

In Israeli election, ultra-Orthodox women push to be on party lists

by [Ben Lynfield](#) in the [March 4, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* A group of determined ultra-Orthodox women are rejecting the male monopoly on politics in their community as, for the first time, they press to be represented on the lists of candidates of the Haredi parties running for Israel's Knesset, or parliament.

"No one represents us," said Esty Shushan, head of the No Voice, No Vote group, which is calling for a boycott of ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, parties that do not list women on the ballot. "A man's way of looking at things is different."

While the women concede that only a miracle will enable them to place a candidate in time for the March 17 election, they are breaking new ground in what promises to be a long struggle and are staking their claims for future elections.

"Our goal is to raise awareness," said Shushan, a mother of four who runs her own advertising company and lives in a predominantly ultra-Orthodox area of Petah Tikva, near Tel Aviv. "The more it's talked about, the more the social taboo is broken."

Ultra-Orthodox parties, guided by rabbis from both the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities, have often been kingmakers in Israeli coalitions, but they were left out of the broad government formed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu two years ago. (Ashkenazi Jews are primarily from eastern Europe, and Sephardic Jews are from North Africa and the Levant.)

Now they are eyeing an opportunity to return to power, especially if a rift persists between Netanyahu and the secular, centrist Yesh Atid party of Yair Lapid, which finished second to Netanyahu's Likud in the last elections in 2013.

Kimmy Caplan, a specialist in Jewish history at Bar Ilan University, said the demand for Knesset representation is an outgrowth of a 40-year process in which ultra-Orthodox women have gone beyond traditional jobs in education to establish themselves in accounting, graphic design, administration, and many other fields. These working women often support husbands who devote themselves to the study

of sacred texts rather than paid employment.

“Someone successful as a lawyer or graphic designer could see the Knesset as something women should be part of as well,” Caplan said. But, he said, so far this is “not a huge phenomenon. There are tens of thousands of Haredi women in the workforce and maybe 50 in the political arena.”

While ultra-Orthodox rabbis agree that women can leave the house to work, serving in parliament is another matter, they say. Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish philosopher and jurist, was against such public roles for women, said Mordechai Bloy, chairman of the Guard for Holiness and Education of the United Torah Judaism party.

“Why can’t a male member of the Knesset represent women?” he said. The demand for women’s representation “is all folly and chauvinism.”

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