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Between Tradition and Modernity: The Plurality of Jewish Customs and Rituals

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Abstract
This article sheds light on the gender division of roles in the traditional death rituals of Yemenite Jews. This division of roles, i.e., men’s eulogizing and women’s wailing, as well as the affective, religious, and class meanings of both practices, is analysed drawing on the research participants’ evaluations. The second goal is to describe the relationship between the attitudes of members of one gender (men) toward a practice typical of the other gender (women) in the light of gender theory that relates to collective crisis events. The main argument is that the methodology is intrinsically related to the nature of theoretical thinking about women’s and men’s roles. The discussion focuses on the relationship between this methodology and the socio-existential meaning of the structuring of gender differences in death-ritual roles.

Introduction
“Wailing culture” is a matrix of behavior patterns, beliefs, and discourses of women in the wake of death of a member of their ethnic group. The lamentation, i.e., the text that is wailed, relates to the meaning of death and elaborates on the loss of the individual who is being bewailed. Wailing is considered a special genre that blends speech and sobbing into an emotive lyric poem. Mourning patterns in various cultures, such as those of ancient Greece (Holst-Warhaft, 1995; Danforth, 1982), Bedouin in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 1986), and Macronesians (Urban, 1988), to name only three, are examples of “wailing cultures” that have much in common. This article has two main goals. One is to discuss the gender division of roles in the traditional death rituals of the Yemenite Jews. This division of roles, based on men’s eulogizing and women’s wailing, entails multiple affective, religious, and class meanings. The second and more important goal is to describe the relationship between a special methodology that investigates the attitudes of members of one gender (men) toward a practice typical of the other gender (women) and the claims expressed in the gender theory that relates to collective crisis events. My argument is that the methodology is intrinsically related to the nature of theoretical thinking about women’s and men’s roles and may contribute to it.

Women’s wailing in ethnic groups in Israel and elsewhere is waning (Holst-Warhaft, 1995; Gamliel, 2002). Notably, the Yemenite-Jewish traditions in music and dance are not in decline; they are being preserved if not adopted by a larger Israeli society (Loeb, 1985; Lewis, 1984). By contrast, the wailing culture of Yemenite Jews has not been endorsed in Israel, similarly to the wailing traditions of other Jewish ethnic groups such as the Moroccan, the Iraqi, and the Tunisian. The Yemenite-Jewish
wailing culture is more rooted in religious beliefs than are the music and dance that had been part of ritualized wedding events in Yemen and were later incorporated into Israel’s secular and traditional weddings. What is more, the wailing culture certainly does not belong to what one may call “happy folklore” due to its association with negative emotions (bereavement, sorrow). The below-described comradeship between Jewish women is rather unique because it existed mainly in Yemen. However, even though it no longer exists in this whole form among Yemenite women in Israel, several of its manifestations still survived at the time of my field work.

My method of choice for this study was participant observation. Over a period of 18 months (2001-2002), I conducted 50 interviews and observations in homes of the bereaved and in cemeteries. My interviewees included women who are considered wailers, other women who do not wail, and male members of the Yemenite-Jewish ethnic group. Most of the subjects came to Israel in a mass immigration from Yemen in 1948–1953; a few settled in Israel in the 1990s. Most belong to the socioeconomic lower-middle class and are sixty to eighty years of age. They live in towns and villages in central Israel. Some of these localities are ethnically mixed; others are homogeneous and have become centers of the Yemenite-Jewish ethnic community. All subjects speak two languages: Yemenite Arabic and Hebrew.

This article focuses on women’s wailing as perceived by the circle of men whom I met twice during my visits to one of Israel’s Yemenite-Jewish communities. Thus, the article is based on findings collected in two group interviews with men. The wailing women are recognized as performers who are familiar with the secrets, movements, and social gestures of shared weeping. In this study, these women are discussed via the lens of men who have a different kind of social involvement in a death ritual. Thus, the following ethnography has two focal points, of which the latter is more important: a phenomenon among women and its reflection among men. I believe in an added value gained by exploration of wailing from the male point of view. This article departs from the usual approach taken in most ethnographies and describes the cultural division between performers and onlookers as relations between the genders.

The place and voice of the first interviewee

I found the men sitting in a large circle on their host’s spacious porch. They were about forty in number and forty to seventy years of age. Nearly all covered their heads with a kippa (yarmulke) or a hat as an indication of their religiosity. Ten colorful nargilas (water pipes) rested in a smaller circle near their owners, inside the outer circle of mattresses on which the men sat. Cups and pots of hot tea and water rested on low stools. Leaves of qut were strewn around. As the men chewed them at length, they busied themselves in conversation about mundane affairs and paused at times to listen to a d’var Torah (a brief informal lecture on a religious theme; pl. divrei Torah) or a joke that someone retold loudly to attract attention. One or more of the participants occasionally stood up to stir the coals in the nargila or to pour others something to drink. Now and then someone passed the mouthpiece of the nargila from himself to another. It was in this fashion that I discovered the routine of the encounter, which has been taking place every Friday for more than ten years.

This custom, preserved from Yemenite days, is called yeshivat ha-takhsina, “sitting together”—an arena of male fraternity. Among Yemenite Arabs, these qut parties fall
into two main categories, casual and hosted ones. The research group seemed to be organized in a manner that was closer to the latter category, which Weir describes as follows:

These do not usually mark any special event. They take place relatively spontaneously at the initiative of those who want to “chew qut together” and with the co-operation of the owner of the room or house in which they are held (Weir, 1985, p. 109).

Yemenite Jews in Israel usually exclude women and children from the custom of smoking and chewing qut. The men sit together for several hours, until shortly before the beginning of the Sabbath. During this time, the group serves as an information clearinghouse, discussing various matters related to work, family, and current events, but doing so in a loose style that transcends daily concerns. According to Weir, folk publications, and my personal observations—as best as I could interpret them—the chewing of qut has a positive affective and cognitive effect. It generates feelings of tranquility and calm and induces profound thinking about the realities of the world. Since the group is male only and is susceptible to the calming influence of the qut leaves, the gathering gives the participants a special opportunity to create and cement social relations. Under these psychosocial circumstances, the group is a mechanism that helps strangers to assimilate into the community (Weir, 1985). As an Israeli-Jewish woman of Yemenite extraction and a scholar who approached the group of men as an outsider, I was pleased by the warm initial reception that I was given that eased my subsequent visits to the community. Tolerance and cooperation were widely evident in both group interviews, despite the distraction of the men from their regular agenda. Notably, an informant had notified the participants about my wish to conduct a group interview; even though women’s wailing had never been a topic of discussion in their circles the men expressed their full consent.

The group members began their series of references to women’s wailing with the quotation that follows. The remarks of the first speaker, one of the older men, served as a greeting of sorts to me, the researcher:

The wailing women are a subject unto themselves and the eulogy [that men say] is related to the women’s wailing. On that subject, I’ll tell you what went on in northern Yemen, around [the town of] Sa’ada, sixty years ago and more. We [men] didn’t eulogize the dead; instead, we wrote a letter saying: “It’s a pity to have lost him and his religious learning, it’s a pity to have lost him and his crafts, it’s a pity to have lost him and his ways, it’s a pity to have lost him and all his good deeds.” What does this mean? It means, it’s a pity that such a man has parted from society, family and relatives, the most important study that he did [his religious study], and the craft that he’d learned. In northern Yemen, especially, they did crafts for a living... The soul isn’t ours; it belongs to the Creator of the Universe. He deposited it in the human body, but if [the deceased] escorted it with good deeds and good behavior, then everyone weeps and laments the parting of the soul from such a body.... Even [the soul] itself ascends to the Creator of the Universe and says, “It’s hard for me to part with this person’s body.” But it’s decreed in Scripture. No one in the world can prevent it... They’ll follow in the footsteps of the ones who are no more. It’s as though you had a dream at night: this person was here, walking, laughing, and joking here. People say all sorts of things. They
praise [the deceased] after he’s gone. If he was a bad person, they say it isn’t good to mention him at all. They’d say, “May his bones rot in hell,” in so many words... If he’d been important, they’d say all kinds of good and important things about him in the eulogy. Why? To calm the relatives and family members about their loss and to speak well about his soul. If it is pure [they say], then may it merit the status of an immaculate soul and may it find its place in the heavenly Garden of Eden. Now, the women have nothing to do with this. What they do is inspiring the listeners to weep. Not every woman can say these things, only trained ones who’ve learned over time what to sing and what to say in order to make [people] weep. The song [the women’s lamentation], that’s something entirely different. This is what you’ve heard from me; anyone who wants to add to it is free to do so and you can write it down.

The interviewee’s introductory remarks say nothing about women’s wailing. They mention wailing at the beginning and at the end, demarcating the boundaries of the parallel ritual, the men’s eulogy, about which the interviewee had not been asked. The interviewee may have first mentioned the eulogy—the “men’s lamentation” for the deceased—to suggest that it is more important and central than the women’s creative genre or to deal with it by negation. His remarks imply that the eulogy is unique because it is rooted in Scripture, derived from the sanctified sources, and circulated among the deceased’s relatives in the form of a letter. This portrays the men as literate people whose actions are informed by God’s commands. Another topic embedded in the respondent’s opening remarks is the essence of the eulogy as a vindication of God’s judgment. The men, by means of their eulogy, seem to think of God as a father-figure of sorts who may subject the deceased’s soul to the afflictions of hell or the delights of Eden. Returning to women’s wailing, the interviewer described it as “entirely different” and noted that the women themselves “have nothing to do with” what he had described thus far. He also depicted women’s wailing not as a phenomenon of intrinsic value but as a mere trigger that “inspires listeners’ weeping.” Thus he created a taxonomy that recurs in another wailing culture stressing the difference between men’s eulogies and women’s wailing (Kaeppler, 1993). So does women’s wailing represent a contrast to men’s eulogizing? To what extent do both “creative genres” represent clusters of gender images that exist in the conscious mind even where the overlay of death is not present? Since my research strategy had the “audacity” to inject the “female” into the epicenter of the male arena, there is good reason to ask whether the images of women’s wailing are event- and context-dependent. As noted, the men whose views and reflections are presented below were seated in a circle. The meaning of the circle is revealed not only in the sense of its enclosing and exclusionary power but also in the sense of its symbolic perfection—the participants’ tendency to observe an object that is placed in front of them.

Another important setting in which we may understand the feminine-masculine divide in this context is religion. Death rituals in many societies express the dictates of a male-led canonic faith. Sered (1994) proposes that women’s religiosity be viewed as a unique alternative that one may observe along the seams that the tradition has left unsown. Sered believes that motherhood allows women to sense spiritual truths and attain higher levels of moral understanding; thus, their tendency to create their own religion and invest it with contents is justified. As viewed from a feminist perspective, women in antiquity were able to develop religious beliefs, mystery, and rituals due to their supreme role as creators of culture, as mothers, and as main bonders with the
spiritual world. The mystery of creation, transformation, and recurrence originates in the unmediated psychic and physical experiences of women: bleeding, childrearing, care giving, working with fire, cooking, and seeding (p. 77). Women, who adopt circular symbols from nature—purity and primevalness on the one hand, and savagery and pollution on the other (Lutz, 1988)—developed a religion that corresponds to their sagacity and emotionality, a religion that spans both worlds. Women’s contact with others, their tenderness, and their emotional vulnerability explain why various cultures construe them as susceptible to possession by demons and as uniquely potent media who occupy a position that men cannot access (Seremetakis, 1994). Historically, their attempt to provide knowledge of their own, to deviate from a posture of mere knowledge-objects, is considered terrifyingly bizarre—enough to have them accused of witchcraft (Lips, 1991). The convenient transitionality among fields in the model fits the demonic imagery that has been applied to women, especially at the time of wailing (Holst-Warhaft, 1995). It also befits the magic type of ritual and the subversive religion that they encourage (Beit-Hallami and Argyle, 1997). This portrayal of women gathers strength even when, or perhaps because, women accept some of the canonic ideas (Rosaldo, 1974).

In reference to gender relations, it should be noted that wailing, as a practice that “belongs” chiefly to women, has attracted extensive ethnographic attention. For example, Holst-Warhaft (1995) deals with the separate nexuses of power and death that men and women create, the validity of a gender distinction between emotion and intellect, and feminist critiques of images of women’s emotionality in Western society. Another study, titled “Emotion as Female,” discusses the validity of beliefs concerning markers of naturalism, ambivalence, and danger in “female emotionality” (Lutz, 1988). Various writings depict women’s wailing as a practice of power formation, an undermining of patriarchal order, and an arena for the dangerous intensification of political demands by women (Seremetakis, 1990; Briggs, 1992; Wilce, 1998). In its own way, wailing has been found to create a consistent hierarchy between the sexes in view of conventions concerning proximity to and distance from the body of the deceased—a hierarchy that is deemed worthy of a discourse about the world order (Seremetakis, 1990; Abu-Lughod, 1993). The far-reaching creativity of research on this topic seems to be informed by the mystery surrounding “woman’s derangement,” especially at the time of death.

**The Yemenite-Jewish wailing culture**

According to Jewish religious law, the close relatives of the dead “sit shiva.” This means that, for seven days following the burial of their loved one, they apply a set of restrictions to people who play the role of “mourners.” During this time, it is the custom among Yemenite Jews for mourners to sit on the floor and avoid all purposeful labor and even some activities in service of their own needs. They spend most of their time seated on mattresses, men and women separately. At prayer time, male mourners pray with guests who have come to comfort them; women mourners listen to the prayers and acknowledge them by saying “amen” in unison with the men. All mourners are expected to listen to religious teachings or sermons delivered by rabbis or religious scholars. Relatives who are not among the mourners serve the mourners their meals and meet all their immediate needs. Mourners avoid bathing and all other aesthetic care, including shaving of the beard and trimming of fingernails. It is their duty to “receive consolation” throughout the seven-day period, i.e., to respond verbally and non-verbally to every gesture of consolation shown them. In the main,
they nod as they say “amen” in response to trite expressions of consolation such as “May God console you,” as are stated to them scores of times each day by the many members of the community who visit the home and participate in the prayers and meals.

The first three days of mourning are the “days of tears.” This time limitation of the display of emotions is especially pertinent in regard to women’s wailing customs. This is because, from the moment of death to the seventh day, the deceased is mentioned in men’s prayers in segments of eulogy and requiem, but these texts are read out almost like any other prayer service. The vocalization of the melody by the group of men and the special order of the sentences determine the proper form of delivery—an uninterrupted enunciation of verses.

Words of eulogy for example:

* A proper rest in the Supreme Assembly under the wings of God’s presence. At the ascent of the holy and the pure, casting illumination and splendor like the splendor of the Firmament. Resurrection of the bones, atonement for misdeeds, distancing of transgression, and drawing near of deliverance, And mercy and forbearance from He Who dwells on high. 

Verses from the canon text are recited in a holy melody and create daily rhythms of spiritual despondency. The religious narrative about the individual’s fate and portion evidently strengthens the moral adherence to the text; it requires fluency in expressions of sorrow and forces the listeners to stifle their tears. Respondents described the role of men in the home of the bereaved as “learners.” They learn for an especially critical and sacred purpose: “raising the soul of the dead.” In view of this, the phrase “three days of tears” actually denotes affective confirmation of the public bereavement function of women.

**Wailing performance**

It is midday. The mourners are seated on the floor, their shoulders slumped. In their midst are six women—sisters and daughters of the deceased woman—and three men wrapped in prayer shawls, her sons. They sit in a special tent that is open on either side to receive consolers. Many consolers sit on chairs that face the mourners at a short distance from them. They form two ellipses, one male, one female. The mourners and the consolers bow their heads and converse quietly, mulling at random over bits of current events and affairs that are taking place outside the tent. A small group of older women enters the tent. Each woman in succession blesses the women mourners—“May God console you”—and sits down nearby. One of the older women mourners suddenly begins to weep. She breaths heavily and bites her lips. She covers her eyes with her hand, strains with all her might to look at her guests, and nods in response to their sighs: “Oy, what a shame it was about your sister, what a good woman …. But what can one do about it? It’s Heaven’s decree.” She adds, as they listen, that she does not understand how it happened, how her sister was stricken. She stares at them in disbelief.

As the medley of words rustles about in the tent, one of the older women consolers opens her handbag, withdraws a small cloth kerchief, and covers her face, mainly her eyes. She then launches into a wailing melody that immediately silences those present and, in one stroke, brings tears to the mourners’ eyes. From the outset, the whispered melody is accompanied by lyrics in a crescendo of vocal power. The wailer’s head moves right and left. At times the entire upper half of her body, leaning slightly
forward, sways from side to side. As this happens, she expresses the meaning of the words by extending her other hand in cyclical motions. No one in the tent says a word. One of the male mourners steps out and moves away. The others stare at the wailing woman, their faces expressionless, or sob in unison with the mourners. The wailing woman’s voice is audible for quite some time; it describes the personality of the deceased and the void she left behind in the hearts of those who had loved her. People who are about to join the group in the tent hear her from the outside as they walk along the paths. They enter the tent and grope through their tears to find chairs and join the bubble of melancholy. Another woman unties the knot on her kerchief and pulls the cloth over her face. She now grips the wailer’s hand and, sobbing, blesses her for her exertions, attempts to calm her, and asks her permission to continue the lamentation in full force. The first woman nods and allows her wailing to ebb gradually. The second woman begins to wail in a slightly different and higher pitched tune. She describes her own sorrows and connects them with those of the deceased, as she knew from stories about her. Several of the men, their faces still covered with their prayer shawls, groan in agony. The first wailing woman pulls her kerchief over her face—the kerchief is dry; her facial features softened—and sips from a cup of coffee that has been served to her. The sorrowful tune is sustained a little longer, until consoling women calm their colleague with soothing words and thank her for her special lyrics. Silence ensues. Afterwards, people begin to speak hesitantly about the deceased’s personality and misfortune. The tears dry up. Another wailing episode has ended.

In the circle of men
The men were aware of the women’s wailing but did not participate in it. In this wailing culture, as in others, the lamentation was “stage-directed” as if meant exclusively for women and merely overheard by men. The term “overhearing” suggests that the speaker, in this case the wailer, articulates unintentionally or randomly to an accessible target audience (Urban, 1988). One participant in the circle of nargilas described this as the actual state of communication: “Everyone wants to hear the woman but the woman wails with the women, not where the men are.” The men’s passive awareness of the women’s wailing and the consequence of this awareness, a segregating attitude, made it easier to elicit valuable information from the interviewees. Furthermore, an improved observer’s position—men, including some who belong to the second generation in Israel, in a closed encounter that is separate from the traditional contexts of bereavement—seems to enhance the respondents’ reflexive ability to place themselves in a “talking about” mode. The participants in yeshivat ha-takhsina—the circle—discussed various matters pertaining to the women’s wailing. They were particularly interested in the issue of the women’s emotionality, the significance of the wailer’s role, and the wailer’s vocal performance in death rituals. Their attitudes and thoughts, as expressed after the elderly participant’s introductory remarks (quoted above), follow.

Phase I: Women's emotionality
The parting experience that women undergo when they marry is closely related to lamentation in some cultures (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Danforth, 1982; Benedicte, 1994). One of the participants in my study also established this linkage. “I have an idea why women do the wailing and not men,” he said. “You know, when a woman gets married she has to leave her family. She feels how very sad it is to part with the family, because in Yemen she goes to a new family. In wailing, too, there is a parting, of the
soul that is leaving us. A woman knows how to express this best because she has already experienced it.” The interviewee credited the emotional gap between men and women to the separation experiences that the life cycle imposes and depicts women as experts in situations of parting. The agony of parting is a familiar cultural and literary motif among Yemenite Jews and is attributed explicitly to women (Seri, 1994, pp. 165–174).

Although the group accepted the cultural-circumstances explanation, some linked women’s emotionality during wailing with their very “nature” and portrayed women as excitable creatures. These respondents’ remarks reflected lay theories that assume contrasting types of emotionality between the genders (Zammuner, 2000) and research findings from various cultures (Vingerhotes and Becht, 1996) that attest to a tendency to weepiness among women and to composure among men. The participants adhered to this attitude unequivocally and several of them expressed it by contrasting strong men to weak women. “Women, we know, are more prone to tears than men,” one participant claimed. “She’s more sensitive. She makes you feel pity for her. She’s more sensitive and weaker by nature. You’re more concerned about her. She needs more caressing, help, and compassion than men do.” Another participant said, “I’ll explain it to you. The woman has the traits, she’s got emotion, she can say things differently. She expresses pain differently, too. Not like a man. Men are stronger. It’s natural; it’s been that way ever since woman was created.” Sometimes woman’s special emotiveness was described as a code that might prompt men to take action due to the weakness being signaled. “Since women also had emotion,” one participant said, offering a “historical explanation” of sorts, “of course they let women do the wailing. It’s because, well, imagine that I’d hear Shlomo [one of those present] crying and then I’d hear a woman. Of course I’d get more agitated when I’d hear the woman.” Another participant said, “A man loves to hear a woman wailing because she’s more exciting, and it’s deeper than man-to-man. Woman-to-man is different; she stirs up his emotions and he cries.” One participant added his own example: “Sometimes she can be manipulative even in a court of law. When she starts to cry, the judge treats her considerately. A woman’s tears are a whole different world. The emotion is built in a totally different way. A man can cry in court or anywhere else but they don’t relate to him as they do when a woman cries. Women are pitied.”

The participants lectured to me about the “fact” that, as men, they are familiar with “women’s tears.” This familiarity taught them how to protect themselves against this “natural” trait. One participant, for example, said, “When I was young, my late father would say [in Arabic], ‘Shekakh hamara wa-la bukh’ha.’ In other words, a woman’s crying doesn’t matter at all…. Even if she cried it was like a game. For a man, it isn’t … [A man] knows about women’s weeping in his daily life because he’s a tyrant. He knows women’s weeping before and after, in all kinds of situations, when they give birth…. He’s been sensitized to it.” This claim not only focuses on the spontaneity of women’s tears but also alludes to the ludic and manipulative dimension of the tears. These dimensions, which are different and are perceived as clashing, attain their full development in women’s role as wailers (Gamliel, 2002). Granqvist’s ethnography provides an especially blatant illustrative example of women’s use of wailing. Women from Artas, an Arab village south of Bethlehem, are described as conditioning their compassionate wailing on a rewarding meal. They sing: “Were it not for the sausage and the (black) bread, we would not have come to shake our heads!” (Granqvist, 1965, p. 95)
Phase II: A practice of the present world

Women’s wailing has two performative dimensions: contents and vocalization. The wailer pronounces words that form a narrative poem. As stated, she sings the improvised narrative about the deceased in an especially evocative lyric melody. Several ethnographers have identified these performative dimensions as the shaping factors in the emotive potency of wailing in which the main significance is social (Urban, 1988; Feld, 1982; Danforth, 1982; Briggs, 1992). The men in the research group related to the verbal contents and lyric performance of the lamentation in an attempt to gauge its characteristics as a form of expertise. Their description was ultimately segregating and marked the wailing women as somewhat unique. “No matter how often I hear the words and no matter how well I understand this Yemenite Arabic that they use, it’s hard to follow them,” one participant stated. “The [wailers] relate mainly to the dead person,” he explained. “They put together rhyming stanzas and, amazingly, they make them up right then. They end the rhyme so that every word ends the same way, and then they flip the word around so that it has the same poetic meter. The wailer flips it even if it doesn’t have the same meter as the song. She doesn’t exactly repeat the previous word but the sound of her ‘eeyah’ or ‘oyah’ flips it around somehow, no matter how it ends.” Another participant expresses wonder about the wailers’ performance: “I’ve had opportunities to talk with poetic women who put together amazing rhymes on the spot. Ask her to repeat it an hour or a week later; she’ll repeat it. It’s been imprinted in her mind, you might say. It’s a unique kind of memory.” The lamentation, like women’s ordinary singing, is enunciated in Arabic (Binyamin-Gamliel, 1994). Thus, wailing is foreign and inferior to men’s eulogies, which are delivered in Hebrew, the holy tongue. The lamentation is described as an improvisation and as having linguistic and musical mechanisms that facilitate the spontaneous creation of an accepted text. The flipping of words to make them rhyme is described as an “open door” for words that have an aesthetic target, i.e., the listener’s ear, and are not meant to be recited from a written text. Yemenite-Jewish women, as we know, were prevented from gaining literacy (Tsadok, 1967). Arguably, then, wailing and its mechanisms embody a compensatory model for women’s illiteracy but also, for our purposes, stress women’s separateness in men’s eyes.

The participants emphasized this separateness by describing the extent to which women’s wailing, which ostensibly deals with death, actually relates to material affairs. Their remarks, validated in ethnographic findings (Briggs, 1993; Seremetakis, 1990; Urban, 1988), portrayed wailing as a practice that is deeply involved with social relationships and matters of power and status. One may say that the participants depicted wailing in masculine terms. First, someone described the wailer as a dominant personality who functioned as a repository of social information in her community: “The wailer was like a ‘wailing wall’ for all the women. That’s why she could produce texts about someone who’d died. In Yemen, women would sit in a group and talk about cooking, food, and how husbands treated their wives. Who did they talk with? With the important woman, so that she’d use her power and make her husband behave well. So the wailer knew the woman and her husband from up close, and when the time came she had what to say in her lamentation. She did the wailing simply because she had all the information.”

Evidently, then, the performance and contents were determined on the basis of social information that the wailer possessed. “Wailing women had their preferences and priorities,” one participant said. “If the deceased was just anyone, the women usually
didn’t wail for him. Nothing. They visited [the bereaved] to console them, like everyone else, and that was that. It all depended on the person’s level and whether he had or didn’t have friends. If it was a man who’d died and his wife was important and well-liked, then the women usually came and wailed and wanted to show how concerned they were for her and how they commiserated with her.” This led the participant to a generalized conclusion: wailing is a political instrument, “Everything has always depended on a man’s connections and status in the community. They wail for the man’s status. That’s how it’s always been.” Women’s wailing was also described as a means of social discrimination and, therefore, as something separate from the men’s custom. “Men say eulogies and give short divrei Torah in any event,” the participant stated. “But the wailing woman you spoke with”—he turned to me—“wouldn’t be happy to come and wail for some wretch whose wife had nothing to do with the community.” Social parameters also determined the volume of the wailing and the impression it made on those assembled. “In cases that I encountered, I saw that the women really wailed, especially when the event was very tragic. Say that a young guy or a young woman died or was killed. Then the wailing bursts from the heart much more powerfully. You also notice the wailer’s voice, her melody, the way she moves her hands, how she weeps, and how the people around her weep... You feel much more emotion, much deeper emotion. Everyone’s crying. When an old man who lived a full life dies, there’s less....”

Wailing served the cause of social relations in cases where it became an arena for the voicing of women’s personal problems. “Women often blend totally different subjects into their lamentations,” one participant stated, explaining: “The moment someone dies, they seize the moment and bemoan their own bitter fate. They turn things around, you might say. How do the women say it? [They turn to the deceased and say,] ‘Tell the man who died a year ago...’ and they begin to make up all kinds of lyrics about their problems and other problems. They wail, but it’s not for the same dead person anymore. It’s about someone who died before him, and they mingle the two. Most of them bewail their own bitter fate.” In this case, as among Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Wilce, 1998), the wailing event allows wailers to tell someone in the audience about their vulnerability, their actual situation, and how they relate to it. It is an act of impression management and an implicit call for help or consideration.

The expression “they turn things around” gives a good illustration of the personal and social uses of women’s wailing. Other participants used similar expressions, as noted above, such as “It’s hard to follow them” and “they flip the word around.” These expressions also allude to the men’s assessment of their lack of control over these women. Women’s preference of telling a coherent and singular narrative about the dead, and of pointing to the “social” aspect and lasting relevance of the event, were manifested in their choice of words and in the volume of their voices. By the same token, the participants themselves noticed the written, impersonal aspect of their form of lamentation, citing the permanent text that they use. Some repeatedly stressed, “Men didn’t wail that way. They said divrei Torah.” One participant, tracing the origins of the mental differentiation to the spatial segregation that was strictly observed in Yemen, said, “Women wailed to themselves. Why? Because they didn’t sit with the men. The men would say divrei Torah. Since women had nothing to do with that subject, of divrei Torah and argumentation with God, but had more to do with tears, only women, never men, expressed themselves [in tears]. It’s also inappropriate and unbecoming [for men], only for women.”
Phase III: Unrelated to the afterworld

Unlike women’s wailing, the eulogy recited by men in death rituals is portrayed as a religious text. Its contents pertain to the image of the deceased as a soul that has left the body at a predestined moment of truth and is progressing, auspiciously, from the “corridor” (life in the present world) to the “banquet hall” (the afterworld). The present world represents placelessness for the soul and impels the living to perform a reckoning of their actions. The reckoning is conducted with the assistance of the community of male survivors in accordance with the overarching scheme of Scripture, which determines sanctity and purity, righteousness and evildoing. The eulogy expresses a positive message that reflects one pole of a bipolar design even when it is delivered in a tone of pleading for atonement and forgiveness. This outlook is reflected in the text from the prayer book, previously quoted, that contains phrases such as “in the lofty levels of the holy and pure, who shine like the glow of the firmament; resurrection of the [dry] bones; atonement for culpable acts; distancing of misdeeds; and hastening of deliverance.” The elderly participant with whom we began the interview cycle expressed the same outlook.

Another text to which one of the participants referred me is “Eulogy for Women,” included in Biography of Rabbi Shalom Sharabi and Customs of the Jews of Sharab in Yemen. The text, composed of several eulogies in the book, was chosen in order to illustrate the difference between the eulogy and the two lamentations for women by women that are cited above. The phrasing of the eulogy wording is plainly standard, impersonal, and anchored in rabbinical tradition (Mishna, Tractate Berakhot).

Most pleasant of women, pure and saintly, may the living God have mercy on her and remember her righteousness and inscribe her merit in setting aside hallah [tithing of dough], in lighting the [Sabbath] candles, and in observing the marital laws. [May God] place her portion amidst the four Matriarchs and amidst the righteous acts of all women of righteousness. The Rock—His deeds are perfect. Most pleasant of women, honorable and modest, may the living God have mercy on her and grant her deliverance, pity, and compassion. May He Who remembers [His] covenant and oath forgive her sins and [attribute them to] fleeting pressure. May she be taken to the Garden of Eden, without sorrow and distress, in the company of the honorable [women,] the Matriarchs, [wives of] whose before whom [God] appeared. The Rock—His deeds are perfect.

In view of the general tenor of these excerpts and the participants’ depiction of women’s wailing as an expression of the corporeal and the social, it is noticeable that the men’s eulogies mention the afterworld conspicuously while women’s wailing confronts the deceased and death in terms of the present world. On the basis of this clear and distinct difference, one might wind up the comparison by reinforcing ethnographic and theoretical conclusions about the contrasting relationship between canon religion and women’s wailing (Sered, 1994; Abu-Lughod, 1993). However, an additional voice was heard in the circle of men, mainly as the second interview progressed. This voice is less segregative, less differentiating, and more concerned with elements that bring the genders together at the time of death. It is a bridging voice. One may say that in the space between the social-mundane and the transcendent-sacred—with emphasis on the word “between”—women’s wailing was also given a positive regard. As the men continued to speak about women’s wailing, they exhibited an attitude of inclusion, respect, and familiarity with its spiritual
virtues. They did so, however, without sanctifying it outright, i.e., without placing it on the road to the afterworld.

One way in which the men regarded women’s wailing inclusively was the equalization of the trait of emotionality. The men spoke of the cathartic importance of wailing and admitted that they resorted to ludic restraint in death events. This was an acknowledgment of the value of women’s wailing. Some of the men expressed this in a special way and one participant traced the women’s role to Scripture: “We men are rigid by nature and we need someone to make us emotional. Why is it said, ‘Summon the dirge-singers; let them come’ (Jer. 9:16)? Because of the way the verse continues: ‘That our eyes may run with tears, our pupils flow with water.’ We want to cry.” Some participants, like men in the Greek wailing culture, have learned that women are different from them in the outward expression of emotions but not in their intensity (Sarris, 1995; Danforth, 1982; Caraveli, 1986). One participant, as if divulging a secret, said, “You ought to know that those who say they don’t want to hear the wailers are just pretending. It’s make-believe. A man who’s just lost a parent wants to erupt and let his emotions out. He’ll go and listen because he wants to cry. Then he’ll pretend to repress his feelings and say ‘I’m tough, I’m not crying.’ That’s not good. That’s not a real man. That’s all there is to it.” Another participant illustrated this need from his personal experience. “I’ll tell you,” he began. “My mother died on the Sabbath. We stayed with her until Sunday afternoon; only then was she buried. I held it all inside because people, friends, and family members were coming. I controlled myself so as not to burst into tears and I sealed myself up. When we got to what they call the end of the road and the wailers came and began to wail, I felt that I’d come to the juncture where I could let loose, to let out everything I’d been holding in at the time…. I think part of the wailers’ role is to bring out what’s really inside you. Even though you’re trying to overcome it, to be high-minded, and not to let people notice that your crying, there’s a moment when the wailers begin where you say, ‘OK, this is the moment when I’m allowed to blow up, let it all out, and from then on to let it begin to build up inside until the next [lamentation].’ It’s something personal that I wanted to say about the wailers.” A third participant recounted an emotional experience that he had undergone during the period between the group interviews. His remarks, expressed in a humorous tone of voice, indicated to us that he had never considered women’s wailing an element in the circle of men and that the interview had placed it there after the fact. “You took us off our regular track,” he said, turning to me. “You made us think about [wailing]. Last week I was at an azkara [memorial ceremony] for my wife’s uncle and there were wailing women there. Because of you I went up close and listened, and because of you I cried, too. [The deceased] had been old and ill. Because of you, the wailing made me break down and cry. You’re making us think, thinking, who paid attention to it at all?! So what do we care if they wail? But when people talk about it, they notice it.”

Sometimes the participants associated the emotiveness of the lamentation with a religious act, commandment, or prayer. When they did so, they spoke of it as an act of almost equal status and as something not exclusive to women. “Wailing is a good thing that’s disappearing and ought to be revived,” one participant maintained. “Your research topic has to do with emotion. In Yemenite Jewry, emotion stands out strongly all over. Being hospitable … yes, it’s a divine commandment but it’s an emotion. Sometimes when they talk [wail] they lift a man out of the trauma of being withdrawn into himself. It’s an emotionally important issue for us; it makes us yearn again. There aren’t lots of sources about wailing. It gets around only by word of mouth. As
they say, ‘I gain insight from my elders’ [Ps. 119:100].” Another participant took this reasoning farther: ‘[Women’s wailing] is like praying. Praying stimulates emotion. It’s like a prayer leader who has a really pleasant voice and melody; he stirs up your emotions and makes you want to pray. The opposite example is someone who gets up to lead the service but hasn’t got a nice melody or voice. He recites the prayers as though he were walking down the street.”

Some participants took issue with the remarks about the social significance and possible manipulation of women’s wailing. “I don’t think wailing depends on the person’s social status. I think the wailers in history... we also know this from Scripture, where the prophet Jeremiah said, ‘Summon the dirge-singers; let them come.’ It means that wailers had the status of wailers; it was like a profession. If you called them, they came; if you didn’t, they didn’t. It was that way in all generations, more or less. Everywhere, in every generation, every [Jewish ethnic] community has had wailing women who’ve treated it as their profession.” This was the interviewee’s way of claiming that wailers are unbiased in their work. Several participants mentioned well-known women in their community by name, distinguished between an “expert” wailer and a “professional” wailer, and agreed that “the expert is influenced by the social surroundings” and that “the professional wails in any situation.”

Associatively, one of the older participants stood up and demonstrated in body language the typical motions of the wailer and the eulogizer, absolving the former of any intention pertaining to social relations and besmirching the latter: “The woman wails with her eyes closed. She does up her kerchief [as a covering] so she won’t see the men and get embarrassed and mix up her words. A man who comes to give a eulogy behaves differently: he glances left and right to see who is looking and staring at him with his eyes open.” Later on, the first speaker reinforced his remarks by drawing a connection between the emotionality of the lamentation and its religious purpose: “The prophet also had this in mind when he said ‘Summon the dirge-singers.’ The idea was to arouse them and stir up their emotions so that they’d appreciate the wretchedness of their [spiritual] situation.” In this verse from the prophecy of Jeremiah, women’s wailing turns out to be a very important religious task even though Jeremiah’s words express a clear gender differentiation in the articulation of emotions. Interestingly, Hasan-Rokem offers a similar perspective, noting the importance—and superiority—of the role in her analysis of the rabbinical exegesis (Eikha Rabba) of this verse (Hasan-Rokem, 1996). The exegetic parable describes a king (God) who murders (exiles) His two children (the twelve tribes of Israel) and wishes to call on the dirge-singers because He lacks the power to bemoan His children. This call for their assistance, according to Hasan-Roken, confirms the immensity of the women wailers’ psychological and spiritual ability to endure bereavement. Even more, it attests to the reversal of the formal equation that places women in the realm of nature and men in that of culture. After all, according to Hasan-Roken’s analysis, “The object of the parable associates wailing women with the traditional cultural expression of the mourning situation in the form of a lamentation, whereas the male (the father-murderer) appears as the embodiment of an uninhibited natural urge” (p. 127).

Some interviewees even elevated women’s wailing to tsidqut (righteousness) and likened the lamentation to shira (spiritual song) in the sense of this term in the Torah portion Be-shalah, in which the “Song of the Sea” appears. One participant referred to two verses in the portion (Exodus 15:20–21)—“Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after in dance with
timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them [Heb. lahem: the third-person masculine form] ‘Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.’” His remarks attributed to the woman’s voice, which applies masculine language to itself, powers of spiritual influence in her personal and collective relations. “One of the theories,” he said, interpreting the Torah, “is that in the very act of picking up the timbrel ... the woman provokes the man a little, in order to lead him onto a good path. It’s written that she chanted for them—lahem, in the masculine and not in the feminine. Once she gives the order, woman is capable of leading men in whatever way she intends. So with the wailer.... Women are believers. It was by the virtue of righteous women that the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, and so will they be delivered in the future” (Exodus 15:21, portion Be-shalah, Tractate Nashim).

One of the rabbis of the community, wishing to share his knowledge and thoughts, spoke in the concluding part of the group interview. Like the elderly participant who spoke at the start of the interview and was quoted at the beginning of the ethnography, the rabbi began the concluding remarks in a personal tone that related to the place and time at issue. From that point on, his arguments turned the two dichotomizations—sacred and profane, men and women—upside down. By citing rabbinical motifs that are extraneous to the tradition and stated only implicitly, he helped to elevate women’s wailing to a plane very close to that of men’s eulogies. I do not know whether the rabbi did this by chance or whether he had been influenced by the few moderate arguments that had been expressed in his presence. Be this as it may, his remarks closed the circle in terms of timing and approach:

First of all, these matters are Heaven-sent [i.e., no coincidence]... Singing is divided into women’s singing and men’s singing. When you speak about the singing in Yemen, you have to make a distinction between that of men and that of women. In my opinion, it is usually claimed, inaccurately, that men’s singing is sacred and the women’s singing is totally non-sacred. In Yemen, there was no such thing as non-sacred; everything was sacred. But the nature of men’s singing pertains to the synagogue and prayers and it’s the nature of women’s singing to deal with life. You might say that women’s singing is a song of life, not of the non-sacred. Men’s singing is in Hebrew [the language reserved for sacred use] and some songs have Aramaic in them. Women’s singing is almost entirely in Arabic. Women aren’t subordinate to men. Men keep to themselves and have a leader. So do women. In the Yemenite household, it was the wife who determined how life would be lived and how the children would be educated. The father took care of the formal side of reading the Torah and the [Aramaic] translation and [the commentary] ‘Ein Ya’akov. The wife decided what kind of education the children would receive. The wife ran the house. One of the rabbis called her ‘iqar ha-bayit’ [“the essence of the household,” instead of the customary term, ‘aqeret ha-bayit’, “housewife”]. For men, the eulogies had a permanent wording; it’s not something they made up. For women, it was usually a local thing that they made up on the spot, although they already had a basis for it. The initial basis, the format, the structure, existed. They filled the structure with contents in accordance with the situation that they found. When it was an important person, they mentioned his importance. If he was a religious man, they mentioned that. If she was a woman who did acts of kindness, they mentioned her deeds and they called her by name, too. That was the style of the wailers in Yemen, and that’s how it was in the time of our earliest forefathers.
The rabbi associated the women’s creative genre with “life” and that of the men with sanctity. This reflects the perception of women as having a circular psychosocial consciousness that is all-encompassing and that fuses dissimilar elements. Women represent life, i.e., everything “from the beginning of the world to its end” or, as one should perhaps say, from cradle to grave. This is reflected in the “local” improvised texts that they create on the spur of the moment. Theirs is a creative art form that loses none of its value by being mindful of the temporality and changing needs of life. The rabbi’s remarks, which substitute the word “life” for the “non-sacred,” extricate the imagery of women from the binary categorization of “sacred and non-sacred,” a categorization that fits the imagery of men. The women fit into a scheme that one may liken to a canopy that is drawn over and transcends all categories. Although the rabbi’s comments promoted this message, it is noteworthy that he ultimately overstated his claims so badly as to refute totally the other participants’ views. His arguments returned women’s wailing to the category of “sacred” by likening the lamentation to a blessing of God and to the message of acceptance of judgment that appears in the men’s text, the eulogy. The hyperbole of the rabbi’s remarks becomes clear when he refers to elderly wailing women who remained illiterate even after they immigrated to Israel. These women, unlike their younger counterparts, still preserve the traditional patterns of education that limited their familiarity with the sacred literature and even encouraged them to invent daily prayers of their own in Arabic. None of these women deviates significantly from Goitein’s conclusion (1983): “The Yemenite [-Jewish] woman is raised to be Jewish even though she is not privileged with any systematic schooling in Judaism” (p. 254). The Jewishness of these elderly women is undoubted; the rabbi even amplifies it. However, it is a Jewishness of ignorance, of women who cannot access a book such as Tse’ena u-re’ena, a Yiddish-language commentary for women that explains the contents of Biblical episodes (Goitein, 1983). This perception of feminine Jewishness is not typical of Yemenite Jews alone (El-Or, 1992). It is based on a ruling by the greatest and most influential of the Jewish thinkers, Maimonides, which likens anyone who teaches his daughter Torah to one who gives her information that she will misuse (El-Or, 1992; Ratzaby, 1995). Thus, the rabbi’s comments build an imaginary bridge between the ignorance of these women and the profound intent of the canon text.

Discussion
The circle of men is a metaphorical setting. The circle exists not only in the documented gathering of some forty men for yeshivat ha-takhsina, an event of togetherness, but also in the practice of a separate assembly for death rituals. The participants were mindful of two circles from which women were absent, the momentary and the ritual. The group interview on the topic of women’s wailing proved to be a special situation that encouraged the participants to be aware concurrently of the representer and of the object being represented. Although the encounter was defined in time and place, it was sometimes translated into other circles—of eulogy, prayer, and study of Mishna (a tradition in gatherings of and for the bereaved)—from which the men pondered my research questions. The men spoke about women’s wailing as if expressing an opinion about a practice that was either desirable or undesirable in their circles. As they did so, they also offered an opinion about proximity to and distance from the “feminine” and the “masculine.” The absence of women left its imprint on the interview; its contribution to our theoretical perspective became clear after the fact.
We may easily understand the relative status of women’s wailing in view of the concept of “rite of passage.” Death rituals function as rites of passage in three segments of social consciousness: separation, transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep, 1960). In many cultures, the first of these phases is the act of parting from the body of the deceased. It is followed by a “betwixt and between” (transitional) period that is considered liminal. This phase is charged mainly to the period of mourning, in which the social roles of the deceased’s relatives are suspended. The final phase, incorporation, takes place at the very end of the mourning period, when the survivors resume ordinary life; it reflects the belief that the deceased’s soul has reached its destination in the afterworld (Rubin, 1997; Chidester, 1990). Researchers believe that women’s wailing in various cultures is not considered a rite in and of itself. Instead, it serves merely as a partial element in death rituals by making a contribution to the liminal in-between state or to a pause of mourning (Radcliffe-Brown, 1964; Feld, 1995). This differentiation is consistent with Sered’s claim that the religiosity of women in itself does not entail rites of passage and that such rites reflect spiritual and affective patterns that are typical of men. It also corresponds to the characterization of women’s rituals as “rites of solidarity” that subject interpersonal relations to dramatization (Sered, 1994).

The ritual wailing of Yemenite-Jewish women is differentiated from the canon death rituals. Unlike the symbolic actions that unite men, the men deem wailing to be a “practice” at the most. Even though they credit wailing with some affective value, they do not necessarily perceive it as something religious. As one of the participants phrased it, “Women’s wailing isn’t a ritual. It’s just a regular thing, something you take for granted…. Women come and wail.” As stated, there is a designated time for wailing: the “days of tears,” the first three of the shiv’a (the seven days of mourning), during which the men engage in religious study and prayer. There is also a designated place for wailing. In Yemen, the women wailed in the home of the deceased; in compliance with a religious proscription, they excluded themselves from the funeral and the burial. In regard to this absence, some participants believed that women have “nothing to look for” in the cemetery and that “a man went there because he learned [holy texts].” During the “days of tears,” the women wailed for the bereaved women in a separate room.

Cemeteries in Israel exhibit the same allocation of time and space. Today, women visit the cemeteries, mainly at the end of the shiv’a or during the lesser phases of bereavement, the sheloshim (thirty days) or the shana (year). Men stand far from the grave and study, since reading at a graveside is considered idolatrous. Women, in contrast, have been described as wailing “over the grave.” This spatial apportionment resembles that practiced among the Inner Mani, in which women’s wailing stresses physical proximity to the deceased. It is the women who touch and surround the body, thereby creating a center from which their voices are heard. As the women perform, the men maintain an “observer status” that reinforces the unity of women and the deceased (Serematakis, 1990). The relative distances from the grave in the two cultures seem to establish a hierarchy of the sexes. One of the participants expressed this: “We say that you have to set things up so that women also have a role to play [in death rituals], that they’ll go wail a little and put on a show at the grave. They don’t interfere with our learning and we don’t interfere with their crying.” A sequence of lamentation created by three or four women may be terminated at the men’s behest. One participant noted that “control belongs to the men” and then mimicked the accepted call that halts the women’s performance. A man may terminate the
performance by saying, “Ladies, please stop; now we have to say minha [the afternoon prayer service], or “Hey, guys, let’s go [claps his hands], bring the women [who are in the midst of wailing] to give consolation.” The men’s calls displace the women’s wailing because the order of the ritual is sacred. I believe that these outcries and similar stratagems serve the cause of male self-defense against the intensity of the female emotionality.

What is the meaning of the sacred/non-sacred differentiation in death events? What is there about the women’s “narrative lamentation” that challenges the “prayerbook lamentation” (the eulogy)? The answer has to do with the mental and social functions that are attributed to death rituals, i.e., transition and crisis (Chidester, 1990). By examining the contents and essence of the phrasing of both texts, we find that women’s wailing is based on material from the past; it gives nuanced expression to “what was and is no more.” Men’s lamentation, in contrast, “initializes” the details of the event in the present, immediately after the death, and carries matters to the future that awaits the deceased’s soul. Women wailers deal with a specific person who has been revealed in his/her corporeality; male lamenters almost totally disregard this aspect of existence and convert the unique individual into an abstract soul that lacks identity. In other words, the official death ritual, as placed in male hands, routes the collective consciousness along linear channels of transitionality that extend into a future or to eternity. Women’s wailing, in contrast, due to acquaintance with the person at issue, probes past events in a circular fashion and widens the rift that has opened up in the present. The more the contents of the lamentations are arrayed around the metaphysical and the physical, the more the masculine is associated with the transition function of the death rituals and the more the feminine is related to the crisis function. To support this statement, one may cite Ratzabi’s finding (1987–88, p. 42) that one of the Arab motifs adopted in the sacred singing and lamentations of men, in the Middle Ages, was the view of the world as a “bridge and passage.” Padwa’s analysis regards this male perspective as “intellectual-spiritual” and “transcendent” and attributes its development to the “aristocratization” of the perception of death (Padwa, 1987–88, p. 642).

As for the response of the community to the threat of death, the contents of the eulogy and the sequence of the canon rite are unique in that they strive to abet the transition of those present, who tend to identify with the deceased and the mourners. The transition begins with their disconnection from the status of socially-dead and ends when they are reincorporated into routine life. For this reason, one may say that the male text and ritual contribute to the feeling that life quickly returns to its ordinary path. The standard prayer liturgy, the ritual washing of the hands upon one’s leaving the cemetery, and the ritual meal at the end of the seven-day mourning period are examples of the shaping of a consciousness of death-denial and social continuity. In view of this task, the feminine “agenda” is reversed. Among the three phases that are typical of rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960), it builds and reinforces a consciousness of delay. Wailing is a practice that seeks to intensify bereavement or amplify the experience of crisis. By implication, from the community-life point of view, the past has ended and the contents of the future have yet to be created. Insofar as the topic pertains to gender relations, there is reason to suspect—as theoreticians (Lutz, 1988; Durkheim, 1952, 1964) and ethnographers (Abu-Lughod, 1986, 1993; Alexiou, 1974) do—that women’s wailing is devoid of social responsibility. Although it is given a slot in the overall scheme, the female voice clashes with the tone of life in which the canon ritual speaks.
I believe that the phenomenon of extreme differentiation at the boundaries of the death ritual, as practiced in various wailing cultures, attests to an inversion—“Freudian reaction formation”—in the response of a collective to crisis. Thus, women wallow in their wailing and, by so doing, give onlookers the impression of vulnerability and weakness—traits that make them “more feminine.” The men, in contrast, plunge into silence or prayer, slipping into a non-participatory posture of observation that attests to their strength and to their being “more masculine.” The emphasis of different sex roles culminates with the insinuation of “femininity” and “masculinity” into the very innards of the ritual. Thus, after reading the participants’ remarks “between the lines,” I wish to argue that the ritual does not rule out erotic messages and, to some extent, may even be viewed as encouraging them. The ritual is a focal point of attraction, literally and figuratively, for both sexes. This interpretation is related to the argument that the differentiation tendencies of men and women, from their very inception, carry a subtle and complex set of symbols of coupling and fertility. Notably, relations of sexual differentiation and integration are noted for an ambivalence that is not alien to the Jewish tradition. For example, it is the tuma (ritual impurity) of woman’s menstrual cycle that regulates difference and hierarchic sex images that culminate with procreation. This is the sort of “impurity” that results in the banishing of women from the cemetery. Consequently, one may argue that the response of survivors in death rituals is consciously related, although the degree of consciousness is indeterminate, with the creation and continuation of life. An interpretation that relates to manifestations of bereavement in ancient Hebrew culture and in many other cultures, such as the Turkish, the Indian, the Polynesian, and the Tonga, may support this claim. The expressions of bereavement in these cultures include customs of bloodletting, laceration of the face and the chest, maiming, growing or plucking of hair, and growing of fingernails (Pollock, 1972). Frazer defines blood and hair as symbols of life and strength that are sometimes brought into contact with the body of the deceased in order to invigorate it (Frazer, 1923). Women often are considered special agents of various blood customs. In the course of the rituals and the sounding of their lamentations, they rend their clothing in demonstration of their weakness and vulnerability. In this fashion, in which symbols of life are implanted in the arena of death and in which the sexual role of women may be demonstrated before men’s eyes, a consciousness of sexual differentiation-integration takes root. These are examples of the claim that sexuality is a ramified theme in the acknowledgement of loss and death and is able to replace the finite (death) with the infinite (continuity) (Bataille, 1986; Brown, 1985; Lifton, 1979). I propose that the differentiation of the sexes in death rituals, with its implicit erotic allusion, be viewed as a necessary social mechanism that is meant to blur the boundaries of consciousness that separate life from death.

Notably, studies on wailing cultures have thus far attributed the characteristic of bridging between life and death, in a combination of sexuality, fertility, maternity, and death, to women and women’s wailing. Wholly immersed in concrete life experiences, women are credited with the attributes of spanning both worlds and incorporating contrasts. They are expert in bodily contact at the time of birth and ahead of burial and are placed in a conscious position of mediating between worlds (Rosaldo, 1974; Chodorow, 1987, 1974; Deutsch, 1961). The absence of women in the men’s circle, in our case study, neither validates nor invalidates these images. Its value lies in revealing the possibility of a relatively abstract contribution by men to a community’s efforts to cope with death. One theoretical manifestation of this realization, in the differentiation-integration spiral, is the insight that the bridging
function in existential situations does not belong to women alone and that a consciousness of social continuity cannot serve the glory of men only.

References


