

AS A COROLLARY to the current focus on various Israeli-Palestinian peace conferences and symposia, and indeed "networked" into it, is a new preoccupation with Israeli Jewish women's peace groups, promoted as an arena in which gender differences are salient. Less interest now exists in examining women in the nationalist camp, whose militant attitudes – opposition to territorial compromise – equals those of their male counterparts.

Maybe we should re-evaluate what is really happening.

It is with a deep sense of frustration that I find myself watching an important movement develop on the sidelines of the national arena that has little to do with the reality of the "grassroots-people level." Today, with the intifada about to enter its 20th month, the various peace groups continue to avoid penetrating the development towns and neighbourhoods, including the areas outside the city centres, to work among the grassroots frameworks and talking with the people:

The People who voted Shas, Likud and even Tehiya; *the People* who remain unrepresented at international conferences because they may not have a matriculation diploma, let alone a Ph.D.; *the People* who moved across the Green Line because they could neither afford nor obtain mortgages for apartments in areas like the German Colony or Baka in Jerusalem, or Herzliya Pituah or Ramat Hasharon; *the People* who don't get sabbaticals, leaves of absence or temporary transfers that allow them to recharge in the pleasant environs of a foreign city.

SO WHAT IS the purpose of peace conferences held abroad in English, the vegetable vendors ask. Do the

Elitism in the women's peace camp

Katia Gibel
Azoulay

taxidrivers, the office cleaning women and factory workers, the postal clerks, civil service secretaries and day-care centre *metaplot* even know what went on some time ago at Columbia University or at the Hague? Could quiet dialogue between those who believe we must negotiate with the PLO and those who view the PLO as an unreliable partner for negotiations have taken place in their neighbourhood?

I am not so naive as to suggest that there are no people in our community whom no amount of dialogue can change. But does this not apply as well to the PLO and their followers (with whom I agree we must have a dialogue) and to whom the "activists" are devoting their sole attention?

Looking at the women's groups that are attracting media attention here and abroad – such as Women in Black, Shani, Women for Women Political Prisoners – one has to ask: Who are they? For whom do they speak and to whom do they address their concerns? Are they expanding and reaching out to women across

their ethnic and class boundaries?

Unfortunately, the answer appears to be: No. One fails to find many "typical Israeli women" among their demonstrators or at their meetings.

The "typical Jewish Israeli woman," if she is over 27, tends to be married with one or more children. She votes, she shares responsibilities for the household with her husband – though the divisions are not itemized in an unwritten contract – and she has a "job," as opposed to a "career." She is not stupid – though, like her husband, she is probably more concerned with daily problems of family and overdraft than politics, and, like him, does not always treat the price of milk as a political issue.

She is unrepresented in the Women's Lobby and snubbed by the academics and other professionals in the "women's peace movement," who see her as shallow and simple-minded and, therefore, unworthy of cooption into their ranks. In plain English – the typical Israeli woman is ignored where she is not looked down upon by the very people who claim to be feminists.

ELITISM on the Israeli left in general, and in the peace camp in particular, is the greatest danger to achieving progressive goals in Israel. It is very easy for an Israeli professor to engage in dialogue with her Palestinian counterpart or to feel like a heroine when a cabdriver yells out abusive and sexist obscenities at demonstrations.

What is more difficult and far more painful – though less immediately gratifying and less worthy of a news release – is first to admit to oneself that the racism against Arabs one deplores in parties like Tehiya and Moledet has a closer relationship than one wishes to acknowledge to the ethnic and social

bias against one's Jewish sisters.

A prominent leader, featured constantly in radio and newspaper interviews, at conferences and on trips abroad – where she invites American Jewish women to speak out against the oppression of Palestinian women – has more than once stated for the record her distaste for the "levantinization" of Israeli society and for women who do not measure up to her intellectual and cultural standards. She and more than a few of her colleagues and political sympathizers – male as well as female – may indeed be quoted more often in the English-language media to American and European audiences, who, out of either ignorance or prejudice, share her biases, but *the People* by socio-osmosis know and understand the picture.

Is it possible to build the necessary forces within our society to change the disastrous course of our government when, numerically, the people who must be attracted are the ones who know they are despised? I believe it is not.

The dialogue with our enemy must continue. But, in order to have dialogue with them, patiently searching for common denominators while self-righteously avoiding dialogues within our own community is not going to bring about a peace settlement.

The time has come for the "activists" in the peace camp – particularly women – to move beyond their closed circles and examine the tactics and strategies for enlarging and advancing the "movement," precisely in order that the tentative signs of a shift in public opinion towards recognizing the need for territorial compromise can be reinforced.

The writer is a graduate student at the Hebrew University.