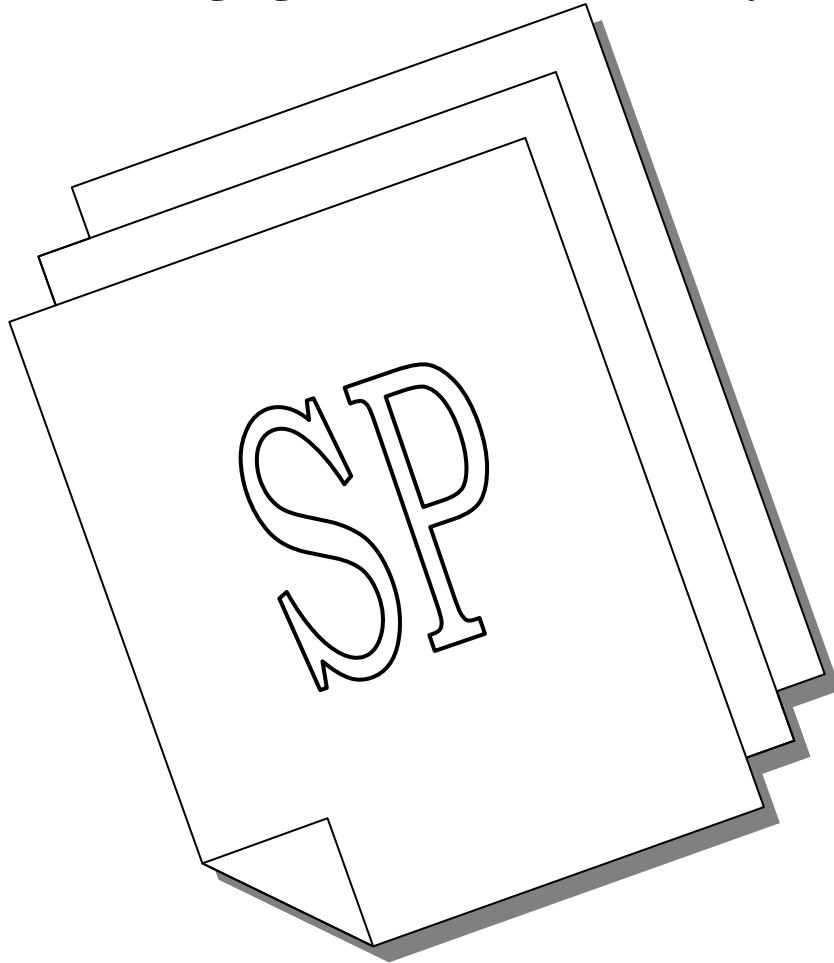


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"A House of Prayer for All Nations": Unorthodox Prayer Houses for Nonreligious Israeli Jews¹

Naama Azulay and Ephraim Tabory

Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Abstract

The establishment of houses of worship for non-religious Israeli Jews by the Jewish renewal movement entails a disconnection between religious identity and religious belief, as well as between religious belief and religious worship. Individuals involved in this initiative are thus redefining the field of Jewish cultural identity in Israel. Our analysis of the transformation of the Jewish renewal movement from its focus on intellectual study of Jewish texts to prayers and ceremonies is based on participant observation, document analysis, questionnaires completed by the leaders of the prayer groups, and interviews with thirty informants involved in the creation of these groups. The data indicate that secular prayer houses that incorporate new religious practices lay the foundation for a hybrid secular Jewish-Israeli identity. This development has important implications for the ongoing ideological struggle to define the Jewish cultural-religious sphere in Israel.

Introduction

Thirty men and women assembled on a Friday night in January 2001 at the cultural center in Nahalal, located in the Jezreel Valley, to celebrate the Sabbath ritual of *kabbalat Shabbat* [receiving the Sabbath] in prayer. It was an unusual gathering in the context of Israeli society at the start of the 21st century. These people defined themselves as secular Jews, and many of the participants had never before been in a synagogue. The house of prayer that they sought to establish was not based on any existing religious movement in Israel--Orthodox or liberal. They wanted to create a sphere in which they themselves would determine how to receive the Sabbath, unfettered by predetermined requirements and mandatory practices.

Secular Israelis have traditionally disengaged from serious, committed forms of involvement with Jewish expression, but various aspects of Jewish life have recently

¹ From Isaiah 56:7 -- "For my house will be a house of prayer for all nations." This article is based on a dissertation by Naama Azulay, in progress, under the supervision of Ephraim Tabory in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bar Ilan University. A version of this article has appeared in Hebrew in *Social Issues in Israel*, 2008, 6:121-156. We thank Eli Gur, Planning Executive, Commission on Jewish Identity, Israel Office, UJA Federation of New York for his assistance in collecting and organizing material about houses of prayer in Israel. Additionally, we thank the founders, leaders and members of the various houses of prayer in Israel who opened the doors of their synagogues not only to worshippers, but also to this study and who shared with us their experiences, thoughts and aspirations.

started to attract people of varied demographic backgrounds. Some of the activities involve small, local groups, but others are attracting broader audiences that can number hundreds and in a few cases, even thousands of people. Between 1995 and 2001, around 2,000 people have joined various learning circles in secular houses of study, or *batei-midrash* (Azulay, 2001). During 2004, more than 30,000 people participated in Jewish pluralistic events and ceremonies that revolved around the Jewish calendar. These events were organized by The Israel Association of Community Centers and other institutions throughout Israel (IACC, 2004). In 2006, around 4,500 persons took part in the *Hakhel* Festival of Jewish Learning, a study event dealing with Jewish identity and Israeli culture that has been held annually on *Sukkot* (Tabernacles) since 1997. In the same year, about 2,000 participants attended the night-long program that parallel the all-night Shavuot (Feast of Weeks) learning program common among Orthodox Jews [*Tikkun Leil Shavuot*] that was organized by Alma- Home for Hebrew Culture, at Tel-Aviv Museum. On the same night, around 3,000 people attended various events organized by various organizations in Jerusalem that sponsor a pluralistic orientation toward Judaism.

The seeds of this interest in Jewish culture and tradition among secular Israeli Jews can be traced to the 1960s, with a significant increase being manifested in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. By the end of the 1980s, significant organizations and institutions of study dealing with Jewish history and culture were established for the specific benefit of nonreligious Israelis who wanted to learn more about those subjects. In the late 1990s, the various activities attracted the attention of the mass media. At first, it was unclear how to frame the phenomenon; the terms employed included “return to the Jewish bookshelf,” “Jewish renaissance” and “Jewish renewal” (Rosenthal, 1996; Yassif, 1997; Caspi, 1998; Kenneth, 2000; Bareket, 2004). The term “Jewish renewal” that we employ in this paper relates to the diverse groups and organizations in Israel that share a vision of a pluralistic Jewish society.

The main aim of these Jewish renewal groups is to enable Israeli Jews to articulate their Jewish identity in diverse ways, and to enhance the commitment to the revival of Jewish life on the individual and the collective levels. In order to do this, the organizations and groups feel that they need to overcome the tendency of non-Orthodox Israelis to reject participation in matters relating to creative Jewish study. Our discussion concentrates on what is usually called the “secular sector.”² This arena includes the type of people who studied in the general state educational system in Israel and the communities it serves. Given the nature of activities dealing with identity, the boundaries of this arena are very often porous.

In this article we focus on one of the developing areas in the field, namely the establishment of prayer houses, often called “houses of community” [*batei kehilla*] or “houses of prayer” [*batei tefila*]. In the beginning of 2008, there were about 30 such groups and communities across Israel that gathered for *kabbalat Shabbat* prayers, holiday rituals, and sometimes life cycle ritual celebrations (like *bar/bat mitzvah* ceremonies). Many of the people who participate in these events view themselves as part of the Jewish renewal phenomenon in Israel’s secular arena.

The prayer service that has evolved among the nonreligious population in Israel is one of the most intriguing developments in the Jewish renewal movement. The concept of “Jewish secular worship,” which includes prayer, appeal to God, and some dimension of spirituality, is usually treated as an oxymoron in Israel. The charge, led by

² The definition was first given by Meir Joffe, executive director of Panim for Jewish Renaissance.

Orthodox circles, is that it is simply “not authentic Judaism” (cf. Manof, 1997; Ben, 2002; and Ariel, 2004). A common view of the Israeli public is that prayer and even holiness are alien concepts for the secular sector. Some argue that the nature of Jewish-Israeli religiosity was shaped by the dichotomy that emerged between the religious and nonreligious populations as a result of secular Zionism's rejection of traditional Orthodoxy. These two polar identities, secular and religious, define and produce rather unique identities for individuals belonging to distinct social groups: rational vs. irrational, progressive and modern vs. traditional and backward (Goodman and Yona, 2004). The increased strength of Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox political parties in Israel and the attempts made by these parties to determine the manner in which Judaism is defined by the state, have further intensified the binary nature of these categories (Cohen and Susser, 2000; Tabory, 2003).

Leaders and members of secular prayer houses in Israel challenge this dichotomy—that one has to be either religious or secular. They have created new categories that do not fit into the traditional classifications. There are now increasing numbers of secular Jews who regularly study the Talmud; secular authors who analyze Jewish canonical texts for inspiration for their writing; and even small, but growing numbers of people who perform Jewish rituals and participate in prayer services in secular houses of prayer. (We are wary of calling them synagogues because they are so different from traditional *batei kneset*, and the participants themselves would be taken aback by having their meeting halls classified as such.) These secular persons are not just passive observers but, rather, are active participants and creators of new ceremonial forms, as we can see in the vision of *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Tel-Aviv (<http://www.btfila.org>):

Beit Tefilah Israeli was created to address the lack of a relevant, vibrant Jewish spiritual community among the secular population in Israel, and to infuse it with a unique approach for developing a Jewish community life that combines Jewish and Israeli identities.

Beit Tefilah Israeli targets secular Israelis who have not been successfully courted by other groups... who are looking for ways to explore the world of Jewish communal and spiritual life.

Beit Tefilah Israeli has successfully created a community built around a new model of synagogue. Services in Beit Tefilah Israeli combine live music, modern poetry, literature and personal prayers with the traditional prayer book. This shows a marked effort: to renew and revitalize the notion of prayer and to form a new Israeli liturgical language, offering an extensive foundation for spiritual Jewish expression in an experimental way. As the name “Beit Tefilah Israeli” implies, one of our goals is not only to bring ourselves closer to prayer, but also to bring prayer closer to us – to the place where our Jewish and Israeli identities meet...

This article explores the dynamic changes in Jewish secular activism in Israel during 1995-2007 as the period of time that marked a transformation from more abstract, intellectual interest in Jewish study among secular Jews to a more active role in Jewish prayers and rituals. The empirical bases of this study include responses to questionnaires distributed to members of the Jewish renewal communities and to groups holding *kabbalat Shabbat* ceremonies; analysis of these groups' publications; participant observation of their prayer ceremonies during 2005-2006; semi-structured interviews with 30 leaders and core members of these groups; and perusal of articles

published on the internet and in the general press, as well as analysis of *kabbalat Shabbat* pages, invitations for community events and various handouts distributed during services.

The popular press and various internet forums have given wide coverage to the Jewish renewal phenomenon (cf. Silberberg and Nelson, 2007). Some evaluation research has also been sponsored by foundations and federations active in promoting such activities (cf. Azulay, 2006; Hachohen-Wolf et al., 2006; Ressissi and Berger, 2006; Yair et al., 2006; Ben Sasson-Furstenberg and Cariati, 2007). Researchers have been interested mainly in its organizational aspects (Ben-Peretz and Joffe, 2000; Azulay, 2001; Joffe, 2001); the phenomenon of the pluralistic and secular *batei-midrash* (Ben Avot et al., 2003; Perlmutter and Filser, 2004; Sagiv, 2005; Newberg, 2005; Yair et al., 2006; Hevlin, 2007), and in the identity building process of the members (Sagiv and Lomsky-Feder, 2007). Likewise, some research has been initiated on alternative marriage ceremonies in Israel (cf. Prashizky, 2006; and Tabory and Shalev Lev-Tzur, forthcoming), but in general, academic research of this phenomenon is still in its infancy. In this article we identify this new phenomenon in Israel—organized secular prayer services in the secular arena, and then seek to understand its development.

The article examines the thesis that in a society that merges religious identity and religious practices, the Jewish renewal movement severs the link between religious identity and faith in God, as well as the relationship between faith and worship. People who are involved in this activity try to redefine Jewish cultural identity on both the personal and the collective levels. In order to redefine the field and redraw its boundaries, the leaders of the prayer groups have consciously and reflexively tried to bring about substantial changes in the existing symbolic systems in Israel society.

Prayer communities and Jewish-Israeli rituals in the secular arena

Why are people coming here? Because they feel involved, they are looking for something related to Judaism, but not too heavy, not every other day, once a month is a good enough dose... It leads to a feeling of local pride, a feeling of belonging. People leave with a good feeling, elation, something that leaves a nostalgic pinch. They find it pleasant, and they come back. (Galia Shtern-Bilu, Ahituv community, 2008)

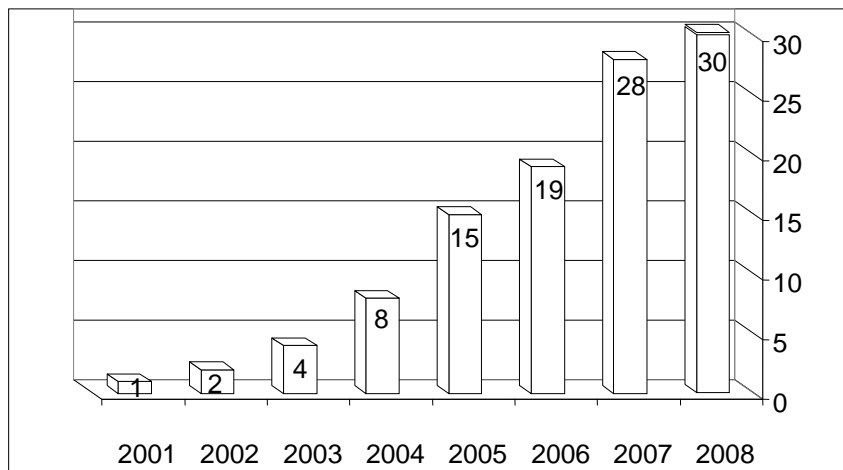
From its very onset, the Jewish renewal movement emphasized knowledge of Jewish sources and intellectual study of Jewish tradition. As time passed and as the persons involved (especially the movement's leaders) became more Jewishly knowledgeable, a well-spring of Jewish communal organization developed that was spiritual in character. These communities focused on Jewish practice more than on Jewish study. The contents and nature of their activities and the frequency of their meetings were determined by each community. Despite the differences between the local groups, they share common features that serve as a basis for the construction of a network of Israeli prayer houses in 2008.

The first secular prayer group, *Niggun Halev* (Melody of the Heart) was founded in 2001 by a group of Jewish educators and residents of the Jezreel Valley, many of them from *Hamidrasha in Oranim*. These persons sought to create a framework for a meaningful expression of Jewish spirituality aimed at addressing the needs of non-affiliated Jewish Israelis (see <http://www.hamidrasha.org.il/>).

As seen in Diagram 1, there were about 30 such communities of worship active in Israel in January 2008 (Azulay and Gur, 2008). The most prominent among them

include *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Tel Aviv, inaugurated in June 2004 and run by two of its founders, Rani Jeager (Chairman of the Board) and Esteban Gottfried (General Director); *Hochmat Halev* [Wisdom of the Heart] founded in 2004 by Eduardo Shoval -a former high tech entrepreneur, in Ramat Hasharon; *Shimshit* in Jezreel Valley, founded by Itamar Lapid from *Hamidrasha in Oranim*; *Olamot* [Worlds]: Israeli Jewish Identity in Upper Nazareth; *Shevet Achim* in Yokneam; *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Gan-Yavne founded by Orly Keneth and Dror Ortasse-Spiegel; *Nava Tehila*- [Beautiful Praise]- an emerging prayer and study community in Jerusalem; and *Achva Behakerem* [Solidarity in the Vineyard], an ecological Jewish community in Jerusalem. (For a list of the communities see: <http://www.panim.org.il/>.)

Diagram 1: The establishment of secular houses of prayer, 2001-2008



The number of participants in the various *kabbalat Shabbat* and holiday services typically ranges from 30 to 100 men and women in each group, but there may be as many as 300 or more participants on holidays and special occasions, and when the *kabbalat Shabbat* services are held outdoors (cf. *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Tel Aviv which regularly hold weekly beach front services during the summer months).

An analysis of the types of settlements in which secular houses of prayer have emerged indicates that half of them were established in the urban milieu of large cities (Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv) as well as small towns (Nazareth-Illit, Yokneam and Migdal-Haemek). The other half of these prayer houses developed in smaller communal areas, like moshav and kibbutz settlements. In geographic terms, two thirds of the houses of prayer are located in the north of Israel, while just a few of them are to be found in the southern part of the country (such as Gan-Yavne and Ashdod). Two houses of prayer were organized in Jerusalem in 2007, and there were plans to form another one in that city in 2008.

Most of the *kabbalat Shabbat* gatherings take place in clubs, school buildings, and local youth cultural centers. Four prayer houses operate in private homes for lack of other facilities. Only one house of prayer operates in dedicated premises, where its members study Judaism during the week. No community has a dedicated facility that is devoted only to prayer services. One agriculture settlement was trying to procure funding for such a building, in 2008, from the official religious establishment in Israel.

Half of the communities assemble monthly, and the other half meet on a bi-weekly or weekly basis. Almost all of the communities gather to celebrate Jewish holidays together in addition to the weekly *kabbalat Shabbat* services. About half of the communities have some form of Jewish education classes, although the number of participants in those classes is much smaller than the number of people who attend the prayer services.

Generally, two or three “prayer leaders” [*movilei tefila*] jointly guide the Sabbath prayers. Additional congregation members almost always have active roles during the service. One of the terms often repeated in the questionnaires was “lighting family” [*mishpacha madlika*]--used to indicate a common practice of having a particular family be responsible each week for candle lighting and other tasks (such as organizing meetings, reading the weekly bible portion, or just making sure that members are informed of weekly announcements). With few exceptions, the same two to four persons who had been instrumental in establishing the local houses of prayer were the ones who also served as prayer leaders.

Most of the prayer leaders had taken various courses in Judaism and/or group leadership and other related subjects at institutions such as the Jerusalem based Shalom Hartman Institute--a pluralistic research and leadership institute at the forefront of Jewish thought and education (<http://www.hartmaninstitute.com>); the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, an educational establishment for men and women of diverse backgrounds who study together in a rigorous, challenging and open-minded environment (<http://www.pardes.org.il>); or Elul Beit-Midrash--the first institution established in the secular arena in 1989 by secular and religious persons together (<http://www.elulbm.org.il>). Some leaders had participated in *Gvanim* [hues of colors], a leadership program (sponsored in Israel by the San Francisco Bay Area Jewish Federation) designed to promote tolerance for diverse forms of Jewish religious expression. Most of the leaders had also participated in various courses in *Hamidrasha in Oranim* (<http://www.hamidrasha.org.il/>). Three of the prayer leaders have a rabbinical diploma from the Tmura program at the Center for Training Secular Humanistic Rabbis in Israel. Five leaders are involved in the Israeli rabbinical training program at the Reform Movement’s Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. Only three of the persons identified as prayer leaders in 2008 indicated that they had not received any previous instruction in Judaism.

The phenomenon of *batei tefila* raises several issues worthy of analysis. In the next paragraphs we will focus on three of them: 1) The consequences and mechanisms that produced a transformation from the learning stage to the performance of Jewish ritual and worship; 2) the ways in which secular Israelis who are not used to traditional prayer construe collective prayer behavior; and 3) the incorporation of typically Israeli elements in the traditional Jewish prayer service.

“They will act and listen (*naaseh ve'nishma*) but we will listen and then decide how to act:” From houses of study to houses of prayer

The phenomenon of formal and informal classes devoted to Jewish learning for nonreligious Jews was often framed in the media, as we earlier pointed out, as a “return to the Jewish bookcase” (cf. Rosenthal, 1996; Yassif, 1997). Often, though, Jewish literacy was not viewed as a goal in itself but rather as a necessary means to help develop a meaningful Jewish identity for individuals who grew up in a secular milieu (Yair, et al., 2006). Over time, as the level of Jewish knowledge increased, some of the persons who were more active in the process, including leaders and

teachers, sought an experiential relationship with Judaism that would go beyond the cognitive orientation that had been sufficient in the past. This desire, to be sure, only characterized some of the participants and institutions. Large differences still exist between organizations, groups and individuals involved in Jewish learning with regard to wanting anything more than Jewish knowledge. Notwithstanding this, increased levels of knowledge corresponded with increased interest in developing rituals and services that would be grounded in Jewish sources, but be shaped in accordance with the worldviews of people who are essentially secular.

The transition from the Jewish intellectual arena to the realm of Jewish ritual has not been easy. Participants in these activities had to first overcome the mental reservations that they had as secular Jews toward ritual service. Indeed, some of our interviewees indicated that they did not necessarily try to intellectualize the services that they developed, but rather to initiate social, spiritual and family activities that gave them a good feeling:

The most important activity here is communal singing. The experience of the adults with their children in the spiritual meeting is very uplifting; a shared experience of transition that separates the weekday from Shabbat. It is important for me to create a Jewish way of being without believing in God, but with a dimension of some holiness. (Niza Cohen, Maabarot, 2008)

Several informants mentioned the self-confidence that they needed in establishing Jewish secular rituals in the face of ridicule and condemnation by the Orthodox establishment (cf., Ariel, 2004; and Arieli, 2004), or by secular people who perceive this to be a first step in becoming Orthodox [*chozer be'tshuva*]:

We don't want to forego Jewish terminology. Why give it up? Because one sector of Judaism took full control of it? "Our" Beit-Midrash, "Our" synagogue, "Our prayers," "Our" God. Everything is "ours" [i.e., theirs—the Orthodox]. I don't want to forego use of these terms. Just the opposite! Why do I have to try and define myself and invent a new dictionary? Because the basic vocabulary is already expropriated [by the Orthodox] or carries so much [Orthodox] meaning?...There is this magical fear that ...if you pronounce religious words you become a part of it [the Orthodox] (Motti Zeira, Hamidrasha in Oranim, 2005).

It is not easy for a person who grew up as a secular Jew, and who is part of a secular community, to say that there is a need for Jewish ritual and prayer, and perhaps even a transcendental approach toward Judaism. This reservation stems from the perception shared by many secular persons that any form of religious based observance or practice is incompatible with rationality and secular principles. The foundation of the movement for Jewish renewal reinforces this feeling. The movement started out as an intellectual exercise that negated Orthodox ritual practice (Azulay, 2001; Sagiv, 2005; Sagiv and Lomsky-Feder, 2007). In Israel, where the terms “religious” and “Orthodox” are commonly perceived as synonymous and overlapping, the association of ritual with Orthodox Judaism deters some secular activists from adopting practices that might lead them to be characterized as “religious.”

...I would like to point out a troublesome phenomenon in this movement – the appropriation and dominance of a religious framework in the discourse of the movement for Jewish renewal...This religiosity stands in

the center of most of [our] organizations and programs. If the deep, internal language that is used by the renewed Jew is a religious-mystical one, then people like me will find themselves outside of the halls of the new beit-midrash. (Tal, 2006)

The impact of liberal Jewish movements in the United States on the Israel Jewish renewal movement has been quite significant, in this regard, as they provide a platform of legitimacy for carrying out religious practice that is not beholden to Orthodox law [*halakha*]. *B'nei Yeshurun* synagogue in New York has had an especially significant influence, as its prayers are less hierarchic and structured (see <http://www.bj.org>). Delegations of Israeli secular activists who visited that non-denominational synagogue, were impressed with the fact that a group composed of hundreds of participants each week could design its own religious service without having to justify it before others. This point was driven home to the Israeli delegations in private discussions with the synagogue's rabbis who explained to them and emphasized that it was legitimate to have different persons lead the ceremony in different ways. For the first time, Israeli Jewish renewal activists experienced a prayer service that led them to collectively realize that they need not follow a particular pattern of practice for it to be recognized as "the right way." This was more than an expansion of their horizons by virtue of their exposure to alternative patterns of practice beyond those that they might have seen before—it was an expansion of their thought processes that allowed them to see that the design of any alternative model is inherently legitimate. The lesson learned was that being different does not mean that one is deviant. This lesson was especially important for people coming from Israel where Orthodox hegemony reigns. This was a lesson that had to be learned abroad, and this was the feeling that the participants wanted to take back and create in Israel. Let's listen to Chen Ben-Or Tsfoni from *Niggun Halev* in Nahalal and Hamidrasha in Oranim (2006):

As a delegation from Hamidrasha [in Oranim] to Bnei Yeshurun, we were shocked at the freedom to be a Jew and realized how this freedom is limited [in Israel]... until then we thought we were at the peak of all activity and suddenly it seemed so limited, because we were studying about Shabbat, but not celebrating it, teaching about holidays, but not really celebrating them, except in the Beit Midrash, and even then we were cautious and doing it without the landmines of any reference to God and holiness.

The lifestyle of those rabbis in Bnei Yeshurun looked...very much like our lifestyle. They are not like the people we meet in a regular Orthodox synagogue in Israel, but they have something spiritual that we are afraid of, and that we still don't know how to use...

We came home and asked, "Do we want this?" And the answer was "Yes," so we began to work on it. Shai [Zarchi], Bini [Talmi] and Moish'ale Itzhaki wrote a prayer book and we started to perform the kabbalat Sabbath service with much excitement.

The courage to admit a need for Jewish-spiritual activity without viewing it as a betrayal of secular principles, together with the ability to create new Jewish rituals based on traditional acts but fashioned in a manner appropriate for the secular sector, have both played a role in the process. However, two more elements were necessary

for the development of houses of prayer for the secular sector: finding appropriate audiences and identifying persons who could take on the necessary leadership roles.

Ritual is a structured public event and a group of people characterized by a structured relationship that ties them together is necessary for its performance (Turner, 2004:182). Secular Israeli Jews who wanted to perform rituals in their own way needed to identify a critical mass of additional people who were interested in participating in the ceremonies. As Rani Jeager (2006) of Beit Tefilah Israeli said in a televised interview:

And then I started to think that maybe there are other people like me... people who are not afraid to say "God" but also not afraid to say that He doesn't exist. People, who want to study but who are also willing to experience...

The need to gather a group of people who could provide the moral and practical support necessary for the creation of a communal Jewish practice explains why the first services were held in the "Niggun Halev" community in Nahalal. Most of the persons involved in this new initiative were from *Hamidrasha in Oranim* and they had resided in or experienced life in a kibbutz. They thus came from a background that had provided them with some degree of familiarity with collective rituals in different stages of their life. Furthermore, many of them had worked and spent much of their free time together, and this had led to a feeling of "family" among them. Indeed, many of them celebrated family life cycle events together, and some of these ceremonies incorporated Jewish traditional texts and lyrics. This was a close knit group with considerable knowledge of Jewish rituals. The transition to ceremonies that expanded the boundaries of Jewish identity or practice was relatively easy for them. These were important facilitating factors that enabled this group to establish the first house of prayer in the secular arena in Israel.

The last hurdle to overcome for the creation of a secular house of prayer was to find persons who were prepared to actually serve as leaders. The difficulty here related to the dilemma of taking on a position that involved authority, when the general orientation of a secular orientation is independence. The rejected rabbinical authority of Orthodox Judaism was replaced by an orientation of individual autonomy, and now there was wariness of establishing an alternative authority structure. Many of the persons involved in initiating houses of prayer found it nearly impossible to accept the role of "ritual authority," even if the role would entail much openness and flexibility. Furthermore, there was fear that people who rejected rabbinic authority would also reject any form of authority within the secular houses of prayer. Overcoming this fear was a complicated but necessary step toward establishing new houses of prayer. Shai Zarchi, one of the first prayer service leaders, explained this:

Suddenly we understood that our secular group was in need of some form of authority – not a person who knows it all, not a person who claims to hold the only truth, not a person who dictates to others what to do, but the authority of a figure with a meaningful spiritual world... The ethos of the secular is not anti-authority but it accepts authority only partly... Later, I found that I had to abandon the ethos of anti-authority that I grew up with on a kibbutz and to be courageous and contribute [my ability] as a leader in the community ...This was something that was new for me. (Shai Zarchi, Prayer leader in Niggun Halev Nahalal, 2006)

We have discussed three issues with which the community had to deal in order to create the houses of prayer. To recapitulate, these included the need for people to realize that they were not alone in a spiritual quest and that other people shared with them this common interest. Confidence in their ability to independently create Jewish ritual in a secular environment was the second issue. The third was the need to develop an authority structure among people who inherently were independent minded. We now turn to the continuing challenges that faced the movement once it got under way.

“Teach me, my God, bless and pray” (Leah Goldberg 1998: 48)

Rituals and ceremonies require an established script, and participants who know the words, motions and symbols. There is a need for persons who can help newcomers learn the ritual language, teach them the group values and how to participate in the established social system (Grimes, 1996). Activists who were developing rituals and ceremonies for secular Jews in Israel found themselves in a situation in which they had to develop ceremonies and organize a cohesive group while they were seeking to explore and crystallize their own values at the very same time.

In the beginning, efforts were made to consolidate a group of adults who for the most part had had little experience with any type of religious ritual, and have them regularly participate in the Friday night *kabbalat Shabbat* service. Many of the early participants experienced embarrassment, not knowing the words or the sequence of ritual acts that at times seemed strange if not outright foolish. At times, the communal singing would die out as attempts were made to sing songs that few people knew. This situation negatively impacted on the flow of the service and the pleasure that could be derived from it. The question of how to coordinate a meaningful prayer service for an audience that was totally unfamiliar with such services and, indeed, that had seen them as alien, had no simple answer.

It is a real challenge for the Israeli secular public to experience the spiritual encounter that they want to have together...I was in Jerusalem on a tour [of synagogues] ...at 5 o'clock in the morning and I saw around me people observing their tradition. People entered...they all knew when to be quiet, when to put on their tefillin [phylacteries], when they should pray with the prayer leader. I thought to myself that these people have and know their tradition...[When I saw this} I asked myself how can we, as a community of people who by and large identify themselves as secular, have a prayer service or observe Shabbat, or have some other ceremony, when we have no tradition, when our people did not see their own parents doing these things, when they do not know the prayers, in short, when they have no tradition. Our task is to create tradition, to make this part of us again. In its essence, this is the biggest challenge that we have.(Chen Tsfoni, Niggun Halev, at a public forum in Tzavta, Tel Aviv, 8.9.2005)

In spite of the initial difficulties in establishing the prayer communities, our respondents reported that the number of participants in the early communities grew steadily.³ We know of just two efforts that did not bear fruition. Our own observations

³ In *Beit- Tefilah Gan Yavne* 10 families started a *kabbaalt Shabbat* service in August 2007. In January 2008 there were 30 families. In 2001, the community of *Niggun Halev* began with 6-7 families and the community expanded to 60 families by 2008. Tel Aviv's *Beit Tefilah Israeli* started with 20 members

over time at *Niggun Halev* in Nahalal, *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Tel-Aviv, and *Olamot* in Upper Nazareth indicate that after three to four years of weekly or bi-weekly communal prayers, most participants feel comfortable and easily take part in the service. To some extent, it has become routine for them. They also easily adapt when changes are made in the order of the prayers or when a different melody is used. Newcomers often receive help from an experienced member who might explain what is being done, and show them the place in the prayer book. Observations of holiday and Sabbath worships revealed several mechanisms to offset strangeness and lack of know-how in the beginning.

The informal character of the meetings appears to be an important factor in the expansion of the communities. The prayers take place in informal settings like clubs, sport halls, and local youth centers, not in a stately awe inspiring domineering temple. These settings are much more conducive to participation for persons who had rarely entered a synagogue in the past. Members chat with one another and have coffee together as the service slowly begins. A prayer leader might play a guitar – an instrument familiar to many Israelis from youth movements, military service and other gatherings. Finally, prayer leaders are ordinary people and make no pretense about being anything else. In spite of their increasing knowledge of Judaism, they too are often confused and unsure about how to continue the service. The fact that the initial participants have almost always been friends or acquaintances prior to the meetings makes them feel comfortable even if they are not experts in what they are doing. They are tolerant of one another and patient with those who are confused, hesitate, or unskilled in their practice. Many of the presenters, as well as those who read prayer selections or bless the wine and *challah-bread* are “beginners” (at least in the early stages of the communities). “Mistakes” and manifestation of inexperience are never criticized and the participants are never given any indication or hint that might lead them to feel badly about what they are doing. The amateur leadership style actually relaxes the participants who understand that the situation is characterized by a collective quest.

I like it most when everything becomes a mess and everyone is walking around and confused, including our leaders. It feels like we are all in it together and making it happen before our eyes, and there is no boss who knows everything. (Participant in Beit Tefilah Israeli, Tel- Aviv October 2006).

A second factor that makes participants feel comfortable is the active participation of quite a few persons in the service on a rotation basis. The participants perform their roles in as well as they can, even if they are not totally proficient in the tasks performed. The general feeling is one of tolerance and understanding. While the participants eventually gain experience in the various roles they fulfill, they also learn to develop a forgiving attitude for doing things differently, even if they are done in a manner that some might consider is “wrong” in some way.

The active involvement also leads these persons to be more committed to the community. Several members lead the prayer. Other members take turns in welcoming new persons, showing participants what to do, giving the weekly *dvar torah* [sermon], and organizing the logistics of refreshments and flowers and anything else that has to be done.

in 2005, and in 2008 there were 80-100 participants at every *kabbalat Shabbat* service. Tel-Mond had just a couple of families participate in 2007 but tens of families participated in 2008 on a routine basis.

Prayer leaders use different means to foster feelings of familiarity and ease with the rituals, such as repeating a new melody many times until people can pick it up themselves as well as providing an explanation for the origin of melodies, liturgy and practices. Explanations and instructions are given to indicate the course of the service. (These activities are similar to what one finds in a “learners” or “beginners” service in synagogues in the United States.) An expanded explanation might be rendered regarding selections that include a direct appeal to God, since many of the participants might be uncomfortable with such a prayer (especially given the consideration that participants in the Israeli services understand the Hebrew prayers).

Generally, secular participants need some form of mediation [i.e., explanation or interpretation]. One of the things I learned from prayer services in the United States is that many congregants don't understand the words of the prayers. It is like a mantra to them. And then I realized that in Israel, for people unfamiliar with Jewish prayers, praying is like crossing the Red Sea.... But if you are interested in ancient words—words that incorporate much beauty and meaning, then you have to work on pushing the limits of their meaning, to expand their perspective so that the people will feel comfortable with them. (Shai Zarchi, Niggun Halev in Nahalal, 2006)

In order to create a meaningful religious experience, a critical mass of community members has to have “religious capital” (Iannaccone, 1990)--acquired knowledge, expertise, ability and the emotional skills that can be activated intuitively and spontaneously during the ceremony. In order to accumulate religious capital appropriate to a house of prayer in the secular arena, one needs to obtain some first-hand experience in ritual. There are three sources for this “religious capital” in this movement. First, there is the North American experience, as Federations sponsor occasional trips to the United States with the intention of exposing the participants to pluralistic Judaism. Second, interviewees told us about their visits to liberal (Reform or Conservative) synagogues or other non-denominational prayer houses in Israel in order to see how things are done elsewhere. These visits are sometimes carried out as a group. Capital is also shared among groups, as communities help out one another when necessary. There seems to be some tendency toward a process of institutionalization in this regard, as some of the leaders of these independent community prayer groups (that want to have nothing to do with any established religious denomination) undertake reciprocal visits and exchange practical information about the conduct of their own prayer groups.

On an institutional level, some of the establishments that have Jewish learning programs for secular Jews now conduct classes on prayer services. For example, *Hamidrasha in Oranim* organized a series of meetings on the “Face [nature] of the Sabbath” for prayer leaders in the northern part of the country). In Hefer Valley, *Zayit [Olive] – The Center for Cultural Jewish Identity*, offered a course for people who are considering the possibility of establishing a new community of prayer and *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Gan-Yavne was officially accompanied in its first steps by *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Tel Aviv. These cooperative efforts allow different groups to establish their own ways in constructing an appropriate style of worship, but they also create a framework for the exchange of ideas and sharing of thoughts. A topic that routinely comes up in these network meetings was the nature of the “Israeli” characteristics of the services, and the relationship between Israeli culture and traditional texts.

“We will sanctify this day by the whiteness of our shirts and in tranquil song:”⁴ Between Judaic and Israeli characteristics

On a Friday night in the Niggun Halev prayer community, there is a pause in the service after a chapter of Psalms glorifying God has been sung. The prayer leader says a few words about the events of the previous week, and the community then sings “Sabbath descended on Ginosar Valley”- a song by Joshua Rabinov and David Zahavi.⁵ In *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Tel Aviv, the traditional *kol nidrei* prayer on Yom Kippur Eve is immediately followed by a song by Lea Goldberg, “You will walk in the field” and a song by Nathan Zach, “All of us need compassion” is sung following a traditional prayer, “For the sin that we have sinned before You.”

All the houses of prayer combine traditional liturgy with the reading or singing of contemporary Israeli poetry and songs. This combination is emphasized not only during the service but also in the advertisements inviting outsiders to participate in the services:

*The prayer service is a place for people who are looking for a means of spiritual and individual expression and introspection. The activity is intended for families – men and women, parents and children, all together. The prayer will include selections from the traditional Yom Kippur prayer book, Modern Hebrew poetry and additional sources, with singing and music accompaniment.*⁶

The analysis of publications and observations of ritual performances indicates that Israeli Zionist secular culture is very much a part of the service in the houses of prayer. An additional ritual, which highlights this phenomenon, is the adaptation of the traditional Saturday night *havdala* service separating Shabbat from the weekdays that follow for a service marking the end of Israel’s Memorial Day (Remembrance Day) and the beginning of Independence Day. This service, created by members of Tel Aviv’s *Beit Tefilah Israeli* (observed in 2006), includes selections from modern Hebrew literature and songs (a poem by Yehuda Amichai, a song by Hanoh Levin, selections from Shmuel Yosef Agnon and others), quotes from traditional Jewish sources, such as the prayer for the deceased, Rabbi Nachman of Breslev’s prayer for peace, legends from the Talmud, psalms, and variations of traditional *havdala* [Saturday night service separating Shabbat from the ensuing weekdays] blessings. Creation of an Israeli-Jewish service for Remembrance Day – an important symbol in the Israeli national ethos –along with the incorporation of selections of traditional prayers shows that these two fields of Jewish tradition and of Hebrew-Israeli culture are merging among secular activists. The *havdala* candle in this ceremony symbolizes not only the ritual itself but also the memorial candle of Remembrance Day and the state torch lighting ceremony marking Independence Day. The blessing said at the Remembrance Day *havdala* ceremony is:

⁴ From a *kabbalat Shabbat* song in Kibbutz Nir Eliyahu.

⁵ This song appears in many books of Sabbath prayer used by the communities, for example in “*Rakeffet*,” “*Ein Dor*,” “*Ein HaShofet*,” “*Shevet Ahim*,” in Yokneam and “*Shimshit*” communities. For the Hebrew and English versions of these songs see: <http://www.hebrewsongs.com/?songID=2656>

⁶ From an email message sent in 2007 in Shimshit .See http://ipaper.co.il/shimshit/files/misc/yom_kippur_2006.html accessed 1.11.2007

Blessed are Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who distinguishes between the sacred and the mundane, between light and dark, between mourning and holiday, between Remembrance day and Independence day. Blessed are Thou, Lord, who distinguishes between the sacred and the sacred.

This blessing is indicative of the porous boundary between Jewish tradition and Israeli culture. For Jewish activists, Jewish tradition and Israeli culture become bound up into one sphere. Tradition is not discarded; rather, it is used as a platform upon which a flexible building of prayers and services can be constructed. Each prayer group can choose the specific elements that are consonant with their values and needs from this expanded universe of symbols and meanings. The services can thus be molded and altered when new circumstances so warrant.

The integration of Israeli culture into the prayer service helps make that service palatable to secular Jews. At times, the Israeli component of the service explains and elaborates on the traditional prayers; at other times, the text confronts and challenges Orthodox interpretations that people might find hard to accept. For example, “*Hallelujah*” by Shimrit Or and Koby Oshrat: “*Hallelujah to the world, everyone will sing one word only, and the heart is full of thanks. And beats as well what a wonderful world*” is a more contemporary expression of joy in this world that can be easily absorbed and shared in by the participants, rather than marking God’s greatness in the traditional prayer book with the words “Oh praise God in His holiness; Praise Him in the firmament of His power; Praise Him in His noble acts, Praise Him according to His excellent greatness...” (Psalms, 150).

A prayer like “God abounding in mercy” [*El maleh rachamim*], which is recited at memorial services for the transcendence of the soul of the deceased, is sometimes difficult for persons to accept given their own tragedies and experiences with wars and disasters. Attempts are made to accommodate the bitter feelings that people might have about their life experiences. For example, a poem written by Amichai that carries an opposite meaning--anger against God who abandoned “His” child--is said immediately following the traditional *el malei rachamim* prayer at the ceremony marking the transition from Remembrance Day to Independence Day. The title of the poem is “God Has Pity on Kindergarten Children:” “*God has pity on kindergarten children. He has less pity on school children. And on grownups he has no pity at all.*” In the same manner, the poem “Sacrificing,” written by Raya Hernik in memory of her son Gony killed in the Lebanon war, is said after the *Kaddish* prayer which praises God. This hybridization can be seen as defiance, making it possible for a secular person to cry and call out to the heavens as part of an emotional experience of prayer.

The formation of ritual brings the ongoing tension between tradition and innovation to the fore (Turner, 1974; Berger, 1979; Grimes, 2000). This is also true in the Jewish secular arena (Goren, 1995). There is tension between institutionalized Jewish tradition and autonomous self expression, and between texts expressing the continuity of Jewish heritage and the contemporary culture of modern Israel. There is a dilemma in fashioning prayers directed to a transcendental entity when the very existence of God can be a question of debate.

The fact that traditional texts and modern texts are interspersed in the prayer book creates a discourse with tradition that involves dialogue. The prayer service is not just a passive acceptance of an authorized text. Rather, it is open to interpretation that

enables each community to express its own voice. As Shlomit Ortasse Shpiegel (*Beit Tefilah Israeli*, Gan Yavne, 2008) says:

I know that it is easier to be part of something already organized, but it is important for me to be part of something new, to influence the way it is going to be made... For example we argued about the measure of religious and Israeli elements in the service. Some people thought that it should be mainly a social get-together, but I felt that if the service isn't connected to tradition and if the prayer does not incorporate contemporary Israeli features, I will stop going there. Social meetings-- we can organize those in other ways... it was important for me to take part in shaping [the service].

Conclusion

Questions regarding the role of religion in contemporary society have been raised in recent years by theoreticians who challenge claims about the inevitable decline of religion in a linear manner leading to complete secularization (Grimes, 2000; Hervieu-Leger, 2005; Latur, 2005; Casanova, 2006). Without taking a position about the veracity of any side in this debate, we note that Israeli society illustrates a more complex approach to the issue of religious identity (Goodman and Yona, 2004). State support of Orthodox Judaism has led to a religious hegemony that bestows on to that denomination sole legitimacy as the representative of the religious tradition. The negation of religion by early Zionists contributed to this perception by leaving a void, so that “religious” and “non-religious” became the popular means of identifying oneself as a Jew. “Traditional” Jews formed a middle category only because they did not easily fit into one of the polar categories. In this religious milieu, persons or groups seeking to establish a religious identity not based on Orthodox Judaism were seen as deviants. The movement for Jewish renewal is trying to spearhead a move to create a hybrid identity for the secular sector that is based on Israeli culture as well as traditional Jewish sources, and to do this in a positive and unapologetic manner. The houses of prayer are attempting to create a new secular Jewish identity that will have an impact on the public discourse regarding religiosity in Israel.

In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary to undertake collective action that went beyond the houses of study that had been earlier established. Houses of study were an invaluable source of Jewish learning that was necessary to provide the activists with the basic knowledge that they needed to proceed further. The houses of prayer provide a platform for these persons to meet, discuss, debate and ponder the borders of their identity. In doing this, they also dealt with the very basic question of how to express an emerging identity. This process entails the transformation of individuals into a group, and a quest based on cognitive learning into a holistic approach to Judaism.

Some thirty houses of prayer have been established in the period between 2001 and 2008. With but a few exceptions, these houses have grown and expanded their activities. The number of persons in the various communities who participate on a regular basis ranges from tens of members to about a hundred. Many more persons have passed through their doors and have been exposed to a new approach to Jewish life. By the nature of the activities, it is hard to imagine a tremendous expansion in size, given that the potential audience identifies itself as secular Jews. The importance of the communities lies not in their absolute size, but in that they are creating new arenas for a definition of Jewish identity. This new hybrid identity, based on Israeli and traditional Jewish sources, is not subordinate to the dichotomy of one's being

either “secular” or “religious.” This development may have a substantial impact on Israeli society in the future if it succeeds in radically altering the discourse of religiosity in Israel. While there are many factors that can have an impact on identity in Israeli society, these communities are attempting to show that a quest for alternative ways in experiencing Judaism is legitimate.

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Photo by Naama Azulay, *Kabbalat Shabbat* in *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in port of Tel-Aviv, 15 August, 2008



Photo by Naama Azulay, *Havdala* service separating the end of Israel's Memorial Day and the beginning of Independence Day, in *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in Tel-Aviv, 2006



Photo courtesy of Galia Shtern-Bilu, Sabbath community in *Beit-Ha'am* in *moshav Ahitov*, 16 November, 2007



Photo by Naama Azulay, *Kabbalat Shabbat* in *Beit Tefilah Israeli* in port of Tel-Aviv, 15 August, 2008