

# Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival

edited by

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Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press

The Goldstein-Goren Library of Jewish Thought  
Publication No. 14

ISBN 978-965-536-043-1

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Beer-Sheva 2011

Printed in Israel

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# Self, Identity and Healing in the Ritual of Jewish Spiritual Renewal in Israel

Rachel Werczberger

## Introduction

Recent years have seen a remarkable revival of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah in Israel, the United States and in other western countries. In many of these present-day forms of Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism one finds various characteristics of the New Age movement.<sup>1</sup> A prominent theme within New Age and contemporary spirituality is the idea of healing. Physical and emotional health and well-being are held as central spiritual concerns in many of the present day religious and spiritual movements.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, a similar concern exists in many of the contemporary forms of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will explore the New Age aesthetics and semantic dimensions of the Jewish Spiritual Renewal<sup>4</sup> (Hence JSR) rituals in

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- 1 Boaz Huss, "The New Age of Kabbalah: Contemporary Kabbalah, the New Age and Postmodern Spirituality", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6.2 (2007): 107-125.
  - 2 Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Oxford, 1996), 15-40.
  - 3 For instance, see: Celia E Rothenberg, "Hebrew Healing: Jewish Authenticity and Religious Healing in Canada", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 21.1 (2006): 163-182; Jody Myers, *Kabbalah and the Spiritual Quest: The Kabbalah Center in America* (Westport, Connecticut, 2007), 137-179. Boaz Huss, "All You Need Is LAV: Madonna and Postmodern Kabbalah", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95.4 (2005): 611-624. Huss, "The New Age of Kabbalah", 115-116.
  - 4 In the US, the parallel (or mother) movement to the Israeli "Jewish Spiritual Renewal" is known as "Jewish Renewal". Jewish Renewal in the US is a widely based, well-organized net of organizations and communities. Defining itself as trans-denominational, it integrates different aspects of the 1960's counter culture, Hasidism, Far-East practices and various Jewish traditions such as the *havurah* and the Reconstructionist movement. Chava Weissler, "Meanings of *Shekhinah* in the Jewish Renewal Movement", *Nashim* 10 (2005): 53-83. Chava Weissler, "'Women of Vision' in the Jewish Renewal Movement: The Eshet Hazon ['Women of Vision'] Ceremony", *Jewish Culture and History* 8.3 (2008): 62-85. Shaul Magid, "Rainbow Hasidism in America: The Maturation of Jewish Renewal", *The Reconstructionist* 68 (2004): 34-60. Shaul Magid, "Jewish Renewal: Toward a 'New' American Judaism", *Tikkun* 21 (2006): 57-60. Yaacov

Israel, and will focus on the manifestation of the theme of healing within them. My underlying assumption, in analyzing the JSR ritual, is that the JSR in Israel is a cultural hybrid phenomenon, which integrates New Age characteristics such as the sanctification of the self, the eclectic use of tradition etc., with Jewish tradition. An examination of the theme of healing in the JSR's ritual reveals that, much like other contemporary religious phenomena, it blurs the line between (Jewish) spirituality and psychotherapy, and perceives the quest towards the divine as indistinguishable from that of self-development.

However, while scholars of contemporary spirituality/religiosity tend to emphasize "religious individualism" as one of the defining features of contemporary religious and spiritual phenomena,<sup>5</sup> I would like to suggest that in the case of the JSR, this 'hybrid' spirituality holds collective and communal aspects well worth exploring. The choice to perform healing ceremonies, integrating Jewish practices and traditions reflects current concerns of contemporary Jewish-Israelis regarding their collective Jewish identity.

Through the ethnographic example of an innovative *Kol Nidrei* ritual that took place during a Yom Kippur service, I will trace the complex ways in which the JSR ceremony is constructed, relying not only on the individual, but also on a system of collective meanings and symbols. The analysis of the ritual demonstrates the simultaneous pull of both the individual as well as the collective in the JSR's Jewish New Age styled religio-therapeutic praxis.

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Ariel, "Hasidism in the Age of Aquarius: The House of Love and Prayer in San Francisco, 1967-1977", *Religion and American Culture* 13.2 (2003): 139-165. I have named the parallel Israeli movement "Jewish *Spiritual* Renewal" in order to distinguish it from the wider Israeli phenomenon of a renewed interest in Jewish texts and practice among secular Israelis, which is sometimes called "Jewish Renewal" (*Hithadshut Yehudit*). See Naama Azulay and Rachel Werczberger, "Hithadshut Yehudit: Metofa'ah Litnu'ah Hevratit", *Politika* 18 (2008): 141-172. Naama Azulay and Ephraim Tabory, "From Houses of Study to Houses of Prayer: Religious-cultural Developments in the Israeli Secular Sector" (Hebrew), *Social Issues in Israel* 6 (2008):121-156.

5 For instance: Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, 1985), 219-249; Wade Clark Roof, "Religion and Spirituality-Toward an Integrated Analysis", *Handbook of Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge, UK, 2003), 137-148.

While Jewish texts and the body of Jewish laws may provide the script for ritual actions, the live experience of Jewish practice lies in the drama of it, in the actual performance that engages the actors in culturally rich and distinctive ways of shaping their lives according to a sacred calendar.<sup>6</sup> This presumption directs the present paper's methodology as to the actual performance of renewed Jewish ritual.

This study is based on anthropological fieldwork that took place from 2004 up to 2006. During those years I was a participant observer in the two JSR communities in Israel: *Hamakom* and *Bayit Hadash*. As part of my fieldwork, I participated in many of the communities' activities: weekend retreats, holiday workshops, classes and more. Many of these activities proved to be sites for innovative ritualizing. In addition, I conducted interviews with more than twenty of the communities' members, thus learning about the perspectives and insights the performers had of the rituals, and about the meanings they ascribed to the rites.

### **Contemporary Spirituality and the New Age Movement**

The resurgence of religion,<sup>7</sup> in its various social and geographic modalities, in the life of the western individual in recent years (also known as late modernity, or the post modern era), has led to much theorizing as to the validity of the secularization theory<sup>8</sup> and to the nature of the changes in western religion. Although the yearning for a

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6 Riv-Ellen Prell, "Forward" to Vanessa L. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, (Philadelphia, 2007), 11-14.

7 In this paper I use a broad Durkheimian definition of the term 'religious' to include all social phenomena, both the institutionalized and the non-institutionalized, which, in some way or another, relate to the sacred. Employing the term "spiritual" I adopt Wade Clark Roof's definition according to which in contemporary times spirituality has come to mean the presence of human-spirit or soul, as well as the human quest for meaning and experiential wholeness. "Hence the word 'spiritual' when used today may refer to the inner-life that is bound up with, and embedded within, religious forms, or much more loosely in keeping with humanistic psychology as a search on part of the individual for reaching, through some regimen of self-transformation, one's greatest potential". Roof, "Religion and Spirituality", 138.

8 For instance, see Steve Bruce, *God is Dead - Secularization in the West* (Malden, MA, 2002). Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994), 11-39. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003), 1-20.

religious and spiritual experience and the search for a higher meaning, are indeed no new human or social phenomenon, the novelty of the present time is manifested by the new forms of search developed.

One of the central characteristics of contemporary religiosity derives from the fact that religious meanings are now self-produced and constructed by the individual who is free to choose his communal belonging autonomously.<sup>9</sup> The predominance of the individual's choice in structuring meaning and belonging have led Roof to describe the present era as a "spiritual supermarket" in which the individual 'shops' and chooses the spiritual option which meets his present needs.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the studies on the new religious forms claim that within the present religious-cultural current, a new form of individual religiosity has develop; it has been named 'spirituality', so as to differentiate it from more traditional and institutionalized forms of religion.<sup>11</sup> Robert Wuthnow maintains that this spirituality is a dynamic, individualistic form of religion centered on the self.<sup>12</sup> Heelas and Woodhead have depicted it as "spiritual but not religious", describing this move as nothing less than a "spiritual revolution".<sup>13</sup>

The growth and the numerical significance of spirituality in Europe and North America are beginning to be gauged. For instance, in a poll from 1994 conducted in the US, it was reported that 65 percent of the Americans believed that religion was losing its influence in public life, yet almost equal numbers, 62 percent, claimed that religion held a more significant place in their personal life. Robert Fuller estimates that nearly 20 percent of American population can be termed "spiritual but not religious".<sup>14</sup> Other studies, conducted in the UK suggest that

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9 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993), 23-41.

10 Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, 1999), 77-110.

11 Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 12; Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950's* (Berkeley, 1998), 1-18.

12 Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 142-167.

13 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (Oxford, UK, 2005), 12-32. Robert C Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford, 2001).

14 Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton, 2004), 12; Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious*, 5-6.



the number of active, highly committed, regular participants in spiritual activities stands at around 1.6 percent of the population, the level of adherence (indicated by those claiming to be “spiritual but not religious”) at around 10-20 percent;<sup>15</sup> the level of belief in some sort of “a spirit or life force” (World Value Survey) or “God as something within each person rather than something out there” (RAMP) lies somewhere between 20 percent and 40 percent.<sup>16</sup>

Within the western spiritual milieu, the New Age Movement stands out as the most noticeable form of spiritual engagement. The New Age Movement is an enormously popular global mass spiritual movement that has emerged in the past twenty years. New Age offers a new spiritual perception, one that integrates spiritual and mystical elements from various sources and cultures with secular-western components. Its conceptual roots are in the secularized western romantic and esoteric traditions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, fused with the cultural critique of dualistic and reductionistic tendencies of (modern) western culture.<sup>17</sup> A considerable amount of literature about the New Age Movement has been published,<sup>18</sup> in an attempt to historicize and characterize it. However, researchers have not yet reached any general consent as to the actual nature and definition of the movement. One of the leading voices in the field, Paul Heelas, claims that the key to understanding New Age religiosity is what he and Linda Woodhead, following Charles Taylor, call “the subjective turn” of contemporary culture. In this religious/spiritual modal, the individual becomes his own spiritual sacred authority.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the development of the New Age Movement is related to questions of the individual’s identity

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15 For United States, see Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*. 83-84. For United Kingdom, see Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 51.

16 Data cited in Linda Woodhead and Eeva Sointu. “Spirituality, Gender and Expressive Selfhood”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47.2 (2008): 259-276.

17 Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden, 1998), 514-524.

18 For instance, see: Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*; Heelas, *The New Age Movement*; James R. Lewis and Gordon J. Melton, *Perspectives of the New Age* (Albany, 1992) to name a few.

19 Heelas and Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, 81.

in contemporary society, and the tendency to turn inward in order to find meaning in times of unstable and fluid identities.

### **Healing in New Age Thought and Practice**

As in many other contemporary religious movements, one can identify in the New Age thought and practice an emphasis on non-medical healing.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the theme of healing has become so dominant in present-day religious thought, that some scholars perceive it as the contemporary theology of redemption of the soul.<sup>21</sup> In many contemporary spiritual or religious movements the focus has shifted from “What can I do to save and redeem myself and the world?” to “what can I do to be healed or to heal the world?” For instance, in her study on religious ritual healing in middle class suburban America, Meredith McGuire identifies five different religious groups sharing this emphasis: Christian groups (such as fundamentalist churches, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal and healing cults among the main line churches), metaphysical groups engendered by the early twentieth century metaphysical movements such as Christian Science and Religious Science, Eastern meditation and human potential groups, psychic and occult groups and technique practitioners. Although fundamental differences exist between them, they all share the claim for a holistic mind-body-spirit relationship and its association with the concept of the self.<sup>22</sup>

Most New Age groups, such as the ones McGuire studied, believe that the spiritual dimension of man – his mental, physical and spiritual energies – has the capacity for healing. According to this perception, the self has a key role in the healing process, regardless of the curative method: removal of energetic blocking, affirmative declarations, meditations, etc. Nevertheless, it is also possible to find, under the

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20 The most notable ethnographic and theoretical work done on this issue is by Thomas Csordas, *The Sacred Self: The Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (Berkeley, 1994).

21 Meredith B. McGuire, “Health and Spirituality as Contemporary Concerns”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527. 1 (1993): 144-170.

22 Meredith B. McGuire, *Ritual Healing in Suburban America* (New Brunswick, 1988), 241-257.

influences of eastern thought, approaches that emphasize the existence of a universal cosmic source of energy. Inner contemplation by way of meditation, for instance, allows the tapping or channeling of this source for the purpose of healing. It should be noted that the experience of healing in these approaches is not necessarily a physical one, and in many cases it is perceived as occurring solely in the mental or psychological dimensions.

The mental and spiritual healing aspect of the New Age Movement is historically linked to Human Potential and Trans-Personal psychology. Through the integration of spiritual ideas with those of the Human Potential and Trans-Personal psychology, a wide range of psychological concepts can be identified in New Age thought and practice, such as self realization, personal growth etc., as well as therapeutic techniques such as emotional group sharing, self awareness and more. New Age culture translates these psychological concepts into a religio-therapeutic practice, which is understood to be conducive to one's spiritual development. Personal growth, achieved through therapeutic techniques, is equated with the prospect of reaching a higher spiritual level.

At the focus of these spiritual and therapeutic processes stands the conceptualization of the 'self'. The New Age self is perceived as a bounded entity possessed by the individual, the true core beneath the masks of social roles, the ultimate foundation for the individual's value and agency. The self is the seat of authentic experience, which is harmed by the 'inauthentic' experiences of envy, irritation and anxiety. These negative feelings are triggered by discrepancies between the needs of the true self and society's expectations.<sup>23</sup> According to this view, the social persona is systematically programmed for certain behaviors and relationships. Furthermore, in keeping with New Age spirituality, the innermost authentic self is considered to be the locus of immanence, directly connected to divine energy: as Paul Heelas puts it, self becomes God.<sup>24</sup> Thus, New Age spirituality synthesizes two contemporary cultural themes: The understanding of the divine or

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23 Galina Lindquist, "Bringing the Soul Back to the Self", *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*, eds. Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist (New York and Oxford, 2005), 157-173.

24 Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 19.

the sacred as intrinsic to the self with the therapeutic ambition to reach this inner core and heal it from 'inauthentic' experiences and emotions.

### **New Age Spirituality in Israel**

Until recently there has been very little academic discourse<sup>25</sup> about the proliferation of new religious movements and the New Age movement in Israeli society.<sup>26</sup> This dearth of academic research on the subject is surprising, given the fact that as early as 1996 Paul Heelas listed Israel as one of the five global centers for New Age, together with Germany, New Zealand, US and the UK.<sup>27</sup> Since then, New Age culture in Israel has only gained in scope and recognition.

One plausible explanation for the proliferation of New Age culture in Israel in recent years is the great ideological and material changes that Israeli society has undergone in the last three decades and the growing influence of American culture via mass media and the internet.<sup>28</sup> Goodman and Yonah have suggested that the weakening of the hegemonic national-cultural center has led to processes of change and the construction of new socio-religious identities, among them identities centered on New Age spirituality. Another factor which influenced the development of New Age culture in Israeli society is the increasing number of backpacking trips to the Far-East and South America after the army service.<sup>29</sup> During these trips, the young, twenty plus year Israelis, learn of other religious traditions, notably different from the

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25 The first notable work on the subject is Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Despair and Deliverance - Private Salvation in Contemporary Israel* (New York, 1992).

26 Several doctorate theses on New Age spirituality in Hebrew have been submitted recently, among them: Dalit Simchai, *Resistance through Hugging: Paradoxes of Social Change in The New Age* (Hebrew; Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Haifa, 2005) and Mariana Ruach-Midbar, *The New Age Culture in Israel* (Hebrew; Ph.D. Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2006).

27 Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 120.

28 See: Uri Ram, *The Globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel Aviv, Jihad in Jerusalem* (New York, 2008). Oz Almog, *The Sabra: the Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley, 2000). Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military* (Berkeley, 2001).

29 Daria Maoz, *Aspects of Life cycle in the Journey of Israelis to India* (Hebrew; Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005). Chaim Noy and Eric Cohen, *Israeli backpackers and their Society* (Albany, 2001).

Orthodox Judaism they had experienced in Israel, and attempt to re-experience them upon return.<sup>30</sup>

For whatever reasons, a lively and innovative New Age scene has developed in Israel since the early 90's. In the last few years, the scene is characterized by local social manifestations such as the 'spiritual' festivals taking place every year, usually coinciding with the Jewish Holidays.<sup>31</sup> In addition, various New Age workshops and classes of all types have become tremendously popular: from Yoga and Vipasana Meditation retreats to shamanic and channeling lessons. Furthermore, as Garb notes, the renewed interest in Jewish mysticism: i.e. in Kabbalah and Hasidism, prevalent these days in Israeli society, as in other parts of the Western world, can be attributed to the New Age influence as well.<sup>32</sup> The activities of such groups as the Ashlagian Kabbalistic groups, i.e. the Kabbalah Center and Bnei Baruch, or certain Hasidic, or rather neo-Hasidic, circles such as Braslov and Carlebach, reflect, in varying degrees, New Age practice and values. The JSR movement in Israel, which is the topic of this paper, is a major player in this developing field of New Age Judaism in Israeli society.

### **Jewish Spiritual Renewal**

Emerging out of the Israeli New Age culture, JSR is a collective, partially organized phenomenon, which evolved toward the end of the 1990's. As noted above, the movement is rooted in four different social phenomena: the New Age Movement, which gathered momentum in Israel in the 1990s; the American Jewish Renewal Movement; the present quest among secular middle class Israelis for new definitions of their Jewish identity; and the flux of Israelis traveling to the Far

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30 See Yossi Loss, *Universal Experiences in Israel* (Hebrew; Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Haifa, 2007) for a discussion of the proliferation of Vipasana meditation in Israel as a result of these processes.

31 Every year about five big spiritual festivals are held in Israel in which tens of thousands participate. In addition smaller sized festivals take place as well. These are usually dedicated to a certain theme or NA method, such as the Tantra Festival etc. For a discussion of the spiritual festivals in Israel see: Simchai, *Resistance through Hugging*.

32 Jonathan Garb. *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2005), 185-223. Huss, "The New Age of Kabbalah".

East every year. Although both American and Israeli Jewish Renewal thinkers claim to rely on Hasidic and Kabbalistic mystical traditions, it is possible to identify in their thinking the characteristics of contemporary spirituality in general and of New Age spirituality in particular: a need to strive toward a personal divine experience and an emphasis on the subjective within the religious experience; readiness to incorporate into the Jewish practice and ritual non-Jewish (mostly Eastern) practices and a strong emphasis on personal development, transformation and healing.

Unlike the conventional scholarly view on New Age as an individualistic phenomenon, the JSR movement in Israel does not only advance an individualistic turn inwards – to the private, emotional and mental human dimension – but has a distinct political aspiration as well. The JSR's ambition is described reflectively in the terms of a conscious attempt to renew Judaism, both intellectually and practically. By integrating Kabbalistic and Hasidic concepts as well as New Age values and by re-designing Jewish symbols and rituals, JSR intends to transform Judaism. Doing so, it proposes to become an alternative religious expression to the existing Jewish denominations, thus undermining the hegemony of orthodoxy in Israeli society. Although this kind of a social engagement is not political in the accustomed sense of the word, it still expresses a belief in the possibility of a social change achieved through individual means. Based on her study on Neo-Shamanism in Sweden, Lindquist has termed this specific New Age type of social engagement “magico-political engagement”.<sup>33</sup>

By the year 2001, two key figures emerged in the Israeli JSR scene: Rabbi Ohad Ezerachi and Rabbi Mordechai Gafni. Rabbi Ezerachi is a *ba'al teshuvah*, who has severed his ties with the Orthodox world. In 2000 he established the *Hamakom* community in the Judean Desert, which he led for five years, up to its disintegration in the spring of 2005. Following the disbandment of his community, Ezerachi moved to the Galilee where he now teaches what he refers to as “Kabalove – School of Love and Kabbalah”. Rabbi Mordechai Gafni is an American born, self-defined Orthodox, who established the *Bayit Hadash*

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33 Galina Lindquist, *Shamanic Performances on the Urban Scene* (Stockholm, 1997), 181.

community in Jaffa in 2001. Gafni led the community up to its disintegration in the spring of 2006, following accusations of his sexual abuse of several women in the community.<sup>34</sup> At its peak, the community included over a hundred members. Both Ezrachi and Gafni<sup>35</sup> received their *semikhah* (rabbinical ordination) from the Jewish Renewal Movement's leaders in the United States.

Many of the communities' activities such as *Kabbalat Shabbat* (ceremony and prayer for the receiving of the Shabbat), weekend retreats, workshops etc., advertised in the leading New Age Journal in Israel *Hayyim Aherim* (A Different Life), attracted hundreds of Israeli New Agers. The retreats were usually centered on a Jewish-spiritual theme such as events from the Jewish calendar. The retreats took place on Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, Purim etc.; each festival supplied its own set of concepts and practices reinterpreted in a spiritual, New Age fashion. In 2005, both *Hamakom* and *Bayit Hadash*'s Yom Kippur retreats drew over 400 people. For lack of rooms some of the guests were forced to camp outside, on the lawn.

#### **Renewing Jewish Ritual via the New Age**

While the JSR's communities remained mostly socially marginal phenomena, the popularity of their weekend retreats and workshops among Israeli New Agers cannot be contended. On these occasions both communities held what can be conceived as renewed Jewish ceremonies, i.e. redesigned Jewish rituals. In the performance of these rituals both New Age spiritualities and Jewish traditions served as what Ann Swidler would term a "toolkit" – a collection of symbols, worldviews, stories, rituals etc., out of which certain components were chosen, redesigned and performed.<sup>36</sup> Hasidic stories, for example, were used to exemplify the importance of self-forgiving and the Jewish calendar often provided the opportunity to explore various spiritual

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34 Following the allegation, the community's board of directors responded by dismissing Gafni from all positions in the community, an act that consequently led to his rapid return to the US, and the disintegration of the community.

35 Rabbi Gafni had a second Orthodox *semikhah* which was revoked after the scandal in the community.

36 Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies", *American Sociological Review* 51. 2 (1986): 273-286.

themes. For example the festival of Tu BiShevat, (also known as the 'New Year of the trees') was celebrated in the *Hamakom* community by experiencing a shamanic journey and on Purim the group discussions centered on the issue of masks people wear.

### **New Age Aesthetics and Jewish Ritual**

In both communities New Age aesthetics<sup>37</sup> were central in the design and the performance of the renewed Jewish rituals. The quest for an individualistic, non-mediated and un-institutionalized spiritual experience led to the construction and performance of distinctive embodied, sensual ritual aesthetics, whose performance are conceived as conducive to the facilitation of spiritual experiences.

The influence of New Age on the JSR rites was most apparent in the prayer service, which was transformed in the JSR into a New Age style practice based on an idealized image of Indian spirituality.<sup>38</sup> In both communities, sacred spaces were redesigned accordingly. Prayers were held not in synagogues, but outdoors, in natural surroundings or in simple temporary and improvised structures such as tents or shacks. The participants sat on the grass, on the floor or on mattresses. These make shift prayer spaces seem to exemplify what Robert Wuthnow has named "The spirituality of search". According to Wuthnow, contemporary spirituality is regarded as an individualistic, fluid, and temporary experience, part of ordinary life. Spirituality is not to be found in specific sites, neither in churches nor synagogues, but anywhere and everywhere.<sup>39</sup> Thus, every location, whether it is in nature, or in a

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37 The term New Age aesthetics is employed here to describe a set of aesthetic elements, which in the Israeli New Age scene have become synonymous with the concept of spirituality. Influenced by an idealized Far-Eastern spirituality, and imported by the numerous young Israelis who travel to the Far East and especially to India, Israeli New Age aesthetic culture is characterized by a hippy-style, simple and colorful dress code, Indian and world music, and by the integration of body movement and dance into cultural practices. In many ways, this aesthetic style is reminiscent of the American 60's counterculture ('hippy') aesthetics.

38 Andrea Grace Diem and James R. Lewis, "Imagining India: The Influence of Hinduism on the New Age Movement", *Perspectives on the New Age*, eds. Gordon J. Melton and James R. Lewis (Albany, 1992), 48-58.

39 Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 1-18.



man-made edifice, can be sacralized, allowing the individual to discover the sanctity that lies within him.

Furthermore, in the JSR ritual, New Age aesthetics are also extant in the embodiment of the sacred through the body, dress and movement. The specific dress code customary in these events, usually consisting of flowing white cotton clothing, reflects New Age values such as the quest for 'simplicity' and the wish to 'return to nature'. In the prayer space, participants are expected to sit cross-legged or in a meditation position on the floor, supported by mattresses or pillows, as is customary in Hindi shrines – allowances being made for the elderly, and for new guests.

The music accompanying the prayers, played by community members, sets the mood and bodily response. Slow, quiet melodious tunes evoke a contemplative mood with the participants sitting quietly, close-eyed; at times supplementing this position by a rocking movement of the upper body with a hand resting on the chest. Quicker music, accompanied by rhythmic drumming on oriental drums (*darbuka*), set the atmosphere for ecstatic singing and dancing.

The aesthetics of music and bodily movement during the prayer are important in the attempt to create an intense emotional experience suitable to a specific prayer or words. For instance the *pesukei de-zimra*, regarded as having an explicit excited emotional undertone, is set to music whose rhythm was helpful in arousing emotional and physical excitement.<sup>40</sup>

However, the influence of New Age aesthetics on the JSR rituals is perhaps most discernable in its eclectic approach, resulting in a colorful bricolage of religious traditions. In both communities the liturgies were formed syncretically with various non-Jewish traditions consciously incorporated into the Jewish ritual. Thus, it was quite common to find eastern meditation techniques in the prayer, or even more often, Sufi

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40 Rabbi Zalman Shachter Shalomi, the leader of the Jewish Renewal in the US, has developed a systematic liturgical theory based on the Kabbalistic concepts of the four worlds: *Asiyah, Yetzirah, Beri'ah and Atzilut*. See Chava Weissler, *The Jewish Renewal Movement: Ascending through the Four Worlds* [Video], unpublished lecture (2003); available from: <http://www.uwvtv.org/programs/displayevent.aspx?rID=3312&fID=710>. In Israeli Jewish Renewal this theory has not received much attention.

and Hindi devotional chanting replacing the traditional Jewish prayer verses. In the JSR, the complex Jewish liturgy was considerably shortened into the repetitive chanting of single verses from prayers or the Bible, in Indian-style music played on *Tabla* drums, a Harmonium or other Indian musical instruments. And although the words of the chants did not follow the exact course of the prayer, most of the times there was an attempt to follow the prayer's structure, by singing one verse out of each section of the prayer: *birkot ha-shaḥar*, *pesukei de-zimra*, *shema*<sup>c</sup> etc. In Israel, this form of chanting has been named "sacred singing" or in Hebrew *shirah mekudeshet*.

### **New Age Themes: Jewish Healing Rituals**

Up till now I have explored some of the formal, external aspects of the JSR ritual. In what follows I would like to focus on their semantics, i.e. on the ways in which New-Age values, symbols and meanings are imported, translated and integrated into the Jewish traditions. One minor instance of this has been mentioned in the above in the case of the simple cotton clothing dress code common among the JSR crowd, suggesting the New Age beliefs in 'return to nature' and 'simplicity'. The influence of New Age spirituality on the JSR ceremonies is evident, first and foremost, in their re-interpretation of traditional Jewish rituals as rites for spiritual development and for the healing of the self. This interpretation echoes the New Age emphasis on the self and its need for transformation, self-development and healing.

It should be noted, however, that renewal and invention of new Jewish practices, is not necessarily a New Age endeavor. As Vanessa Ochs describes in her book *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, the invention of Jewish Ritual among Jewish Americans, especially among those belonging to the Liberal denominations, can also take a political stance, for example, in the case of the new Jewish feminist rites.<sup>41</sup> However, it is possible to read into Ochs' description that much of the ritual innovations entering these days into the Jewish world, is, in fact, in the spirit of contemporary spirituality. This cultural trend is represented in Jewish healing practices now prevalent in the American Jewish world.

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41 Vanessa L. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, (Philadelphia, 2007), 47-52.

Presently a broad Jewish healing movement is developing, mostly among American Jews. The movement is rooted in the history and growth of the *Havurah* Movement, which arose out of the 1960s counter culture ethos; Jews who were disenchanted with the traditional synagogue life, or simply uninterested in it, created informal, egalitarian *havurot* or fellowship groups that met regularly to study and pray together outside the synagogue setting.<sup>42</sup> The Jewish Renewal Movement, which is the ‘institutional successor’ of the *Havurah* Movement, explicitly emphasizes paradigms for healing; many of its activities are oriented towards the goal of healing the self and the world.<sup>43</sup> According to the National Center for Jewish Healing<sup>44</sup> there are now approximately 30 Jewish healing centers in North America. These centers usually offer a broad array of services, including individual counseling, training programs, prayer groups, healing services (which are organized sporadically or in association with the Jewish High Holidays), and library resources. Healing services are now given as freestanding services (sessions are held both outside the synagogue and, recently, at specific times and locations as part of the synagogue services) in certain parts of the United States.<sup>45</sup> In some of the cases, but not in all of them, these may be formally connected to the Jewish Renewal Movement.<sup>46</sup>

In its attempt to incorporate the New Age concept of self-development and healing into Jewish traditions, JSR relies strongly on Hasidic psychology. As described above, JSR (both Israeli and American) draws on Hasidic thought and practice. As does Hasidism

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42 On the *Havurah* Movement see: Jeffrey K. Salkin, “New Age Judaism”, *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Alan Avery-Peck (Oxford, 2003): 354–70; Prell Riv-Ellen, *Prayer & Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit, 1989) and Chava Weissler, *Making Judaism Meaningful: Ambivalence and Tradition in a Havurah Community* (New York, 1989).

43 Weissler, “The Meaning of Shekhinah”, 62.

44 Cited in Rothenberg, “Hebrew Healing”, 169.

45 Ibid, 169.

46 For instance, in “Hebrew Healing” Celia Rothenberg describes a Canadian Jewish healing group she refers to as “Yehi Ohr”. This group met regularly once a month for a healing service, and had no formal relation to the Jewish Renewal Movement. Rothenberg, “Hebrew Healing”, 163-182.

it stresses religious experience, rather than scholarship, and uses meditation, music, rhythm and dance to reach a state of inner contemplation. The Hasidic psychological ethos aims to reach the state of *devekut*, a uniting with the transcendental, which has become a resource for the JSR mystical-therapeutic practice. And although considerable differences exist between the Hasidic and the New Age ways of thinking, the link between them creates a wide hermeneutical space open for a variety of innovative interpretations of the Jewish practice and ritual.

One of the aspects in which Hasidic and JSR thought strongly differ is, of course, in their attitude towards the Jewish commandments (*mitzvot*). As opposed to the Hasidic and Orthodox perception which sees the Jewish commandments as transcendental and therefore as obligatory norms, JSR perceives of the *mitzvot* and the practices derived from them, as a system of symbols reflecting human psychological inner life. This understanding leads to a liberal, voluntary and personal stance towards the *halakhah*<sup>47</sup> according to which the individual is free to choose as he pleases from the existing traditions. The choice is evaluated only in terms of its utility or significance to the development of the self and its well-being. In this context, as Charles Taylor has elegantly pointed out: “The religious life or practice that I become a part of, not only must be my choice but must speak to me; it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this”.<sup>48</sup>

The Jewish calendar, with its variety of ritualized festivals, offers a year-round range of practices and activities to be reinterpreted and psychologized. Relying on Hasidic teaching, JSR regards the cycle of the Jewish calendar as the cycle of nature within the soul. Jewish festivals are perceived as an opportunity to ‘work’ on the self by employing the festival’s symbolic system.<sup>49</sup> Beginning with the Jewish

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47 Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and the American Experiences* (New Haven, 1990), 128.

48 Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 94.

49 For instance, see Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi and Michael Kagan’s video: *Seasons of the Soul: Holistic Teachings on the Jewish Holiday Cycle*, directed by Chuck Davis. (Throughline Productions, 2004).

New Year (Rosh Ha-Shanah) and ending with the mourning over the destruction of the temple (Tisha<sup>6</sup> a Be<sup>7</sup>Av), nearly every festival in the cycle is interpreted, not only as a marked date of a mythical, historical or religious event, but as an individual mark in the soul to be reflected upon. The prospect for healing rises through the carrying out of the festival's rituals, while the actual performance may vary between the traditional one, a renewed version of the traditional ritual, or an entirely invented form.

***Kol Nidrei* Ritual: Integrating Jewish Tradition  
with New Age Concepts**

In this section I will present an ethnographic vignette as an example of the ways JSR integrates Jewish traditional ritual practice with the New Age concept of healing of the self. The ritual of *Kol Nidrei*, which I am about to describe, took place in Ohad Ezrachi's home, about six months after the breakup of the *Hamakom* community, on the Eve of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). By choosing this particular instance, I don't mean to imply that this is the only way or form the renewed rituals of the JSR took on. On the whole, a great variety of renewed rituals were embraced by the two communities. However, it seems as though this particular instance, pertaining to the Yom Kippur service prayer, exemplifies the intricate and creative ways in which New Age concepts such as healing can be integrated into the Jewish ritual, as well as the tensions this amalgamation may create.

The Day of Atonement is considered the holiest day of the Jewish year. The fundamental elements of this holiest of days, such as the ritual of atonement and the 24 hour fast, are of biblical origin with additional elements added later on. The formal procedure of the Day of Atonement is rich in symbols, declarations of faith, verbal and cantorial expression of prayer, ritual actions and ritual abstinences. Several themes and concepts recur throughout the day; the most central of which is the one of atonement. This theme recurs constantly in the day's liturgy and in other symbolic actions. The various rites pertain to every conceivable transgression: they touch upon the relationship between man and God, and between men. Repentance and attrition are the crux of the Day of Atonement celebration. During the course of the service the worshippers confess their sins nine times, according to

a fixed formula: four times communally and five times individually. Food and drink are prohibited, as are the wearing of leather shoes, bathing and sexual intercourse. The Day of Atonement is believed to be the day on which God, the supreme Judge, “opens the registers (or the books) of the living and of the dead”, and decides on the fate of men in the year to come. Hence the ordinance that requires people to mend any specific ills they have committed against their fellow men, otherwise they will not attain complete atonement. Atonement, in turn, leads a state of utmost purity. Both concepts – purity and atonement – are inherent to many of the Yom Kippur symbols.<sup>50</sup>

The Day of Atonement proves to be a special challenge for the JSR New Age way of thought. The notion of sin is abolished from the New Age spirituality, as is the idea of an institutional mediation between the self and God. The ideas of authenticity and the unmediated contact with the sacred-self, replaces the ethics of any external law. The ‘good’ becomes what is good for the self, and the idea of sin is conceived when the authentic self falls prey to the demands of the Social-Me.<sup>51</sup>

In JSR thought, the Day of Atonement’s central concepts such as transgression, sin, and repentance are re-read and interpreted in an anthropomorphic fashion- psychologized and translated as pertaining to the self. As in other approaches of Jewish thought, the Day of Atonement becomes an opportunity for a conscious self-reflection. In the case of JSR, however, the reflection is more centered on the self, than on one’s relationships with the other or on one’s relationship with the divine.

One of the most central prayers on the Day of Atonement is *Kol Nidrei*, which, since the Middle Ages, has held a prominent place in the day’s liturgy. The earliest reference to the custom appears in the ninth-century Babylonian liturgy compiled by Rav Amram Gaon, the leading authority of his time. Amram cautioned that the prayer is a foolish costume (*minhag shetut*). Other early medieval authorities also deride the custom, however, with time opposition abated, until the prayer reached its current important status.<sup>52</sup>

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50 Shlomo Dshen, “The Kol Nidre Enigma: An Anthropological View of the Day of Atonement Liturgy”, *Ethnology* 18. 2 (1979): 121-133.

51 Lindquist, “Bringing the Soul”, 168.

52 Dshen, “The Kol Nidre Enigma”, 121-133.

The text of the prayer, originally in Aramaic, runs as follows:

By the authority of the Court of Heaven and by the authority of the court on earth: with the knowledge of the Omnipresent and with the knowledge of this congregation, All vows, prohibitions, oaths, consecrations, *konam*-vows, *konas*-vows, or equivalent terms that we may vow, swear, consecrate, or prohibit upon ourselves – [from the last Yom Kippur until this Yom Kippur, and] from this Yom Kippur until the next Yom Kippur, may it come upon us for good – regarding them all, we regret them henceforth. They all will be permitted, abandoned, cancelled, null and void, without power and without standing. Our vows shall not be valid vows; our prohibitions shall not be valid prohibitions; and our oaths shall not be valid oaths.

The dramatic words of the prayer are backed by the drama of the ritual: The cantor flanked by two elders holding Torah scrolls, solemnly chants the words three times, facing the open Holy Ark. Though there are various interpretations of *Kol Nidrei*, the most common, dating from medieval times, sees the prayer as a legal formula intended to annul a certain category of vows and pledges, pertaining to acts of man vis-à-vis God.

In Rabbi Ohad Ezzachi's Yom Kippur workshop, this prayer did not only receive a New Age style interpretation but also proved to be the inspiration for the invention of an innovative ritual of healing. New meanings, embodied and performed in an original ritual, were attached to this ancient prayer. What follows is a short ethnographic description of this ceremony, taken from my field journal:

Following a lecture about the healing qualities of fasting, Rabbi Ezzachi, dressed in a long flowing white Middle-eastern styled robe (*galab'ya*) begins his *shic'ur* (lesson). His audience, about 45 men, women and children, participating in the two-day Yom Kippur workshop, are seated cross-legged on mattresses before him. Ezzachi teaches what he claims to be the original meaning of the concept of purity and impurity. He stresses the idea that impurity is not the negation of 'holiness' or 'sacred'. In a rather Durkhemian fashion he explains that the opposite of the state of the sacred is the state of profane – something which is part of

the routine of daily life. Accordingly, a holy, sacred object maybe in a state of impurity, as in the case of the Temple's candelabrum, that was, as the legend of Hanukkah tells us, contaminated by the Greek army. Moreover, explains Ezrachi, the original meaning of purity is to be in a state of openness and freedom, and the meaning of being impure is to be confined and chained. In order to return to the state of purity, one needs to unbind oneself from whatever keeps one confined.

Following this *shic'ur* Ezrachi suggests holding, before the reciting of *Kol Nidrei*, a short ceremony for the unbinding of personal vows. Personal vows, he explains, are understood as habitual, recurring interpersonal or personal patterns of behavior or emotion from which the members would like to be released, in order to become wholesome again. The participants are asked to gather in small groups of four. Each person in the group is requested to share with the group three patterns of behavior of which he or she wishes to be released. Taking turns, each individual asks the rest of the group, serving as a 'court of law' (*beit din*), to annul his or her vows.

The text is an adaptation of the traditional prayer for the annulment of vows recited by many Orthodox Jews the day preceding Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. The text runs as follows:

The annulment petitioner says:

Hear now oh dignified judges! I am hereby requesting annulment for any vows or oaths I have taken, and for every habit or custom attached to me by repetition, such as (Here the person announces the patterns he wishes be liberated of). Please know that they are many, and I cannot elaborate on them all. I am not conscious of them all. I am asking for a complete annulment for them all.

The Judges reply:

All is annulled, all is forgiven! There is no vow, nor oath nor practice that binds your soul. As we abolish them in a human court – so they are abolished in the Court of Heaven.

The participants follow Rabbi Ezrachi's directions in a serious and accurate manner. Assembled in groups of four, sitting on the floor, they take turns requesting annulment from the 'court', and the rest of



the members solemnly respond to the list of patterns called out by the petitioner with a cry of: “All is annulled! All is forgiven!” Most of the participants request the abolishment of either interpersonal or self-directed patterns of behavior and emotion. Some women ask to be relieved of recurring patterns of anger and aggravation towards their mothers. Others request to be freed of self criticism, stress or self induced anxiety. The ritual takes about twenty minutes, after which the group reassembles and continues to pray *Kol Nidrei* in its traditional version.

In Ezrachi’s invented ritual of *Kol Nidrei*, the concept of a vow or an oath to God is turned inside-out, to be re-interpreted as a personal or inter-personal behavioral or emotional recurring pattern; a pattern that prevents one from reaching his true essence or ‘purity’ required on the day of the holiest of holy. The vow is understood not as an act of man vis-à-vis God, but as an internalized act of man vis-à-vis himself.

In the dramatized role-play, the individual admits, or rather confesses his vows – i.e. his negative patterns – in front of the group, which acts as a religious court (*beit-din*). By the performative utterance of the words “All is annulled, all is forgiven”, the court unbinds the petitioner and forgives his sins. An external, publicized confession takes the place of the traditional Jewish intimate, personal one. As evident in the performance of the ritual, the group’s role is not to pass judgment but to react in a way reminiscent of therapeutic self-help groups – to listen and to forgive. Emotional sharing is perceived as central in the process of gaining self-awareness, and is equivalent to forgiveness.

In the New Age conceptualization of spirituality, the development of the self and the process of realizing its authenticity, necessary for reaching a higher state of consciousness and experiencing the sacred, are impeded by ‘inauthentic’ experiences such as negative emotional patterns: envy, irritation, anxiety etc. According to Ezrachi’s New Age styled exegesis of the concepts of ‘pure’ and ‘impure’, the impure self is bound by these patterns. By using expressive means, such as emotional sharing and group support, reflected in the communal declaration of “All is forgiven, all is annulled”, the self overcomes these patterns and is consequently healed. And since the religio-therapeutic view of the JSR regards therapeutic-healing as having spiritual dimensions, the

emotional healing offered in the ritual becomes a step towards spiritual development.

A notable aspect in the ritual I witnessed was that some of the negative emotional patterns that were brought up by the participants, usually by women, related not only to the self but to interpersonal relations as well. While scholars have tended to emphasize “religious individualism” as one of the defining features of contemporary spirituality, a key concept in the rhetoric of healing is the one of ‘interconnectedness’. Thus, although individuals may embark upon their own spiritual quest, or ostensibly seek healing for themselves, this is ultimately an act meant to heal the larger whole.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, Woodhead and Sointu in their research on the gendered meanings of ‘holistic spiritualities’<sup>54</sup> discovered that for women involved in such practices, the goal of holistic spirituality was represented in terms of the desire to secure a sense of authentic selfhood in the midst of intimate relationships, rather than to abandon the relationship altogether. They observed that most women were committed to a vision of authentic selfhood in relation to others rather than to an autonomous individualistic selfhood on the one hand or the loss of individuality in experiences of sublime self-transcendence on the other.<sup>55</sup>

### Conclusion

The newly invented ritual of *Kol Nidrei*, described in the above, serves as an example for the ways in which JSR translates the traditional Jewish ritual into a New Age styled healing process. Traditional Jewish ritual and its underlying concepts provide an inspiration for the invention of a therapeutic course of action. It is also an example of ‘creolization’- a merging of forms and ideas from different sources. The Jewish concepts of the Day of Atonement are fused with the New Age ideas about spirituality, self-development and authenticity.

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53 Marion Bowman, “Healing in the Spiritual Marketplace: Consumers, Courses and Credentialism”, *Social Compass* 46. 2 (1999):181-189.

54 Woodhead and Sointu define Holistic Spiritualities as “mind body and spirit” practices centered on the goal of “holistic well-being”. Woodhead and Sointu, “Spirituality, Gender”, 263.

55 Ibid, 267.

Influenced by New Age aesthetics and thematic concerns, and emphasizing a search for the spiritual experience and self-healing I would like to claim that the JSR ritual creates what Victor Turner terms a 'liminoid' space.<sup>56</sup> Unlike Turner's and Van Gennep's earlier concept of the 'liminal',<sup>57</sup> the term 'liminoid' introduces a shift in the understanding of the nature of ritual performances, especially in complex and modern societies. While the liminal is obligatory and ascribed, the liminoid is optional and chosen. The liminal belongs to structure and, despite its symbolic disorder it always reinforces and furthers the purposes of the existing social systems. Liminoid often is a creation of individuals, an idiosyncratic creation, critical of social structures. The liminoid is associated with 'post structure' – a precursor of new forms and changes, a source of new culture. The liminoid state is connected to entertainment and conceived of as plural, fragmentary and experimental in character. The liminoid develops apart from the mainstream processes, along the margins, in the interstices of established institutes.<sup>58</sup>

It is thus possible to contend that New Age ritual-spaces (i.e. workshops, courses, retreats etc.) in general, and the JSR rituals in particular, create a liminoid space. This space is a 'between and betwixt' state, located between the performance of the normative and traditional Jewish ritual and the non-Jewish, New Age rites; a social site in which spiritual Jewish rituals are enacted experimentally and creatively. Here, new Jewish cultural forms are created and performed, offering an edifying critique on mainstream religious structures and practices.

Moreover, the realm of the liminoid, with its freedom of play and creativity, provides the occasion for the distinct mode of human interrelatedness that Turner calls 'communitas'.<sup>59</sup> Turner sees communitas as an unmediated relationship between group members, stripped of their social roles and conventions, and moving without restraint towards freely chosen goals. According to Lindquist,

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56 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure* (Ithaca, NY, 1969), 96.

57 Ibid, 96; Arnold Van-Gennep, *Rites of Passages* (Chicago, 1960), 21.

58 Lindquist, *Neo Shamanism*, 176.

59 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96.

communitas can be understood as an experience of mutual participation in a transcendental act of togetherness, a mystical unity with humanity, where the definition of humanity is expanded to its ultimate borders.<sup>60</sup> The state of communitas is also achieved in what Bauman calls the 'spectacular outbursts of togetherness' in millenarian, charismatic and counter cultural movements, as it does among Pentecostals in their ecstatic services and hippies during their happenings.<sup>61</sup>

The momentous total openness to fellow human beings is at the same time typical of what might be considered a spiritual experience, the unification of the human being with the divine. It is thus possible to read the JSR ritual, with its New Age styled ceremonies and its constant attempts to experience the sublime, be it through meditation, or through ecstasy induced by music, as the creation of a state of communitas.

Discussing contemporary rituals Catherine Bell claims that rituals, in the contemporary social world, are part of the individual's reflexive trajectory of a search for self-expression and fulfillment. Accordingly, invented ritual becomes a special type of language, suited to express the internal spiritual-emotional resources tied to what is conceived as an authentic identity. Community and society are defined in these rituals in terms of the self rather than the self in terms of the community.<sup>62</sup>

However, as I have attempted to show in this paper, this conceptualization neglects to pay attention to some of the collective features of contemporary rituals. From the creation of the state of communitas to the drawing on collective symbols in order to establish meanings, the effectiveness of present-day rituals is founded on some form of sociality. The case for this contention is even stronger when considering the JSR forms of celebrating Judaism. The participants explicitly choose how to redesign and perform Jewish rituals. I believe that this choice explicates the effort of secular Israelis, not only to define themselves in terms of spiritual self-development, but also to reconnect to their Jewish identity.

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60 Lindquist, *Neo Shamanism*, 176

61 Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Post-Modernity* (London and New York, 1992), XIX.

62 Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York, 1997), 241.

As noted by Charmé, “authenticity has become the key term for postmodern reconstructions and ‘renewals’ of Jewish identity”.<sup>63</sup> In the JSR ritual, the attempt to reach authenticity is expanded from the realm of the self to that of collective performance. The Jewish practice is rendered as being the authentic path for Jews seeking a spiritual experience. Authenticity is therefore valued not only in the re-figuration of the self and individuality, but also as the dimension of a Jewish collective identity. Apparently, the development towards an authentic selfhood, is not only an individualistic attempt at reaching authenticity through the single person’s expression of emotion<sup>64</sup>, but also addresses a much-needed sense of collective belonging and identity. This, claims Alberto Mellucci,<sup>65</sup> as do other New Social Movements theorists,<sup>66</sup> is the result of the fragmented social life in contemporary society, in which personal identity is collectivized and geared towards the creation of a renewed collective consciousness.

Indeed, several of my interviewees mentioned that for them, as Israelis and Jews, choosing Jewish spirituality was the ‘authentic’ choice. It seems as though in the JSR, the discourse as to authenticity replaces the one of authority; Jewish tradition is no longer being valued as a basis of authority but rather as a source of authenticity – a means for legitimizing a personal choice by way of relating to practices rooted in a shared past and constituting a community based on common grounds.

The complex of the innovative JSR ritual caters simultaneously to two contemporary needs: to the quest for individual spiritual self-expression as well as to the need of belonging to a community bounded by shared meaning and identity. In the present-day search of secular Israelis for their Jewish identity<sup>67</sup> the performance of the JSR ritual

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63 Stuart Z. Charmé, “Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Jewish Identity”, *Jewish Social Studies* 6.2 (2000): 133; Rothenberg, “Hebrew Healing”.

64 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 497.

65 Alberto Melucci, “A Strange Kind of Newness: What’s New in the Social Movements?”, *New Social Movements – From Ideology to Identity*, eds. Enrique Larana, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R. Guesfield (Philadelphia, 1994), 101-129.

66 For instance: Clause Offe, “New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics”, *Social Research* 52 (1985): 817-68. Alain Touraine, “An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements”, *Social Research* 52.4 (1985): 749-788.

67 Azulay and Werczberger”, *Hithadshut Yehudit*, 141-172.

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becomes a viable and legitimate option. Through the creative and innovative interpretation, Jewish ritual becomes relevant again to contemporary Jewish Israelis searching simultaneously for self-centered spirituality and for their collective Jewish roots.