

## With Lips Sealed and Body Present

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I was afraid to meet them on the walls of the Artists' House. Prior encounters between the Haredi world and artistic enterprise usually conveyed sentiments of nostalgia or mockery. Two years ago, when Nomi told me that she was painting Haredi women we were still strangers to each other linked only by the object of our work. I therefore preferred to view the paintings before meeting her.

I walked up the dark and narrow corridor, turned left and right and there they lay in front of me on the big wall. Different from anything I had imagined. From afar, I saw them as peasants in social realist painting, as women bending over the sheep in the sheering scenes of Shalom Sebah, strong, physically present. The Jerusalem hair coverings were transformed, as it were into blue kerchiefs, drawn from the communal clothing supply; a quick pace through the city streets turned into a confident walk. Soft, transparent bodies, covered in fabric, turned to full breasts, stomachs and waists, fastened in belts or covered with folds of fat. Arms bulged from under the cloth and the eyes almost returned a glance. Then, from closer, more detail emerged, individual touches, transcending the initial – the familiar medium of realism. A society of women, captured by the camera and returned to the canvas by Nomi; a world of women, adolescent girls and girl-children. Together they fill that side of society, holding hands, watching each other, studying one another, in preparation...

Hair on the neck of the small child, braids tightly plaited falling down the back of the girl, who is holding the hand of the child, who is watching the passing woman, her hair well hidden under a scarf. Erect stands the girl holding the child's hand; leaning slightly forward the woman watched them. Her head slightly bent, she examines the girls. Body examining body, girl looking at her future, woman watching her past. And the details continue to unfold. Eyes watch, but don't see, only examine, stare but refuse to gaze. They look ahead towards the city that lies before them, but not for them. Glancing at one another to say what will not be spoken. Girl watching woman to discover what she craves, but is afraid to contemplate. What the eyes see the mouth refuses to describe. The women with the sealed lips on the canvas say not a word.

What remains to them is the body, aware, perhaps of its own concealing, neglected perhaps, unaware of its importance, but present, in the streets and in the shops, present for one another, for daughter or for sister. The gaze is unclear, the lips are sealed, and the toiling socialist body, for whom does it labor.

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