of the Tsadik will be blessed in the after world".

[13] An approximate translation of the initials is 'God will safeguard it [the community] and save it'.

[14] '*Sitra Hachra*' is an Aramaic phrase which means 'the other side of the evi', or the 'evil inclination'.

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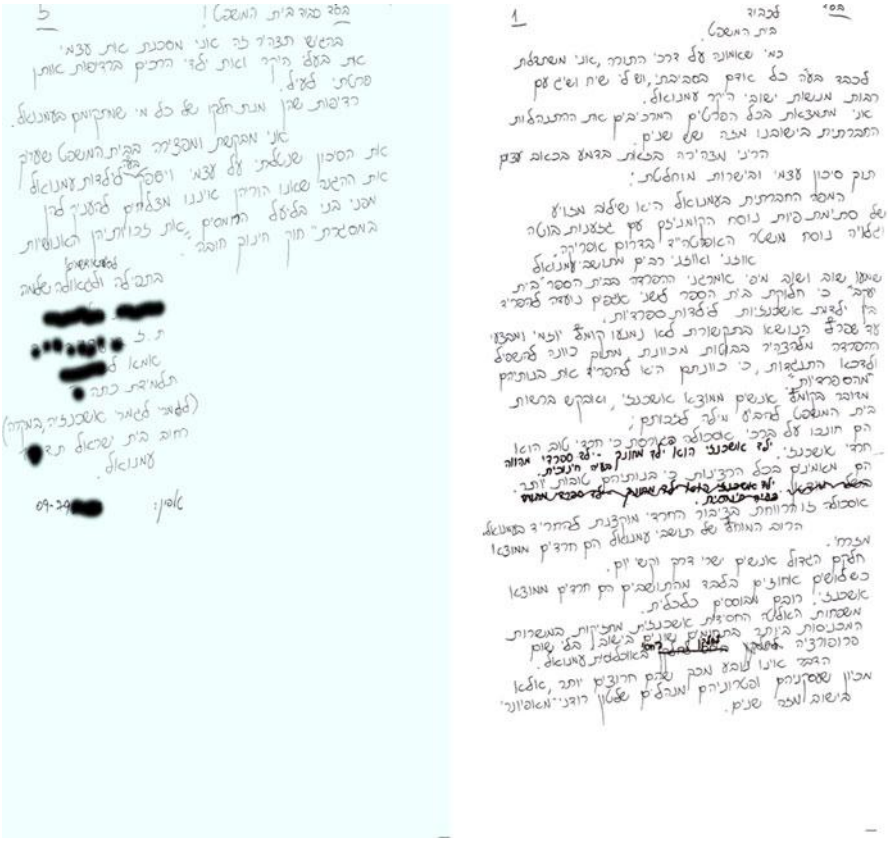
5 "With God's Help", "I Ask and Plead the Court": The Letter of the Mother



(The first and last pages of the letter in Hebrew [6])

While the affair was at its peak, one mother wrote a letter she addressed "to the court", without any further specification. It contains five pages and bears no date of writing. The letter is hand-written, on blank pages. It is replete with erasures and corrections, and its style is conversational and informal.

A few weeks before the Admor published his declaration, while the contempt proceeding was taking place, the letter was published in an ultra-Orthodox website, with the writer's name and indentifying details erased. A few surfers referred to the letter polemically [Id.]. Other than that it did not stir much attention within Israeli public. There is no much doubt as to the authenticity of the letter, since it was used as a basis for a deposition submitted to the Supreme Court by the petitioners. The deposition notes the name of the writer,[15] and specifies the allegations of the letter. We shall refer both to the original letter and to the deposition based on it.

[15] Though the name appears on the deposition, we decided to refrain from revealing it here, since the deposition was not published online.

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The following is a free translation of some of the major contentions in the letter:

"[Initials of the Aramaic phrase 'Siata Deshmaya'[16]]

To

The Court

As a follower of the Torah's way, I try to respect anyone who lives near me, and I have constant and daily conversations with the women of my dear city Immanuel…

The overwhelming majority of the Immanuel residents are ultra-Orthodox people whose origin is Sephardic. Most of them are honest and hardworking people. Only thirty percents of the residents are ultra-Orthodox whose origin is Ashkenazi. Most of them are financially well of. The elite Ashkenazi Hasidic families hold the most profitable jobs in different areas in the city with no proportion to their relative part in the Immanuel population… Almost all the areas of life are ruled by them. Those who do not comply suffer personal and painful damage; their livelihood is damaged, their children in the educational institutions are being hurt (yes yes!), they endure slandering, humiliation by derogatory shouts in public places, etc.…

This [the segregation in the school] is not legal? Who cares.

This is not moral? So what.

This is against the will of most of the parents? They are experts in silencing public criticism…

One of the mothers of the Grade 8th students, courageous and inspired—a mother who belong to the elite Hasidic Ashkenazi group but her Jewish consciousness is living and beating—organized the parents of the class not to sign their daughters to the Ashkenazi track. Grade 8th of the Immanuel Beis Yaakov remained integrated without ethnic origin and social class differentiations and all the parents are happy about it…

There is no child who does not know that she is studying at the 'second league' because of her Sephardic origin.

I ask and plead the court to … provide (with God's help) the girls of Immanuel the protection that we, their parents, cannot provide them from those ungodly persons who crush the human rights under the 'compulsory schooling law'.

With a pray to the help of heaven and full salvation,

…

I.D. …

Mother to…, a student in Grade…

(by a chance totally, totally Ashkenazi)"

Here are some paragraphs that appeared in the deposition, which clarify and enhance the message of the writer [HCJ 1067/08 *Noa'r Kahalacha Association v. The Ministry of Education.* Deposition. On file with authors]:

[16] 'Siata Deshmaya' is an Aramaic phrase which is literally translated as 'with the assistance of the heaven' and means 'with the help of God'.

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"Even though I am a daughter to an Ashkenazi family, I believe that the discrimination that is practiced in the 'Beis Yaakov' school is absolutely unacceptable and reeks of ethnic discrimination which has no place in a society that lives according to the Torah of Israel…

The building of the separating walls, the different dress code, and the different entrances severely violated and are still violating the dignity of our girls and our dignity. They are creating 'castes' at school, which have nothing to do with religious considerations".

6 The Articulations as Textual Codes

Both articulations—the declaration and the letter—are modes of address that need audiences or readers in order to obtain meaningfulness. Each of them was directed to different audiences. The declaration of the Admor was shaped for a well-defined audience. As mentioned, it was published on the bulletin board in the Admor's synagogue and sent to the Admor's followers around Israel. The declaration was not published by the commonly used public communication medium within the ultra-Orthodox community—a street poster called "Pashkevil".[17] Instead, it was published by a medium that limits the message to the Admor's followers, a medium that does not presume to convince audiences who do not endorse his authority.

The letter of the mother, on the other hand, was directed to the Supreme Court and was meant to be included in a legal case that is publicly available. As such, it could be expected that it will meet a much broader audience, including the secular community.

Hall's categorization of hypothetical interpretative codes or positions for the reader of a text [20] can be useful to analyze the different representational standing of each articulation. Two of Hall's categories are the dominant (or "hegemonic") reading in which the readers fully share the text's code and accept and reproduce the preferred reading, and the oppositional ("counter-hegemonic") reading in which the readers, whose social situation places them in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant code, reject this reading, and thus suggestively adopt an alternative frame of reference.[18]

The Admor may reasonably expect that his declaration will be met with hegemonic reading of an audience which fully accepts the text's code. His rhetoric is juxtaposed with the medium chosen - his message uses the textual code of his "interpretive community" [17], and is laden with the authority of his societal leadership, enhanced by the repeating reference to God and the Torah, which echoes his status as the authorized interpreter of the religious texts. Another textual signifier in this context is the use of initials that denote the honorary titles of the Admor and

[17] On the different mediums of public communication within the ultra-Orthodox community, *see*: Lerner [33].

[18] Cited in Chandler [13, pp. 194–195].

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praise the community.[19] Additionally, the Admor rhetorically positions his standing as "true", "faithful", "holy", and "exalted", against the standing of the Court which is "lie", "impure", "heresy", and *Sitra Hachra*.[20]

A striking characteristic in the Admor's text is his use of the words ascribed to Rabbi Akiva—"when it will come to my hand that I may fulfill it?". This is a reference to the story of Rabbi Akiva's death. Rabbi Akiva was a famous sage and one of Judaism most celebrated martyrs. Since the reference to the legend about his death is most significant, it is worthwhile to elaborate its core[21]:

> "In the hour that they took Rabbi Akiva out [to be executed], his disciples said to him: 'Our teacher, so far' [i.e., 'Is this necessary?'] He said to them, 'All of my life I was troubled by this verse, 'And thou shoult love the Lord with all thy soul'… and I said, when it will come to my hand that I may fulfill it? Now it is come to my hand, shall I not fulfill it?"

Daniel Boyarin writes that Rabbi Akiva is the ideal type of the rabbinic martyr [7, p. 105]. The story about his death encapsulates the mystical fulfillment of dying in order to accomplish the command to love God with all one's soul [Id., p. 106].

The Admor uses words which are linked in Judaism to the semantic field of martyrdom, in association to his willingness to face a firing squad in order to comply with the Torah's command. The reference metamorphoses the conflict between the community of the Admor and the secular law into an exalted religious battle, akin to the martyrdom of Rabbi Akiva. Consequently, the short massage constitutes a highly effective signifier of authority and power within the Admor's interpretive community.

Let us now move back to the letter, which manifests a deviation of the woman who wrote it from the conventions and codes of her ultra-Orthodox community. The writer could not expect hegemonic reading within her own interpretive community. What she opted for is an attempt to break through the borders that isolate her community, and call for intervention from the secular domain and its judges. Yet, she makes a considerable effort to preserve the signifiers that will denote her loyalty to her own community. She opens her letter by indicating that she is "a follower of the Torah's way" and closes it by asking the court to provide protection for the girls "with God's help" and "with a pray to the help of heaven and full salvation".

The deposition also offers overt alternative interpretations of the religious law by noting that "the discrimination that is practiced in the 'Beis Yaakov' school is absolutely unacceptable and reeks of ethnic discrimination which has no place in a society that lives according to the Torah of Israel". It also mentions that the "'castes' at school" … "have nothing to do with religious considerations."

As mentioned, the declaration of the Admor alludes to the narrative of the death of Rabbi Akiva as a source of inspiration and authority. The writer of the letter as well uses a narrative as a source of inspiration and support. She shortly mentions a

[19] Initials are commonly used within ultra-Orthodox society. They have three roles: to maintain religious perceptions and communal unity, and to indicate honor or genealogy [1].

[20] "*Sitra Hachra*" is an Aramaic phrase which means "the other side of the evi", or the "evil inclination".

[21] Babylonian Talmud, Berachot, 61b, translated by Boyarin [7, p. 106].

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story about Grade 8th, in which the parents united and decided to prevent the division of the students into two "tracks". Grade 8th remained integrated for one year [Laloum, Yoav, Email, May 16th 2011 (on file with authors)], and its story reveals the power of communal solidarity. The parents of the students in Grade 8th succeeded in what the court failed to achieve. Though it lasted only one year, one cannot ignore the radical implications of the decision of this small group of parents to take an action which subverts under the decisions of their spiritual leaders. As this story about Grade 8th suggests, since secular law has limited power in regard to religious conflicts, acting independently out of social solidarity might be a more promising path for achieving communal equality. By referring to the story about Grade 8th the writer of the letter signifies that she is not alone, and that others in her community sympathize with her standing.

7 A Feminine Voice Challenging the Authoriality of the Religious Law

The two articulations present a covert battle of voices. Against the powerful and authoritative voice of the Admor stands out a voice of a woman who retorts and challenges the dictate with a contrary claim. These voices do not directly correspond with each other. The letter is not an overt response to the declaration of the Admor —it was written before it. However, it is a response to the spirit of the way dictated by the Admor, which established the segregation and endorsed it.

Interestingly, although the Immanuel case involves the segregation of girls, almost all the voices that were publicly heard in regard to the affair were the voices of men: the voice of the Admor, the voices of the ultra-Orthodox delegates in the Israeli Knesset, the voices of the fathers who were sent to prison, the voice of Yoav Laloum, the voice of Aviad Hachoen—his lawyer who is also a dean of a law school, and the voice of Edmond Levi—the Supreme Courte judge who wrote the main decision. One should mention here the voices of many ultra-Orthodox women, who were interviewed during the imprisonment of their husbands.[22] Yet, their voices presented a façade of communal conformity and hegemonic reading of the Admor's declaration. The mother who wrote the letter represents thus an almost isolated dissenting feminine voice.

The rarity of ultra-Orthodox feminine voices in the Immanuel case is hardly surprising. There are several hindrances that usually prevent ultra-Orthodox women from contesting the authority of the community or its perception of women as dependent on men and subordinated to them [2, pp. 290–294]. In light of the hindrances, nonconformist or defiant feminine voices are uncommon.[23] Under this

[22] *See e.g.*: News 2 [41]; Bardugo [5]; Reshef [45].

[23] The dominant social model at the Israeli ultra-Orthodox community is of a woman that holds a job in order to support a husband that studies Torah and does not work for his living. This model requires the ultra-Orthodox schools to supply the girls with wide general education, which enables them to find employment outside the boundaries of the community [2]. Education facilitated significant changes in ultra-Orthodox women lives. For instance, some of them are employed outside their community [28]. There are also ultra-Orthodox women who took up writing or lecturing to women—areas that ultra-Orthodox society considers to be in the dominance of men [10, pp. 263–264]. *See also*: El-Or [16];

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background, the emergence of the letter seems remarkable. It is a preliminary feminine attempt to achieve meaningful agency in a power struggle from which women are continuously expelled, although it directly affects their lives.

The woman who wrote the letter and her husband are Ashkenazi [Laloum, Yoav, Email, May 16th 2011 (on file with authors)]. Their family did not apparently suffer ethnic discrimination. It is empathy that probably evoked the message presented in the letter—a proclamation of defying segregation, even when it is declared as a religious dictate that originates from the highest authority. We suggest that the juxtaposing of social exclusion based on gender and social exclusion based on ethnic origin was stressful enough to ignite the act of writing the letter. The result is a rare document that manifests a sensitive, humanistic and brave voice, signifying an option of dissent to segregation, dissent that may yield a chance to achieve a social change. The story about Grade 8th complements the message.

8 Epilogue

To conclude this semiotic reading of both articulations, we wish to emphasize a point that leaps forward: the abundance of names and titles in the declaration against the relative namelessness and "titleness" of the letter. The declaration opens with the name of the Admor and initials that denote praises for him, which in the ultra-Orthodox society are commonly used as honorary titles (בהה"צ מוהרש"נ זצללה"ה). The initials also refer to the Admor's dynasty, by mentioning his father's name. As mentioned, the leadership of the Admor is accepted by dint of his descent from a dynasty of previous "Admors" [4]. The letter of the mother, on the other hand, is presented online with the name of its author erased. The surfer who published it was probably aware to the possible implications of disclosure on the woman's life. The letter also does not mention names or honorary titles within it.[24] Yet, in spite of its anonymity, the letter constitutes the presence of a clear, discernible voice.

At the moment it is hard to evaluate the exact impact of that voice. As mentioned, the letter did not achieve a noticeable effect—the judgment written by the Israeli Supreme Court does not mention it, nor the deposition that is based on it. However, the court eventually ruled that the Immanuel "Beis Yaakov" school practiced illegal segregation, thus granting the mother who wrote the letter formal acknowledgment of her claim. One can only speculate on the question whether the letter (and the deposition) assisted the judges in their attempt to make sense of the situation in Immanuel. The separate non-funded school that was certified by the Ministry of Education still operates in Immanuel. In actual fact—the authoriality of the Admor preserved its dominance.

Footnote 23 continued
Shenkar [49]; Sheleg [48]. However, ultra-Orthodox women continue to accept the gender inequality. They do not defy the ultra-Orthodox interpretation of the *Halacha* (Jewish religious law), which excludes women from the public domain and shapes their subordination, and do not stand for their rights within their families, their workplaces and their community. *See*: Almog & Perry-Hazan [2].

[24] The ultra-Orthodox society lacks honorary titles for women. Women are not expected to study Torah and therefore they are not eligible to titles that indicate their intellectual achievements [1].

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The Immanuel "Beis Yaakov" case exemplifies the limited power of the law as a generator of social changes within ultra-Orthodox society. So do other cases which were decided by the Israeli Supreme Court during the last few years [43]. Hence, it seems that social changes within ultra-Orthodox society are attainable only if internal social processes will ignite and support it. The law may accompany such processes, but its role should be shaped with outmost sensitivity and with awareness to possible implications of creating social counter-reactions to the legal norms [id.].

Israeli ultra-Orthodox society is indeed going through slow social changes. Such changes are associated with a gradual subversion under some basic principles comprising the ultra-Orthodox worldview, and reflected in certain transformations of ultra-Orthodox lifestyle [10, 11]. The rulings of the *Gdoilim* do not support such processes, and in most cases aim to suppress them. However, the evolvements go on, since they spout "from the bottom". They are promoted by religious men and women that are ardently looking for solutions to needs that the traditional structure of the ultra-Orthodox society cannot fulfill [id.].[25]

We see the letter of the mother from Immanuel as part and parcel of such processes. It is a keen strong representation of the thrust towards social change within the ultra-Orthodox society. As a legal deposition, the legal process managed to bestow it with some visibility. It also inspired its publication in an ultra-Orthodox forum and initiated a public discussion. In light of this, the letter, still present within the virtual space, might have a long-run affect. As mentioned, it is a rare feminine voice in a community that tends to silence women. We can only hope that this brave voice will empower other ultra-Orthodox agencies to join the quest for equality.

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[25] One manifestation of the social changes within ultra-Orthodox society is the growing use of the Internet. There are several ultra-Orthodox websites that flourish despite the unequivocal denouncements of the *Gdoilim*. The website "Bhol", in which the letter of the mother was published, is one of these websites.

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