

Elu v'Elu: Towards Integration of Identity and Multiple Narratives in the Jewish Renewal Sector in Israel

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Abstract

Secular Israelis are reconnecting to Judaism in an increasingly growing range of ways. This trend has been accelerating over the last ten years. Whether through *beit midrash* programs or communities of *kabbalat shabbat* prayer and celebration, Jews who had identified as secular and as such did not seek Jewish expression in their lives beyond the national Jewish calendar of Israel, are now finding ways of maintaining their secular identity while actively pursuing increased Jewish engagement at the same time. As the diversity of programs and activities expands, so do the ways of creatively connecting to Judaism and attempting to present a societal and cultural alternative to the previous “secular” and “religious” dichotomy. Both leaders of the organizations and participants in their various programs recognize that the process of reconnection to Judaism is not a passing phase, but a transformation of their identities as Israelis and/or as Jews. The pluralistic *batey midrash* and prayer communities deliberately provide the structures and processes by which the non-observant, with modern values, ideas, knowledge and lifestyle, can be integrated and transformed by an identity that can hold multiple narratives, views and attitudes. This takes place through transformative Jewish text study or community celebration, and a thoughtful educational approach. The article draws on theories

of transformative learning as well as the analysis of scholars who have examined the elements that contribute to integration and formation of healthy Jewish identity. It locates this phenomenon in light of changes taking place in the North American Jewish community and liberal Jewish communities in Israel, as well as the mutual, ongoing influences between and among these organizations.

Keywords: Jewish identity, pluralism, innovation, *tefila*, community, renewal, *batey midrash*, *kehillot tefila*

Introduction

While the gap between those in Israel who view themselves as *datiim*¹ (religious) and those who are considered *hilonim*² (secular) is increasing because of political developments³ over the last few years, this paper points to a new identity evolving among individuals who still identify as secular, but whose approach to Judaism has outgrown the old labels – it is neither strictly “secular” nor “religious.” One of the leaders of this new trend remarked with a wink during an interview that he could not seriously call himself “*hiloni*” anymore.⁴ He is, he said, “*hiloni lite*” (neither really *dati*, nor totally *hiloni*).⁵ Another leader speaking at

1 While the word literally means “religious,” it is comparable to the streams of Orthodox Judaism in North America.

2 *Hiloni*, which is best translated as “secular,” does not have the same connotation as the term does in North American society. It refers to those Israelis whose lifestyle and choices are not dictated by religious law (*halakha*) and who for the most part are not observant and often not knowledgeable about traditional practice and texts. A third category, “*masorti*,” referred once mainly to *Mizrabi* Jews of who observed ritual in a traditional manner, but did not affiliate as “*dati*” for cultural reasons or reasons of observance, or both. Today, the term is taking on a broader meaning, to include Jews from the liberal streams and other contexts who observe some traditions but have reservations about the “*dati*” label or lifestyle.

3 Among the sources of tension between religious and non-religious Jews in Israel is the adherence of the religious public to the belief that the territories held by Israel since the Six Day War are holy and that they therefore should not be part of any territorial compromise toward reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinian people. Tension has heightened even more after Rabin's assassination by a “religious” Jew.

4 Names of the informants will remain confidential to preserve their anonymity unless explicit permission was granted or unless the reference is to a public lecture or presentation.

5 The word “lite” was used in English, although the conversation was conducted in Hebrew. The parallel term of “*dati* (religious) lite,” i.e., a religious Jew who does

a conference called for getting away from these “now-irrelevant labels that do nothing but foster separation and dissension.”⁶ Both comments point to the fluidity of identities and to the misleading nature of their corresponding labels.

Since 2001, I have been studying this phenomenon of evolving identities among secular Israeli Jews who connect to Judaism through study and innovative ritual. Indeed, a creative frenzy of ground-up initiatives, mainly over the past twenty years, has given rise to an entire new world of Jewish activity in Israel, with many ripple effects including new categories of identity that seem to challenge the secular-religious binary paradigm.⁷

Underlying this burgeoning of activity is an attempt to confront what is lacking in the national identity, and a corresponding need for a stronger sense of belonging and purpose. This need has led many secular Israelis to seek connections with the earlier generations of Jews whose writings and lives created and shaped Judaism, from biblical times to the present. They hunger for something beyond the immediate demands of daily life including caring for the land, for individuals and their immediate circle.⁸

not have both feet firmly planted in the religious world, is in conventional usage, mentioned and explained in articles in the newspaper *Maariv* of 01/15/2007, “*Al Tikra Li Lite*” by Eynat Barzilay in *Yediot Aharonot* of 01/14/2010, and “*Mihu Dati Lite*” by Rabbi Shlomo Avineri. “*Hiloni lite*,” in contrast, is a neologism reflecting the need for new categories.

6 Moti Zeira at the conference on Shabbat celebration in Tel Aviv (March 2005) at Tzavta.

7 For example, Women of the Wall, a group of women who gather to pray on Rosh Hodesh, was constrained for over a decade by police interpreting a Supreme Court Ruling regarding their right to conduct non-ultra-Orthodox services at the Western Wall. Recently, in April 2013, the Jerusalem Magistrates Court reinterpreted the Supreme Court ruling in favor of the women. One might conjecture that in an earlier climate of orthodox-secular binary, such a ruling would not have been issued.

8 During July and August of 2011, Israel experienced the first wave of an unprecedented awakening of social unrest that began as a protest against the price of housing and grew to be a critique of the economic system in Israel. The slogan became, “The people demand social justice,” and at its peak the movement had more than 400,000 people demonstrating for social change, including equal economic opportunity and calling for change in the government’s priorities, to be more attentive to Israeli society’s weak sectors. Many participants and activists in Israeli Jewish renewal programs have joined the call for change at all levels and have created opportunities to combine Jewish practice with their own demands. For an example, of the changes taking place, one could see in the summer of groups of protesters readings of the Scroll of Eicha (Lamentations) on

Methodology

Since the fall of 2001, I have been studying the phenomenon of secular Israeli Jews as they connect to Judaism through study, ritual, community building and social action. As someone who hails from the same background as the "*hilonim*" described in this paper, and who has been exposed to pluralistic congregational life and innovative forms of Jewish engagement in North America, I became interested in the phenomenon of Jewish Renewal as it started to emerge in Israel. I was interested in understanding the particular ways in which it was taking shape, and to what extent it was influencing how people viewed Judaism and their identity. Given my prior academic interest in organizations, I aimed also to obtain a deeper understanding of the organizational structures and dynamics that this particular new phenomenon was creating.

I was guided by two theoretical frameworks for qualitative social research that aim to interpret, decode, describe and translate social phenomena, and not to prove or disprove a set of hypothesis: clinical social research (Geertz, 1984) in order to study the phenomenon at the organizational level, and narrative research methodology, to trace the experience of individuals in the movement. Informing my work at all times was a social systems approach that framed all that I was hearing, seeing and reading.

The first of these theoretical frameworks, clinical research, (Berg & Smith, 1984) is a discipline that combines qualitative research methodology with a systemic view of organizations, taking into account not only particular events and details in an organization's life (Schon, 1971) but also relational and behavioral patterns. Understanding these patterns, their meaning and their importance for the organization being studied, is its purpose. Clinical research supports the understanding that there is no objective truth regarding an organization, by prescribing the active recruitment of as many different interpretations from as many members as possible, to ultimately reach a composite picture based on all the information gathered and a great deal of interpretation.

The outcome of clinical research, such as that described here, is an organizational profile that stresses, inter alia, relationships among leaders, staff, and participants, how decisions are made, and the ways in which the organizations evolve in terms of their mission and purpose in light of political and national events as well as in light of the personal lives of those involved.

Rothschild Boulevard, the "headquarters" of the protest and a mainly secular venue.

For the topic at hand, however, a study at the organizational level was not sufficient. Given that Israeli Jewish Renewal is such an unprecedented departure from the life of the segment of Israeli society involved in it, it was important to achieve a deep understanding of the individual journeys, stories, and the meanings that activists and participants attributed to their experiences. Therefore, narrative research methodology, especially as advanced by Lieblich, Tuval Mashiach, and Zilber (1998), was adopted.

In both of these theoretical approaches, data collection is an iterative process carried out by immersing oneself in the subject being observed and researched, in search of patterns and interactions as well as paradoxes and questions. The researcher, as a listener, observer, and interpreter, becomes a temporary, partial participant in the life of the organization. Data collection also includes in-depth, open-ended interviews, and analysis of existing written materials. The result is a “thick description” of the organization.

My initial foray into the research began with immersion into one of the renewal organizations during my sabbatical in Israel, as a participant in the Elul Beit Midrash,⁹ a pluralistic *beit midrash* in Jerusalem whose mission is to foster dialogue between the “religious” and “secular” populations by offering them frameworks for joint study of Jewish texts. From September through June, I joined other students as a participant in two weekly four-hour sessions. These included studying in *havruta*, teaching when my turn came, being part of the opening and closing circles, participating in the annual field trip, attending closing projects and ceremonies at the end of the year, and so on. Alongside my participation as an ordinary student, I conducted in-depth interviews that ranged from one to two hours, and sometimes more, with both faculty members and administrators (four teachers and one administrator), students (five in-depth interviews and one focus group with 6 students), and in-depth interviews with two founders of Elul. At the same time that I was participating in Elul, I visited, observed, became acquainted with, and conducted multiple interviews with the faculty and staff of the Midrasha at Oranim, and the person who established and directed Panim, the umbrella organization of all the Jewish Renewal organizations in Israel. When observing an

9 ELUL is an acronym for “*Elu V’elu Divrey EloHim Chayim*” (“These and those are the words of the living God) originally said about the arguments between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, implying that both positions are equally valuable because both are God’s words (BT Eruvin 13).

organization that I wasn't intimately involved with, I interviewed the leaders and relied on them to direct me to potential interviewees in their program. In institutions I became acquainted with, like Elul, and later, Nigun HaLev and Beit Tefila Israeli, I approached active individuals without an intermediary. Each interview took a little over an hour.

In qualitative social research it is acknowledged that the researcher has her own conscious and unconscious biases, frames of reference, and emotions, that may produce unintentional "filtering" (Miller & Mintzberg, 1983). It is important, therefore, to follow what Schon refers to as the process of describing, reframing, and redesigning, again and again, to make sure that the descriptions and interpretations are as valid as possible, and to carry out what Miles (1983) refers to as "site updates." These are in line with Schon's "reflection in action" (1983), or what Berg and Smith (1985) refer to as "process of introspection," and include journal keeping and feedback from colleagues as necessary.

I therefore committed myself to revisiting and re-interviewing many of the key individuals at the institutions with which I had initially established a close relationship. Since 2002 I have conducted at least six or seven interviews every summer, participated in study sessions in many of the *batey midrash* and in Shabbat services in the two main *kehillot tefila*, interviewed a number of their participants, and performed repeat interviews with the staffs of Beit Tefila, Nigun HaLev, the Midrasha, Elul, Alma, Tehuda, Kolot, Chochmat Halev, Panim, BINA, the Secular Yeshiva in its original Tel Aviv and newer Jerusalem branch, and more. I also participated in five conferences/gatherings devoted to particular aspects of the renewal phenomenon, including Shabbat and High Holidays, in two conferences on themes of *nigunim* sponsored by the Midrasha at Oranim, and more. I subscribed to all their list-serves, and follow them continually on Facebook and other social media. Each time new information is added, the process of data gathering, interpretation, analysis, and recalibration continues.

The mushrooming of these programs over the past decade is anything but obvious, and lends itself to many potential avenues of exploration. Following my initial research, it became clear that beyond the goal of answering the question of what changes are taking place in Israel related to the evolving trend towards renewal of Jewish engagement the findings constituted a case study in the interplay between changing identities and the development of Jewish educational and community programming. The current developments in this area in Israel constitute one of the boldest and most dynamic case studies of the interface

between Jewish identity formation and the educational goals of literacy, activism, and practice over the past twenty years. The springing up of Israeli initiatives motivated and characterized by dialogue with Jewish tradition are part of a phenomenon being described by some who are a part of it as “Israeli Jewish Renewal.”¹⁰ This movement is distinct from the American Jewish renewal movement, connected for the most part with Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi and the ALEPH Alliance, though there is some degree of interface between the leaders of both phenomena.¹¹

This paper, at its core, presents the relevant findings in the form of a detailed overview of exciting Israeli developments that are part of the Israeli Jewish Renewal, including their educational methodologies and philosophies. However, necessary background information is first in order. The following section, therefore, provides the origins, dynamics and implications of Israeli secular identity in Israel, as a key to understanding the context in which Israeli Jewish Renewal has emerged. This section is historical but also based on interviews with current renewal activists concerning their identity.

The overview of activity in the field is then introduced, divided into three sub-sections that cover the gamut of initiatives: study frameworks (modern, egalitarian, uniquely Israeli “*batey midrash*”), community prayer forums that might be called “congregations” (*kehillot tefila*) but are self-defined as secular, thus lacking the religious connotation of a congregation; and initiatives in activism and social justice that are in direct dialogue with the Jewish tradition and sources. While there is a certain degree of crossover between the individuals active in the various organizations and programs, and while the activities involve a range of styles and programs, the paper will describe in broad strokes the shared characteristics of organizations in each category.

The final part of the paper examines the findings from two main

10 While some scholars, such as Werczberger and Azulay (2011), call this phenomenon a New Social Movement and have strong conceptual arguments to back their claim, some of the movement’s leaders are not totally comfortable with the title and the responsibilities it entails. And yet, they feel not only a sense of belonging and kinship with their colleagues in the various organizations in the realm of Israeli Jewish Renewal, but also a sense that they are part of a new path toward transformation and meaning-making in the realm of Israeli identity.

11 The Jewish Renewal Movement in North America fosters deep personal and communal spirituality. Some groups in Israel within the Renewal Movement are adopting similar ways of relating to Judaism. The connections between them are developing and growing, generating new modes of Jewish creativity in both places.

angles. First, the role of the study, prayer, and activism frameworks in identity formation is considered in light of theoretical work regarding “integration” and “good identity.”

Second, the implications for Jewish education in North America are weighed. While the Israeli and American cases defy comparison on a number of levels, one parallel is inarguable: the assimilated or disaffected segments of the American Jewish public have in common with secular Israelis, a lack of basic knowledge about and even an alienation from Jewish tradition and sources. The ongoing crisis in Jewish education on both continents leaves no choice but to learn from each community's relevant experience and to promote mutual adoption of initiatives to the extent possible, including any observations on one side that might inform the other.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and considerations for future research.

Secular Identity in Israel

While all Israelis' lives are based on Jewish culture to a certain degree, for modern Jewish Israelis who view themselves as *hilonim*, a fundamental rupture exists between Jewish culture and Israeli culture.¹² Many *hilonim* have not yet accessed the Jewish heritage that is the basis for their Israeli cultural identity.

To a large extent, this is the result of the secular-religious split, an outgrowth of the vision of the founding generation of the State of Israel. The founders very deliberately left behind traditional Judaism for their dream of an independent Jewish state based upon secular socialist, economic, and social values. Having discarded the authority structures of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, including religious observance, they created a country based on new beginnings in every sphere – a revitalized Hebrew language, Hebrew culture, and a modern national Jewish army, culminating in a new identity for the exemplary citizen of the new country. In order to preserve social cohesion, the religious factions were offered certain concessions, including the right to state-funded independent education, the option of exemption from military service, and control of marriage laws. The secular-religious rift grew even deeper as a result, with political tensions contributing to further alienation and increased points of contention between the populations.

12 The “*hiloni*” label also does not necessarily refer to faith or belief in God, but rather to whether the individual upholds Jewish religious law.

In discussing the phenomenon of the early Zionists' staunch secularism, Yael Zerubavel points out that their determination that the "ideal new Israeli" not be oppressed by rabbinic authority or by anti-Semitism led them to discard all aspects of religious observance, lest it be construed as an acceptance of rabbinic authority. The ideal citizen was to be strong, independent, healthy, and physically attractive; in stark contrast to the pale yeshiva student, he would be committed exclusively to the future, refusing to look back (Zerubavel, 1995).

To a large extent, the dreams of Israel's founding generation were achieved. However, one of the results of this dichotomous thinking has been a loss of connection to and knowledge of Jewish tradition, despite a strong secular identity with Jewish ethnic and national components. Therefore, while part of secular Israeli identity entails strong ties to the land of Israel, Israeli culture, and the Hebrew language, and while much of Israel's official culture is based upon Jewish values and ideas – the calendar, holidays, connections between modern Hebrew and the Hebrew of sacred texts, and so on – the lives of secular Israelis have generally not been connected to Judaism as a culture or as a source of inspiration for constructing meaning.¹³

Israeli Jewish renewal is therefore a deviation from former patterns. What has brought on this search for a Jewish connection? Interviews with participants and activists in the programming that is the topic of this paper indicate that the crisis of meaning has been an important catalyst. The "new" identity introduced by the founding generation of Israel set the stage for a crisis: in promoting a complete dissociation from *galut* (Diaspora) identity, it exacted a high price in the form of denial and repression that weakened the sense of connection that might otherwise have helped to create meaning in the face of the successive traumas endemic to Israeli life.

The Israelis of the second and third generations who merely inherited the choice to leave behind the Judaism that the first generation knew and rejected were born into a difficult reality without fully understanding or knowing in any deeply meaningful way why they were living in the Jewish State. For many, the nation's political upheavals and its difficult, tragic, and even shocking¹⁴ wars brought with them a

13 See footnote 15 below, quoting Ruth Calderon in 2013.

14 The Yom Kippur War raised questions about Israel's preparedness, arousing feelings of vulnerability and uncertainties regarding national decision-making. Since then, with the subsequent military campaigns, there has been an increasing sense of relentless vulnerability, and at times of tragedy.

number of existential questions about living in Israel. The Yom Kippur War, the Lebanon War, Rabin's assassination, and all the subsequent crises within Israel left their marks on the psyche of many Israelis, and raised questions about their identity as Israeli Jews. Zerubavel (2002) discusses the effect of the continuous wars and trauma on the "new Israeli" who has, over the past sixty years, attempted to create an identity as "robust, daring, and resourceful."

Many interviewees from the *batey midrash* and *kehillot tefila* mentioned the core question of why one should live in Israel, especially in light of the difficulties that emerged following the Yom Kippur War. Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983) discuss the erosion of the redemptive power of the Zionist ideology partially as a result of the settler-movement adherents defining their beliefs and actions as "true Zionism," leaving those who disagree with the national religious movement with the need to attempt to define their own Zionism. These individuals state that in light of these and other changes, the total commitment to the redemptive power of the Zionist dream has cracked and weakened. Thus, in the words of a man who fought in the First Lebanon War and who today is one of the leaders of this movement:

I swore that if I came out of this nightmare alive, I would need to look at what the hell I was doing in this country. Since this is my home and I have no other place that I want to live, the only response I could find was to deepen my connection to Judaism and examine how it is connected to my life in this place.

Other interviewees likewise mentioned their need for connecting to something larger, deeper, and more rooted, and their desire to figure out what their life in Israel meant (as opposed, for example, to a life in the United States or France). A few interviewees mentioned the term "*hithabrut*" (becoming connected) as their reason for engaging in this new mode of being Israeli. When asked what the target of their desired connectedness was, they mentioned the past, the traditions of the past, and the stories of important characters in the Jewish narrative that inspired them in finding echoes in their own lives and in the major moral and ethical questions of their lives. "Why did no one tell me about Talmud?" said one of the teachers at the Secular Yeshiva. "No one told me about the riches of the language and the stories." "I can't see my life without connecting to the stories of these holy people," said a person who mentioned at the same time that he sees no problem at all eating on Yom Kippur. "It's not about religion," he said. "It is about connection to

the Jewish stories and their inspiration for my life." Another interviewee said:

We [secular Jews - A.N.] have the particular filter of Judaism that bridges it with universalism. We have to create a narrative, a point of view based on values. It is important to have a way of distinguishing what is good from what is bad, what is holy and what is not.

By connecting to Jewish knowledge, study, and tradition, they hope to gain not just knowledge but also a sense of purpose and meaning in a manner that acknowledges complex, multi-dimensional identity formation, and does not necessitate relinquishing their modern, Western sensibilities and predilections. Filling in the gaps between the duality of being an Israeli who lives in the "secular domain" on one hand, and living in a country that is defined as Jewish but that has a large population that was not exposed to the Jewish aspect of its existence is one of the central motivations for the emergence of this phenomenon.¹⁵

Facts on the Ground: The Institutions of Israeli Jewish Renewal

A saying in *Ethics of the Fathers*, quoted in the name of Shimon Ha-Tsadik, specifies that the world rests on three pillars: Torah study, worship and deeds of loving kindness. (Chapter 1, Mishna 2) The initiatives of Israeli renewal aggregate roughly into these three categories – “*Batey Midrash*,” “prayer communities” and “forums for activism” – despite crossover between individuals active in them and the uniqueness of programming that sometimes defies categorization. Each category will be described below in greater detail.

It was two pioneering *batey midrash* that set the Renewal movement into motion in 1989: Elul, in Jerusalem and the Midrasha at Oranim Educational Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life. The movement has since expanded significantly, such that today there is an entire network of *batey midrash*, called “Midreshet,”¹⁶ comprising twenty-five member

15 The latest example of this is the inaugural speech of Knesset member Ruth Calderon, one of the most influential people in this movement, who was the founder of Elul Elu V'Elu and Alma. She referred in her remarks to her secular upbringing and identity: *Already as a young woman I felt something was missing. Something about Israeli identity, new and free, was good and nice but something was missing. The depth was missing. the past was missing, plots, heroes, places, drama, stories... When I encountered the Talmud, I found my heart's love* (my translation).

16 In Hebrew it is a play on the words “*midrash*” and “*reshet*,” meaning network. Thus: a network of *batey midrash*.

organizations. Some of the *batey midrash*, such as Elul, have multiple sites and programs throughout the country, which makes the count difficult. Panim for Jewish Renewal, the umbrella organization of all the pluralistic organizations in Israel, encompasses fifty-five *batey midrash* and *kehillot lomdot* (learning communities).

Following the *batey midrash*, and out of a feeling that studying even in an engaged and participatory manner was insufficient, some of the members of the Midrasha established Nigun HaLev, the first *kehila*, which in this context might be defined as a framework for prayer and ritual observance, in 2000. Since then, thirty-four *kehillot* have been established and joined the Kehilot Network.¹⁷ Nigun HaLev remains the most prominent among them, in addition to Beit Tefila Israeli in Tel Aviv. Alongside the *batey midrash* and the *kehillot*, programs that provide opportunities for social justice activism through a Jewish lens have sprung up, embracing Shimon HaTzadik's paradigm of "Torah study, worship and deeds of loving kindness." Some of these activist frameworks conjoin with a *beit midrash* or *kehila*, while others are dedicated primarily to social activism, with prayer and study as complimentary aspects. Among the more developed are Yotzer Or in Jerusalem, Kibbutz Tamuz in Beit Shemesh, and Collot Banegev. While the impact is very powerful for those who participate in them, the numbers of participants do not yet reflect widespread movement in Israel. This remains to be determined as they evolve in the future.

Torah: The Batey Midrash

The conscious choice to use the name "Beit Midrash" points to the desire to pay respects to an important institution in Jewish culture, and to follow in its footsteps in a number of ways: intense engagement with Jewish texts, learning in *havrutot*, and earnest study for its own sake rather than for a degree or other tangible objective, and feeling comfortable with texts that are traditionally learned in a *beit midrash*. There is a wide range of texts to which participants in *batey midrash* are exposed through the learning experience. They include all genres of Jewish texts: the Bible and its commentators, Talmud, Kabbalah, Hassidism, Medieval poetry, as well as contemporary poetry and

17 While some of the *batey midrash* have among their students both "*dati*" and "*hiloni*" students, and while some progressive Orthodox organizations include themselves among those who believe in Jewish pluralism, this paper will focus on the transformation that secular identity is undergoing with the emergence of this phenomenon.

literature.¹⁸ The *batey midrash* have also deliberately taken on aspects of contemporary Israeli life by integrating in their traditional study materials (Bible, Talmud, etc.) modern Israeli cultural content such as poetry, literature, popular music, and film. And yet, the commitment to making the texts personally accessible and relevant to the learners' individual lives and experience, and the use of innovative and creative teaching methods, diverges greatly from the practice of the traditional *beit midrash*. The *beit midrash* programs have also drawn from various fields of interest and influence to guide them in their educational approach. For example, humanistic psychology, group theory, and organizational concepts were areas of interest for the founders of the Midrasha at Oranim, which in turn influenced many of the subsequent *batey midrash*.

One of the first innovative *beit midrash* programs was the Zionist Seminar at Oranim – precursor to Oranim's Midrasha – established in the mid-1970s as a response to the Yom Kippur War. The Yom Kippur War, as mentioned, shook many Israelis' confidence in the truthfulness and honesty of the government and led a sizeable number to question the original, somewhat naive Zionist ideology that had previously been taken for granted. The path to questioning the connection between Judaism and life in Israel was thus established. The trend of studying traditional texts intensified after the 1995 assassination of then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and continues to this today.

While there is variation in their styles and courses of study, these institutions share some characteristics that make the *batey midrash* unique as agents of change for their participants' Jewish identity. First and foremost, they are devoted to the study of Jewish texts and, through it, to empowering the connection to the canon of Jewish thought and imagination for mature Hebrew-speaking populations that had never encountered them before. One of the head teachers of the Secular Yeshiva said in an interview:¹⁹

Before I became acquainted with these texts, I never thought of addressing a moral or existential problem through the Jewish sources. It never occurred to me to go to Rabbi Meir, or to Bruria or to the Rambam. I went to the sources that all my friends went to: Foucault,

18 Given the amount of hours available for study and the range of topics covered, the knowledge gained is often broader, but not as detailed as in a traditional *yeshiva* that devotes its time to one genre and for many more hours.

19 Conducted during summer of 2001.

Derrida, and Carol Gilligan. I want my students to know that they can go to the Jewish sources for help and inspiration.

Significantly, the canon of Jewish texts is referred to in these circles as “*aron hasfarim hayehudi*” or “the Jewish bookshelf,” implying accessibility and intimacy with its content. The conviction is not only that the canon belongs to all Jews, but also that studying Jewish texts contributes to the sense of engagement and connection to the Jewish people. It is important to note that prior to the proliferation of pluralistic *batey midrash*, in Israeli society it was only Orthodox yeshiva students who undertook serious study of Jewish texts in non-academic settings.

As indicated, a large portion of the learning is carried out in *havruta*. Learning in *havruta*, derived from the traditional (Orthodox) *beit midrash*, has been adopted by the new *batey midrash* as well as by the other institutions described in this paper. The *havruta* style of learning has also been adopted in other contexts, such as in the secular departments of universities. *Havruta* is a very powerful tool through which many of the principles, values, and ideas of institutions of Jewish renewal are transmitted. One of these values is listening to the other and exploring the other’s meaning. The listening can include discussions that may seem tense or uncomfortable or even painful, but they are part of the culture and the expectations of the *batey midrash*. The learning is not only viewed as a dialogue between individuals, but also as a conversation between each person and the texts, and the characters the texts introduce.

Listening to others and sharing the learning with those who become partners in the journey have been described by participants as “intoxicating” and “exhilarating.” As one student said, referring to the early days of the Elul *beit midrash*: “[We] were in love with each other and with the text,” and “We grew wings; we were drunk with excitement.” This conveys the excitement and fervor felt by those who have discovered the study of Jewish texts in *havruta*.

Empowerment through engaged learning includes peer leadership: all participants not only learn, but teach as well. While the faculty sets the theme for the year and is responsible for the learning that takes place, students are encouraged to take turns in teaching and guiding the group as a whole for the short frontal lecture, and in preparing the questions for each *havruta* to explore. If students feel the need, members of the faculty are available to help.

In their intense engagement with Jewish texts, the *batey midrash* make no attempt to connect study to the observance of any type of

halakha or with religious behavior or thinking. Even those few *batey midrash*, like Elul, that are committed to enrolling a mixed “religious and secular” student body and teaching faculty, do not structure their daily or weekly timetable to follow religious laws. There is no official prayer or religious ritual at any point, such as reciting a communal blessing before or after a meal, or any other obligatory religious observance. Such an obligation would not be congruent with the values and principles promoted by the *batey midrash*. These programs operate with the understanding that individuals reach their own interpretations and definitions of how to live Jewishly and how to best integrate the various parts of who they are and that no one organization or ideology owns the “true” Judaism.

The only type of exception to this “live and let live” attitude is that religious observances that contradict main tenets of the *beit midrash* cannot be tolerated, such as religiously motivated gender separation that would conflict with the acceptance and celebration of women and men learning and teaching sacred text together. All participants must accept egalitarian learning and uncensored dialogue about the text. In order to create an atmosphere that engenders a thorough openness, teaching is nonjudgmental, encouraging personal connections with the tradition in a way that is neither bound by *halakha* nor dismissive of it, but rather helps participants seek personal inspiration and meaning to navigate their own lives in the Israeli reality.²⁰

Furthermore, there is a clear agenda of challenging the ways in which students – religious and secular alike – view their connection to Judaism and Jewish texts and tradition, and to expand the ways in which they view their identity as learners, as Israelis, and as spiritual human beings. One corollary to this agenda is the entirely open reading of texts. The educational philosophy and the accompanying methods of engagement are grounded in openness to all opinions, curiosity, and questioning. In the words of one of the leaders: “We are about asking questions, not giving answers.”²¹

This openness is guided by an attention to possible meanings that do not have to rely on previous commentary, scholarship, or religious values. On the contrary, there is a concerted effort to experiment with new readings, including those counter to one’s convictions or intuitions.

20 For example, the head of the Secular Yeshiva mentioned in an interview, “I would not consider it a failure of the program if students started to fast on Yom Kippur, nor would I view it as a success.”

21 Interview with Esteban Gottfried, summer of 2006.

For example, in a study session I overheard a female teacher known for her strong feminist views tell a female student: "I know you are a feminist. This is a position we have heard many times. Today, take off your feminist hat and try to look at it from a different perspective." In the section of their website labeled "pedagogy of identity" the Midrasha points out that the process of learning is dynamic, as is the development of identity. The dialogue with the text is one more opportunity for encountering and reflecting upon one's own opinions and those of the "others" who participate in the process. The process is iterative and constantly changing.²² In summary, the meaning that students find through studying in the *beit midrash* is also the vehicle for the formation of a hybrid identity, in many cases one that is neither religious nor secular, as in the example of a student who stated that he doesn't fast on Yom Kippur or keep Shabbat in the traditional manner, but "can't imagine living one day without studying the texts of these holy people."

Learning in the *batey midrash* is interdisciplinary, thematic, and integrative, combining literature, Jewish texts, and non-Jewish subjects and themes. For example, at the Elul Beit Midrash, in a unit on King David, the relevant texts from the *Tanakh* were read and studied. Midrashic and Talmudic excerpts were brought in as well as poetry and literature about King David and related characters, such as King Saul, Jonathan, Bathsheba, Uriyah, and others. In addition, participants engaged in discussions about such issues as fatherhood, love relationships, leadership, and leadership during war, integrating, when relevant, material from non-traditional sources, including films of Shakespearean plays. Be'eri Zimmerman, one of the very eloquent teachers and leaders of the movement, says that: "If a text functions as *midrash* it is Torah, even if its creation was not accompanied by *raamim uvrakim* [referring to the thunder and lightning at Mt. Sinai]." Therefore, he states, Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai for him is "Torah" no less than the Pentateuch, and in his "Jewish bookshelf" he does not make a distinction between "*kodesh*" and "*hol*"; both sacred and secular texts are "*kodesh*" for him. Beyond the inclusive approach to text, his engagement with this broad range of content is not limited to straightforward text study but employs a range of creative techniques: poetry writing and reading, storytelling, the visual arts (painting, sculpture, etc.) and other multimedia venues.

Finally, the *beit midrash* programs have an underlying culture of intimacy and community building, antidotes to the alienation,

22 <http://www.oranim.ac.il/sites/heb/hamidrasha/pages/default.aspx>

disengagement, and isolation that occur in crises of meaning. This is realized by attentiveness to the group dynamics and through interventions such as creative organizational “rituals” based mainly on principles of group dynamics, while utilizing the language and concepts of Jewish life. For example, students at Elul take turns at opening the study session with a personal story or poem to share with the group. That same student is in charge of bringing food for the whole group as an additional way of sharing themselves with the group as well as contributing to it. Another example is when students present their final projects at the end of the year. Each student presents a personal perspective on the material learned and experienced during the year. It can be a poem, a painting, a multimedia exhibit, a song, and “so on”. Envelopes with each student’s name are posted on the wall, and at the end of each presentation, students quietly write a personal note to the presenting student. This becomes another opportunity for sharing and the expression of reactions, emotions, and wishes.

On this theme, the Midrasha website advertises a “safe, warm environment that enables participants to reach heights and depths. Therefore, closeness of heart, safety and trust for participants and facilitators are the necessary platform for the dialogical approach.” Maintaining this kind of atmosphere has continued to be an important principle for all the *batey midrash*.

***Avodah*: Prayer Communities**

The secular segment of Israeli Jewish society has grown up with knowledge of *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) and general Israeli culture, which includes the Jewish holidays taught in public schools,²³ but with no relationship to or knowledge of prayer. Its content and potential power are foreign to them.

“Tfilot Hadashot,”²⁴ a song that Chava Alberstein wrote in 2005

23 *Tanakh* is taught in the secular Israeli schools as an important literary and cultural artifact. Students are required to understand its language and know the content of its narratives. Furthermore, *Tanakh*, which narrates a striving toward the land of Israel or takes place in the Land of Israel, constitutes the bulk of sacred Jewish text taught in Israeli public secular schools. Talmud, Gemarah, and Midrash, whose narratives do not take place in Israel, represent Jewish diasporic thinking and are not integral to the curriculum.

24 The song was not written as liturgy. Words and melody were written by Chava Alberstein.

based on a Baal Shem Tov²⁵ story, tells of a person who is lost in the forest on the Sabbath. Lonely and cold, he wants to pray but does not know how. The man cries out to God, knower of all the prayers and ways of the world, to write a "new prayer for here and now." The sentiments expressed in the song ring true to the experience of the founders and participants in the *kehillot*, who gather for ritual celebration in a community of shared values through which they can strive to transform and find their own identity by reclaiming their place in the historical and ritual narrative.

Kehilot tefila, or prayer communities, developed in part as a result of the success of the *batey midrash*. After the study frameworks had been in existence for several years, new ways of exploring the connection to Judaism emerged and a new organizational structure was created in response to the emerging need for a more emotive and visceral manner of connecting the rhythm of the Jewish week and year.²⁶ The connection between studying and prayer is described by one of the interviewees from the first community, Nigun HaLev, which convenes on the grounds of staunchly secular Moshav Nahalal, and was an outgrowth of the Midrasha at Oranim:

*It [text study] was like telling the Little Red Riding Hood story without mentioning Little Red Riding Hood; talking about the grandmother, about the wolf, the food, etc., but not mentioning the main character. It doesn't work. We needed to take the plunge and experience Shabbat and God.*²⁷

The *kehillot tefila* do not necessarily exclude studying Jewish texts. On the contrary, most of them conduct a weekly *beit midrash* as part of the ongoing programs offered by the community, but their focus is expressing their Judaism through singing and reciting traditional and non-traditional liturgy, and connecting to a community of other seekers engaged in the same pursuit.

The interest in prayer, notably, is distinct from an interest in established religion in Israel.²⁸ Physically, the communities are planted

25 The Baal Shem Tov (abbreviated as The Besht), a Hasidic master.

26 Witnessing Shabbat services at BJ in New York as part of a leadership exchange of some of the leaders of the *batey midrash* at the time that these thoughts were starting to emerge inspired them to try it in Israel as well.

27 Interview with Bini Talmi and Shay Zarchi from Nigun HaLev in Philadelphia, March 2007.

28 As early as 1922, the *kibbutzim* created rituals in which they felt a mystical

firmly on secular turf. The two leading *kehillot tefila* serving the Israeli Jewish Renewal are located in the midst of very secular environments: the center of the Israeli metropolis of Tel Aviv, and Nahalal, the historical epitome of the secular Israeli Labor Zionist settlement. Furthermore, the *kehillot* very consciously do not want to conform to the norms of the Judaism that they have rejected as secular Israelis who feel that the Jewish religion presented to them was coercive and not open to the ideas and values that informed their lives.²⁹ The search is not just a reaction against (Abramovitch, 1991) but a search towards something, even if at this relatively new stage forms and content of the new rituals and prayers are still evolving.

A natural outgrowth of this attitude is the relationship of the *kehillot* to *halakha*. There is no deliberate defiance of *halakha*, but neither is it given particular consideration. This occurs both at the individual and institutional levels. With regards to personal observance, for example, at Beit Tefila Israeli men are encouraged (but not obligated) to wear *kippot* during services; in many other prayer communities, this is not the case. The majority of members of most groups do not observe the Sabbath prohibitions, and it is not unusual for attendees to drive to the gathering place – forbidden by *halakha* on the Sabbath – or to use their cellular phones at the end of the *tefila*. At the institutional level, musical instruments prohibited for use on the Sabbath by *halakha* are an integral part of the service, electrical amplifiers are used, and men and women sit together and have equal opportunities to lead services. These few characteristics, which represent just some of the most salient aspects of the lack of attachment to *halakha*, are connected to the core and *raison d'être* of these groups, namely, to offer an alternative to the *halakhic* Orthodox communities, with the desire to engage with the ancient Jewish texts and tradition at their core.

In contrast to an aversion to *halakha*, the connection to tradition in the *kehillot* is strong, reflected in a number of elements. For example, although there is a range of practices among the prayer groups, all of them hold Friday night prayer services, based to some extent on the traditional Kabbalat Shabbat. Songs such as Yedid Nefesh and Lecha

experience commemorating Jewish holidays, in formats that paid no homage to traditional practices.

29 Many secular Israelis find *tefila* imposed on them, especially on those occasions and lifecycle events that force them to into direct contact with the religious establishment and require them to conform to its rules (*circumcision*, weddings, and funerals). This coercion has further contributed to the sense of alienation from *tefila* for secular Israelis.

Dodi are among the traditional prayers sung with melodies that would be recognizable to anyone who has regularly attended synagogue; others are traditional prayer texts with new, modern melodies that have become popularized as Israeli songs and as such are recognizable from song festivals on Israeli radio and television.³⁰

While parts that would be quietly chanted by a *hazzan*³¹ or service leader in a traditional prayer community are skipped because there is more discomfort with elements that are overtly traditional prayer as opposed to song, members go to great lengths to say emphatically: “This is not *shirah b'tzibur*,³² this is *tefila*.”³³ This distinction highlights the desire to connect to the tradition of prayer as a spiritual and religious activity that has a particular structure, context, language, and purpose. As in a traditional prayer service, congregants follow along in a *siddur*, albeit a non-traditional version.³⁴

Certain traditional *tefilot* are recited, depending on the *kehila*. When the time for the Shema prayer³⁵ comes, almost all participants cover their eyes with their hands, as is the traditional practice; others simply close their eyes. Kaddish is recited both by men and women. More often than not, some of the traditional liturgical language is changed in response to a growing feminist sensitivity to patriarchal names for God. Instead of *melech ha'olam* (King of the Universe) they may say, *ruach haolam* (spirit of the world), *tiferet haolam*, (Glory of the World), or *boret hakol* (the One who Creates All, in feminine language),

30 *Adon Olam*, for example (sung at the end of Shabbat and holiday services in synagogues) is such a song, popularized by Yoram Gaon's singing it in a new, upbeat tune, and frequently broadcast on Israeli radio.

31 Cantor leading the services.

32 Singing Israeli songs in groups. This is a very popular activity in Israel, where singing creates a bond of culture and identity. See also note 51.

33 Interview with Esteban Gottfried summer of 2007

34 A “*siddur*” (lit. “order”) is a prayer book, which, as its name suggests, contains the prayers in a traditional set order. Each of the liberal movements (Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) have created their own *siddur* modeled closely after the order of the prayers in the traditional *siddur*, even if some of the content is changed to accommodate modern sensibilities.

35 A prayer recited twice a day, calling to God and exalting his oneness and his name: “Hear, O Israel, Adonay is our God, Adonay is one” (Deuteronomy 6.4). They had to ask themselves to whom they are praying, and whether they really believe in a god that they can call upon. Yet ultimately they have made their peace with this.

etc. Whenever the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are mentioned, the names of the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, are also included.³⁶

Traditional customs are included in the Friday evening service even if not performed in a traditional manner. For example, the blessing of children,³⁷ and a *mi sheberach*³⁸ for those who need healing is extended to all those who need to be blessed. The definition of who needs a blessing or healing is left wide open to members of the group.

There is also presentation of a *d'var* Torah, which usually connects the portion of the week to important societal or political events in Israel. Drawing the present reality of Israel into nascent spiritual/religious awareness is extremely important to members of these communities. The addition of prayer and attention to tradition are, as mentioned, a response to the lack of connection to Jewish sources and traditions typical to secular Zionist thinking. The various rituals and words in the Renewal prayer service are a new important tool through which to interpret their daily and weekly lives. As a result, current events from Israel and the world beyond, such as various political stickers and slogans that spring up in a particular week,³⁹ or the significance of the American presidential elections, are mentioned and at times discussed.

The echoes of tradition in the typical Friday night service of an Israeli Renewal *kehila* having been established, let us consider the points of deviation from tradition – the innovations and differences – that reflect the ways in which these services are unique.

36 Another example is “*Magen Avraham*,” the Shield of Abraham, an epithet for God in the *Amidah* prayer that appears in the traditional siddur. In the revised language, the addition “ve-ezrat Sarah,” brings Sarah, the Matriarch, into the framework of the prayer in a more conscious and overt manner.

37 Traditionally parents bless their children as the Sabbath enters. The wording of the traditional prayer has been changed here, not only to be gender neutral (as opposed to sole mention of the names of Joseph’s two sons) and addresses the children and their families. The blessing is given in a communal setting as opposed to the traditional home-based setting.

38 A blessing included in the traditional format during the Saturday morning service. Usually the blessing is given to those called up to the Torah, or to sick people who need healing.

39 Israelis express their political preferences and at times, campaign through car stickers with vivid and provocative messages. These stickers are not simple statements or advertisements for political candidates, but rather slogans expressing in code a particular point of view. Among the most known is “*Shalom Haver*,” a sorrowful reference to the Rabin assassination based on the words of Bill Clinton right after the news became known. For further analysis of this phenomenon, see Salamon (2001).

As stated, the use of songs and poetry are central to *tefila* in these communities, distinct from a traditional prayer service, where there is some singing in unison, but also much non-unison chanting by individuals, and recitation by the *hazzan*. The singing is often ecstatic; people sway and close their eyes when singing, sometimes even bursting into dance for a few minutes. Most of the *tefilot* are accompanied by instruments, either guitar or a small ensemble. The songs chosen are often popular Israeli songs and, at other times, newly designated melodies are used as *tefilot*, not only adding a dimension of familiarity and intimacy to the experience, but also harnessing the secular as a vehicle for spirituality. The song “*Halikha L’Keysaria*” (“*Eli, Eli,*” by Hannah Senesh), for example, has been previously used in Israel, mainly to commemorate Shoah-related events in secular frameworks. Upon hearing the song in a prayer service in the United States, the founders of Nigun HaLev began singing it as a prayer, and it has now become one of the prayers sung in many of the *kehilot*. As this example illustrates, there is freedom in the choice of the texts and melodies used in the prayers, so that the service fits the needs of the group.

The concept of *tefila* as a way of reading or singing words that bring solace and connection with others living through the same experience is not foreign to secular Israelis, even if these activities are not labeled “prayers.” Secular Israelis tend to punctuate important moments, such as during ceremonies on days of remembrance, with the communal reading of poems and singing of songs,⁴⁰ Poetry has filled some of this need as well. Poetry is read at weddings, memorial services, and other moments in which transcendence and eminence need to be expressed. For example, Rabin read a poem when he received the Nobel Prize and when the Oslo Accords were signed. At the prayer services in these communities, poems by Israeli poets, such as Yehudah Amichai, Natan Zach, H.N. Bialik, Dahlia Ravikovitch, and others, sometimes set to music, are interspersed as prayers. These selections can be used as transition pieces between traditional prayers, or as replacements for traditional texts, especially when the traditional prayers are not satisfactory to the community. The *Aleinu* prayer,⁴¹ for example, which is a prayer praising the wonders and plenty of the world’s vision, is replaced in Nigun HaLev by a song reflecting those themes in a different,

40 See note 46.

41 A prayer that comes at the end of a service, praising God for providing spiritual riches to His people. The end of the prayer depicts the ideal, perfect World to Come under God’s reign.

more fitting agricultural context, written by Bertolt Brecht, translated by Natan Zach and popularized by Shlomo Gronich.⁴² With time and weekly repetition, the songs and poems become part of the new canon of the contemporary Israeli Kabbalat Shabbat service.⁴³ Each one of the groups develops its own “canon” and set of *tefilot* and songs according to their needs, talents, and knowledge.⁴⁴

The revolutionary aspect of these prayer communities is that those engaged in it, despite their secular identities, are not afraid of calling it *tefila*, and by doing so, connect themselves symbolically to Jews throughout generations and places that conduct *tefilot* from a *siddur*, but with content that draws from and responds to the layers of Israeli culture, history, and language.⁴⁵ The other tremendous innovation in relation to modern Israeli culture is that the *tefila* described here has become a regular event,⁴⁶ around which community is formed. Each group builds a sense of community within the framework of Kabbalat Shabbat by celebrating birthdays, marking *yahrtzeits*, praying for healing and supporting sick members of the community, and sharing personal stories and reflections. The atmosphere is warm and informal, often including signs of physical affection to spouses, children, or people standing in the proximity. There is also a sense of excitement in being at the cusp of something innovative and new. Children are engaged in both Beit Tefila Israeli and Nigun HaLev, even though the activities are different. At this point there is no movement that encompasses all of the *kehillot*. The groups are very strongly independent and opposed to belonging to a religious movement, especially any of the American religious movements like Reform or Conservative, which have

42 Nathan Zach is one of Israel’s most prominent poets and Shlomo Gronich is a very popular singer.

43 Some have mentioned the desire to incorporate all these components into a unified siddur and possibly CD as well, so more people could learn it and feel comfortable with participation in the *tefila*.

44 While the independence and authority of each community is guarded very carefully, the Kehila Network organizes gatherings of all the groups in which individuals and groups teach each other their songs and prayers.

45 This is not dissimilar in spirit to what the Reform and Reconstructionist congregations have done in North America, but it is intimately connected to and reflects Israeli culture.

46 Israelis have long used song and poetry as ways of expressing moments of transcendence. A few examples are the singing around the campfire during the Palmach times, which still continues to a degree in the youth movements and ceremonies of remembrance on *Yom Hazikaron* and other occasions.

synagogues in Israel, or even the Reconstructionist movement, which has not established synagogues there.⁴⁷ It is important to mention that the leaders and participants of these movements view the independence of each program and organization as crucial to its identity, and want to maintain that freedom and flexibility of content and format. They want to ensure that their members' opinions and views are the leading voices, and not ones that have been established by a larger more anonymous body. At the same time, there is an acknowledgment that they all are part of the larger liberal, pluralistic Judaism in Israel and therefore they support each other in political advocacy.⁴⁸ There is a Kehilot Network, mentioned earlier, that provides mutual support and the exchange of ideas and resources. Moreover, all of the *kehilot* are part of Panim for Jewish Renewal, an umbrella organization.⁴⁹ Finally, the Reform Movement rabbinic training seminary has become the organization of choice for those leaders of the movement who, through their engagement in Jewish life, have decided to become rabbis.⁵⁰

Gemilut Hasadim, Identity, Engagement, and Social Justice

Interviews reveal that both teachers and students in the study and the prayer communities mentioned above see societal change as one of the possible positive outcomes of their activity. Their activism provides a meaningful link between the secular, more open Western world they have lived in all their lives and the newly discovered Jewish world, inasmuch as social action and justice are an expression of their

47 The report "Jewish Identity, Religious Faith and Observance of Tradition," written by Anat Oren, Noah Levin-Epstein, and Ephraim Ya'ar for the Posen Foundation, states that in Israel only 18% of the population identifies as Reform and 3% as Conservative, while in the U.S. 37% identify as Reform and 29% as Conservative. This is significant not only in comparison to the U.S. but also in comparison with the 57% of Israeli respondents who stated that for them Judaism meant religious faith and observance of religious laws (pp. 107, 113).

48 Struggles over the allocation of budgets in the Ministries of Religion and Education for liberal Jewish organizations, Woman of the Wall, conversion to Judaism, etc., are some examples of shared interests and activism.

49 <http://www.panim.org.il/>

50 They see themselves as a special, different brand of Reform rabbis, and by and large they do not serve in typical Reform congregations in Israel. However, there are exceptions to this as well. Some of the members of the Renewal movement have established Reform communities in various locations – most prominently "Kodesh V'Chol" in Holon, staffed and founded by a graduate of Tehuda and the Midrasha and a former member and staff member of Beit Tefila Israeli.

commitment to Judaism. In the Secular Yeshiva's vision statement, the institution states its goal of developing a mode of study that will bring about action ("*limud hamevi l'maase*"),⁵¹ with an emphasis on activism for social justice.

One branch of social activism in Israeli Renewal is leadership training for the movement. The emergence of the intensive, integrative, and open study of the *batey midrash* and the new experience of communal prayer and participation in Jewish ritual have created a need for leadership and skill building so that more individuals and groups of seekers can be served. There are a number of organizations that are engaged in preparing leaders for such communities who know how to lead services, build institutions, and teach in a *beit midrash* style. The Kehilot program at the Mirdasha at Oranim, and the two branches of the Secular Yeshiva (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) are key examples.

Kehilot attempts to teach its students the skills required to lead prayers, life-cycle, year-cycle, group-facilitation, and leadership skills, as well as how to read and engage with Jewish canonic texts. The two branches of the Secular Yeshiva do not engage in ritual, but their rather put their efforts into the intensive study of texts and the application of what students learn about social justice in the neighborhoods where they are located. Eran Baruch, executive director of the secular BINA Center for Jewish Identity and Hebrew Culture, under whose auspices the Secular Yeshiva functions, describes the relationship between study and social action:

Yeshivot create *talmidey hakhamim* (scholars of Jewish texts) who do not ask questions prohibited by *halakhic* authority. Religious authority is binding for them, but not for us. The universities ask analytical questions. We want to ask questions of meaning – meaning-making of personal, communal, and national relevance. We want to ask questions of relational meaning, and we want to act on that meaning in the national sphere.

The Secular Yeshivas and Kehilot of the Midrasha at Oranim offer intensive courses of study in which students deepen their knowledge of Jewish content and combine what they have learned with social action that offers an experience of personal transformation and commitment to a different balance between their "secular" lives and their Jewish identities. These programs seek to prepare a cadre of future leaders of this

⁵¹Talmud Bavli, Masechet Kiddushin 40b.

movement through intensive, targeted study. Both of these institutions view social action and community service as an integral part of their work. The Secular Yeshivas' students are young individuals who have recently completed their army service, or are just before army service⁵² and who can therefore be engaged in their studies full time, with half of each week devoted to working for social justice organizations. The yeshiva is located in the vicinity of the former Tel Aviv Bus Station, in one of the most disadvantaged and complex neighborhoods in the city, with an explicit goal of being involved with the community and contributing toward its improvement. The students at Kehilot are working adults; therefore, they attend classes once a week in an intensive, two-year course of study.

There is another category of activist organizations that see their main mission as social justice work combined with Jewish learning and engagement. MiMizrah Shemesh in Jerusalem defines itself as a *beit midrash* for leadership development. They believe that combining *beit-midrash* style studies in the spirit of the Mizrahi (Oriental) tradition with leadership and volunteer development to help those in society who are more needy is a true fulfillment of Jewish values that contributes towards improving Israeli society. They have a variety of programs working with schools, training staff, and volunteers at non-profit social justice organizations in their methods, conducting study groups for parents and children, and running a pre-army program that combines study and community service.

The Yotzer Or community is located in a disadvantaged neighborhood in Jerusalem. It conducts a variety of empowerment programs for women and new immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia, is active in the schools providing tutoring, helps adults to find jobs, and holds communal celebrations of Shabbat, holidays, as well as text study. Many people drawn to these initiatives as administrators and teachers are idealists seeking to reach out to young people facing the decay of civil society in Israel who may resort to a range of desperate responses, from apathy to truancy. "I want to catch the young people before they cross the threshold to the other side of society, and I can do it through

52 The Yeshiva in Tel Aviv consists of two tracks: The *mekhinah*, is one of many such programs offered to young Israelis as a preparatory and learning-oriented year before the army. It is the only one offering secular *yeshiva* studies (The Reform Movement in Israel has a similar program in Jaffa but does not define itself as a secular *yeshiva*, as neither the Israeli nor the North American Reform Movements consider themselves secular).

the study of Jewish texts,” said one of the teachers of the Secular Yeshiva (2006).⁵³ Some of the social action programs are more focused on social justice, and Judaism is seen by the members of the community as secondary. In Achva Bakerem, located in Beit Hakerem, a very secular neighborhood of Jerusalem, for example, ecology, a community garden, and expanding sustainability in the city were the primary focus of the participants at the program’s inception. Jewish learning and Kabbalat Shabbat were subsequently initiated by the founder and now have become part of the life of the organization, but they would not have come into existence without the previously initiated attention to community sustainability and ecology. Interestingly, whether in parallel or as runoff from the activist program, the phenomenon of activism blended with Jewish meaning-making did reach the social protests of the summer of 2011.⁵⁴ For example, among the many activities in the encampments were celebrations of Shabbat and other Jewish calendar cycle events, such as Tisha B’Av. Many of the signs around the tents, the Facebook account postings, and the demonstrations drew from the Jewish tradition, including a sign worded: “From Slavery to Social Justice,” echoing the phrase from the Passover Haggada (“from slavery to freedom” – *me-‘avdut le-beyrut*).

Processes of Identity Formation in Israeli Jewish Renewal

Of the thousands who have passed through the gates of the pluralistic *batei midrash*, the *tefila* communities, and the activism programs that arose from them, most would fall on the “*hiloni*” side of the great Israeli religious-secular divide, based on their choice to reject the strict rule of *halakha*.⁵⁵ Yet, “*hiloni*” is no longer an adequate label, as it connotes not only non-observance and non-Orthodoxy, but also a lack

53 This quote is part of a larger conversation in with the interviewee, who wanted to highlight the sense of urgency towards providing young people with values of social justice connected to Judaism. She sees this as the only way to a healthier sense of self for productive citizens whose values guide them and thus prevent them from ending up “on the other side.”

54 See note 8, above.

55 These identity issues have been the subject of some research, including studies pointing to a higher percentage of Ashkenazim and university-educated among the participants in the *batei midrash*. See, for example, Yair, Sagiv, Shimbursky, Akrai, & Lichtman (2006).

of engagement and interest in things Jewish. Interviews with initiators and participants of Israeli renewal programs reveal, to the contrary, the aspiration to integrate modern secular life with Jewish sources, sacred texts, customs, and even prayers and Shabbat observances from which they had been alienated since the establishment of the State of Israel.

The paragraph opening this article tellingly quotes an interviewee who, partially in jest, balks at the label of “*hiloni*,” proposing for himself the alternate label of “*hiloni lite*.” He is part of an increasingly growing segment of the “*hiloni*” population that is undoing the religious-secular dichotomy, exemplifying what Mezirow (1991) terms as a “disorienting dilemma.” The untenable rupture from the pre-Zionist past with its resulting one-dimensional identity as purely secular Israelis detached from their Jewish roots, is discussed by Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983) in their work on the role of civil religion in Israeli society. Their scholarship on the need to integrate aspects of civil identity with tradition, and even religion,⁵⁶ corresponds the processes taking place through the activity of Israeli Jewish Renewal.

The first process is transformation, defined by the authors as retaining certain structurally recognizable features of religious symbols but changing other aspects of their form. Abundant examples of this transformation are evident in the institutions I investigated. In prayer, this can manifest itself as changing the words of prayers but still maintaining the prayer framework and structure, e.g., changing the words for the Aleynu prayer but inserting them at the place where the prayer usually appears in the service. Ritually, the most poignant example I encountered is the Pesach Seder conducted annually since 2006 by the Secular Yeshiva in collaboration with a few other organizations for the refugees from Darfur and other African countries who found their way to Israel on their path to freedom. The format is that of the traditional Seder, but it is adapted to the circumstances and narrative of this particular group. When the Seder first took place in 2006, the words traditionally read from the Passover Haggadah, “*Avadim hayinu atah b'ney horin*” (“We were slaves in Egypt; now we are free”) received a powerful new meaning for the Jews helping with the celebration as well as for those whose lives had been saved, and it has remained a very powerful transformative experience for all.⁵⁷

56 Leaders or participants in this new movement might prefer to replace the authors' choice of the term “religion” with “Judaism,” and “Jewish culture” or “Hebrew culture” with “religion.”

57 North American Jewry went through similar transformations. One of the early

The second process in integration is transvaluation, namely, retaining the form of the symbol but reinterpreting it to give it new meaning. This phenomenon takes place on a regular basis in the communities discussed in this paper when, for example, the words of the *Shema* prayer (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one”), one of the most important statements of faith in the Jewish religion, might be recited with the traditional words, even though there is no expectation that this is a faith statement in the literal sense of the word. It is rather viewed as an opportunity for learning, engaging with, and discussing profound issues, such as values, who/what is God, what does it mean to hear and be heard, and what is the responsibility that fellow human beings have when they call out to each other to hear and listen.

In 2005, I witnessed transvaluation at a Kabbalat Shabbat service at Nigun HaLev, when names of sick people in the community were invoked in the traditional *mi sheberakh* blessing. The timing of the blessing was itself an innovation, because this prayer is usually recited when the Torah is read in the morning service. More radical was the aforementioned event in which John Paul II, who had just died that day, received a blessing from the prayer leader. (“Lekh, l’shalom Yochanan” said the leader) The main transvaluation was introducing the *mi sheberakh* as a prayer for “those who need blessings” and not necessarily for sick members of the Jewish people. A further transvaluation was to expand the prayer to include the deceased and a leader of a different religion, as well as hebraicizing his name.

“Good Identity”

The ultimate end of transformation and transvaluation of religious elements is to achieve what Schachter (2002) has termed “good identity.” In his discussion of the structural constraints on identity formation, Schachter stipulates four salient characteristics:

Firstly, identity must allow for a sense of consistency, sameness, and continuity.

The “*hilonim*”⁵⁸ searching for new direction and meaning in their

notable examples with similar content (in a different context) is the Freedom Seder conducted on Passover of 1969 by Arthur Waskow, which was the first recorded instance when a Jewish group marked the liberation of another people besides the Jews’ liberation. See <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/original-1969-freedom-seder>.

58 As this paper discusses at length, there is no good “label” or name for these “*hilonim*.”

identity feel a strong pull to connect with the past and the heritage of the Jewish people. The word "*hithabrut*" — "connection" — mentioned above, which is used frequently by Renewal activists, is indicative of this desire. While previous generations broke away from what they considered the unhealthy hold of religion on the pioneering spirit, the present cohort is attempting to harness it to their quest for rootedness. "Sameness and continuity" as a repair of the ruptured connection to the past are reflected in the strong communities being built by and for the members of these organizations, and by the long-standing participation in many of them. Elul, BINA, and the Midrasha at Oranim have students who return every year for more study. The *kehilot tefila* have met every week for years, and members want more, not fewer weekly encounters and other activities.

The second characteristic of Schachter's "good identity" is that it is inclusive of all significant identifications. While the search for new meaning, rootedness, and connection creates bonds with the tradition and with sacred Jewish texts, the "renewing *hilonim*" do not want to relinquish their connections to Western culture and pluralistic ideology. The power of these new organizations is that they enable and actually empower their members to retain multiple identifications and, possibly, multiple identities. Postmodern ideas of multiple narratives and truths are part of their worldview and are essential to who they are.

The basic features of the renewal *beit midrash* programs described above support this inclusiveness of identities. In the *beit midrash* the learning process is not static. Students revise and revisit their interpretations and opinions about the texts and concepts being studied, enabling transformation in the opportunity they offer "to refute, reflect, and to hear others do the same." In the identity literature, this is described by Imel (1989) as affording students the opportunity to "examine their beliefs and how they have acquired them by creating the situations in which they can debate how their values, assumptions, ideologies and beliefs have come to be constructed." There appears to be complete commitment to this kind of critical inquiry in the *beit midrash*, as illustrated by interview material, including the anecdote relayed above of the teacher who, despite her feminist ideology, encouraged a participant to take off her "feminist hat."

The third characteristic is that "good identity" must allow for mutual recognition between the individual and society. By establishing

I call them "new *hilonim*," acknowledging that the term is neither satisfactory nor descriptive.

organizations and institutions that foster and encourage this new thinking (including networks of similar organizations, such as Midreshet and the Kehila Network),⁵⁹ a new sense of reciprocity and community is being built in which the movement's behaviors and ways of thinking and living are becoming a norm that is celebrated as positive, encouraging, and exciting. Without it, the new identity would not be able to sustain itself. Not only is there a sense of mutuality among the various similar institutions and programs, but they are gaining increasing recognition and legitimacy in the Israeli press, media, and even academia.⁶⁰

Finally, identity must allow for feelings of authenticity and vitality. This is achieved in Israeli renewal programs by being part of a larger whole, a community of individuals who are seeking new ways of being Jewish. Instead of feeling “fringe” or “strange” for no longer “fitting” into the rigid categories of “*hiloni*” or “*dati*,” they feel they are trailblazers in a new and important direction for Israel. A sense of enthusiasm, excitement, and idealism pervades many of these organizations. Indeed, Werczberger and Azulay (2011) in addition to Sheleg (2010) point to signs of the maturation of this movement as it reaps the fruits of initial experimentation and the eventual establishment of support networks and recognition by the larger community.

Transformative Learning

The field of transformative learning provides a conceptual framework for understanding the educational processes that bring about the identity transformation mentioned in this paper. It is presented here to complement the scholarship cited above, since, while it has not directly addressed the Israeli phenomenon due to cultural distance, it speaks to similar processes in its philosophy and educational theories. We will mention some of the key theories and relate them to the institutions discussed in this paper.

59 Both are national organizations, and both have a part-time staff member who coordinates the activity of the networks.

60 See, for example, the many TV segments about the Secular Yeshiva (www.bina.org.il), and the series of articles in Haaretz written by Yair Sheleg, an important and recognized author who has written extensively about the subject, naming this phenomenon “*hazerem harevi'i*” (the fourth stream). See also Azulay (2010), and papers written for Panim (www.panim.org.il). Additionally, conferences and gatherings regularly receive media coverage and thus further recognition.

Identity as Nexus

The affiliates of Israeli Jewish renewal are deeply invested in exploring the intersection of the forces that shaped them to pursue avenues that did not seem open to them previously. This phenomenon corresponds to Palmer's (1997) characterization of identity.

By identity I mean an evolving nexus where all forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup. The nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more. In the midst of that complex field, identity is a moving intersection on the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human. (p.16)

Spiritual grounding

While spirituality is not an explicit educational goal of any of the discussed organizations, nor is it necessarily mentioned by them, the transformation and changes that take place for those engaged in them seems intuitively to have an undeniably spiritual aspect. Tisdell & Tolliver (2003) in their definition of spiritually grounded and culturally relevant transformative education mention many aspects present in Israeli Jewish Renewal, including authenticity of teachers, an environment that allows exploration through discussions with others and exposure to symbolic genres such as/like poetry and art, relevant readings of the developing cultural identity, explorations of personal and communal aspects of the culture, collaborative work and celebration of learning. Tisdell also maintains that the outcome of this type of educational process leads to a stronger identity emerging from finding one's own passion and authenticity. A spiritually grounded approach to culturally relevant education in higher education is partially about facilitating learners' greater authenticity, which in turn enhances the personal and professional life of the learner. While spirituality is not an explicit educational goal of any of the discussed organizations, nor is it necessarily mentioned by them, the transformation and changes that take place for those engaged in them can be viewed as related to the spirit.⁶¹

61 While "secular" Israelis might hesitate to mention spirituality, the word "spirit" (*ruach*) is commonly used when discussing matters that are more elevated, abstract, and connected to a sense of values, ideals, and the humanities. The translation of the

Inclusivity and pluralism

Openness to people different from oneself, to men and women, and to the religious and the non-religious, is one of the most important guiding principles of the Renewal Movement in Israel as mentioned in many of the interviews I conducted. Mezirow (1978), echoing this in his discussion of inclusivity and pluralism, asserts that: “Pluralism must be highly valued, for it assures us of the availability of alternative ways of seeing, of multiple realities from which to choose.” He further stipulates (1996) that this allows students to make breakthroughs in how they view and approach their futures. This is self-evident in the *beit-midrash* style of learning. Moreover, Israeli Jewish Renewal’s commitment to inclusivity is echoed in its emphasis on social and economic justice work in Israel, particularly since the summer of 2011 and its aftermath.

Intimacy, safety community

Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) and Palmer (1997) discuss intimacy alongside the careful attention they devote to creating a framework of safety and trust to allow for vulnerability and experimentation; all these are necessary for community building in a context where reflection and openness trump predetermined structure and prescribed answers. The programs of Israeli Jewish Renewal, particularly the *batey midrash*, are acutely attuned to this need, as discussed above.

Multiple identities and integration

The emphasis in the *beit midrash* programs on the open reading of texts and allowance for embracing views that are widely divergent and even contradictory plays a role in identity formation in a manner that Schachter, above, describes in his second criterion for “good identity.” In transformative learning, they are identified by Lee Shulman (2008) as active encouragement of multiple identities⁶² and are what Elizabeth Tisdell refers to when she talks about balanced integration of all aspects of the learner’s identity by allowing for a multilayered approach to learning.

general name used for the humanities faculties in the universities (*Mada'ay Haruach*) would be the “faculties of the sciences of the spirit.”

62 Closing speech at the January 2008 conference on “Multiple Identities in Jewish Education” sponsored by the Oranim Academic College of Education in Kiryat Tivon and the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem.

Torah will go forth from Zion? Implications for North America

The individuals and organizations discussed in this paper are engaged in a journey – both personal and communal – toward the transformation of their personal and cultural identities and to creating more meaning and authenticity in the multiple facets of their lives through the institutions of Jewish Renewal. The individuals involved, similarly to many North American Jews, particularly the unaffiliated, were alienated from Jewish texts and traditions; in response, they turned around to face the tradition that they had left behind, and embraced it on their own terms. Is there a parallel for North American Jewry⁶³?

Some of the trends occurring in Israel today already transpired in North America in the early days of the *Havura* Movement. Disaffected Jews who were put off by what they considered conventional synagogue Judaism created independent *minyanim* and *havurot* that, like their Israeli counterparts, connected their lives as engaged Jews and as citizens of the larger American society. In so doing, they transformed and transvalued Judaism as they knew it and greatly influenced the contemporary Jewish community.⁶⁴ It is clear that the Israeli groups have been influenced by this movement even if only indirectly.⁶⁵ The leaders of the Israeli programs have also been influenced by some of the newer, innovative Jewish prayer communities in the United States, especially by B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, which maintains an active and supportive interest in its Israeli colleagues.⁶⁶

63 Israelis, even when they are distanced from Jewish learning and communal prayer life, experience, as mentioned, many aspects of Jewish life, while those in North America who chose to not affiliate can live a life completely separated from Jewish content. Nevertheless, there might be similarities in the approach to counteracting alienation.

64 See writings about the Havurah movement by Weissler (1989) (unpublished dissertation) and Prell (1989).

65 For a more extensive discussion see Newberg (2008).

66 B'nai Jeshurun and its leadership have been an important inspiration in the establishment of the *kehilot tefila* and the Midrasha at Oranim. Israelis have attempted to learn from them in many ways and the leadership at B.J. has taken an active interest in supporting, teaching, helping, and promoting those interested. This includes financial support by some of the members for a variety of specific programs, trips by large numbers of BJ members with their rabbis, and continuous support, problem solving, and teaching of the Israeli leaders by the rabbis. While BJ is very important to the communities in Israel, it must be mentioned that the scale of operation of the North American synagogue is very different than in Israel. In Israel they pride themselves on intimacy, and on the creation of content of programming and ritual that comes from

Yet, despite the similarities and mutual influences, it is important to acknowledge that there are important differences between the Israeli and North American contexts. While one can live in Israel without deliberately engaging in Jewish learning or practice, it is impossible to completely filter Judaism out of life in Israel. The calendar for school, work, and commerce is a Jewish calendar. Shabbat and the Jewish holidays are ever present in the public space, including the sale of particular foods in the supermarket, and their mention on radio, TV, and cultural billboards. This does not necessarily translate into familiarity and basic acknowledgment of the Jewish context in everyday life and a general self-identification as Jews for the majority of Israelis, but it does ensure a certain familiarity and a general Jewish identity consciousness for the majority of Israeli Jews.⁶⁷

A related difference between the Israel and North America is that Jewish education in the secular sector in Israel ranges in the level of exposure to Jewish sources and symbols, but even in non-religious school systems where there is not much exposure to Jewish learning, Bible is taught throughout the years of mandatory schooling, so that when Israelis graduate high school, they are knowledgeable about Biblical narrative, characters, and symbols, if not more. These two elements, in addition to the fact that the language in which Israelis live is the same language in which the Bible and other traditional texts are written, make the context of the two populations very different. When Israeli Jews are motivated to explore the connections with Jewish culture, the path towards engagement – including nuances, echoes, and connections – is much more open than it is to their North American counterparts.

Weighing against the advantage of Israelis having an unmediated connection to Judaism through language, national culture, and many aspects of civic life, is the passiveness of this *de facto* affiliation. In Israel,

the membership, while BJ is a very large institution staffed by a team of professionals. BJ is unique in the North American landscape in its style and independence, but one of their strong features is the rabbinic intern program, in which every year they train future and beginning rabbis to take the mantle of the BJ style to other communities. In a way this is what they intend to do with the communities in Israel, even as they acknowledge that the context and circumstances in the two countries make for very different congregational life in each.

67 The implications of the Jewish nature of public life has particular ramifications on Israel's religious minorities, which include Christian, Muslim, and Druze, who clearly identify as different, and "other"; this is an important topic but beyond the scope of the present paper.

Jewish culture is not chosen or embraced, but inevitable. While there are codes of dress, choice of education system, and other identifiers that mark sectoral identification, these are not the equivalent of the role organizational affiliation plays in Jewish identity in North America. Moreover, in the world of Israeli Jewish renewal, there is freedom to migrate and explore different aspects of one's identity. One can participate in an event identified with one sector, and switch to another venue the next week. The commitment to a particular event or identifier is social/cultural and somewhat financial (there is a slight tuition or membership fee in most of these *batey midrash* and *kehillot*) but the meaning in terms of identity and existential belonging is amorphous and defies labeling; it is more an act of seeking as an inherently Israeli Jew, than an act of asserting one's identity as a Jew.⁶⁸

While some believe that North American Jews negotiate their identities as members of a minority culture, and that for the North American Jew, “connecting” to Judaism is tied to identity vis-à-vis “others,” there are thinkers who believe that in this post-modern era, North American Jews can choose to identify as Jews or not. They can choose to identify with spiritual traditions and not necessarily with behavioral or ethnic traditions (Magid, 2013). In some ways this accentuates the difference between the two populations, since in Israel some measure of Jewishness (albeit not necessarily deep) is unavoidable, while conceivably in North America it is avoidable and a matter of choice. But there is one striking similarity: In both populations, seekers choose innovative, fluid organizations as a choice and a response to a search for meaning. The desire for fluidity is reflected in the two populations as a resistance to committing to one particular path in

68 The fluidity of identities and identifications leads to experimentation with and within the liberal movements and congregations and to some degree of crossover between them. For example, members of the *kehillot tefila* feel comfortable at some congregations that are officially “movement” congregations, like Kol Haneshama in Jerusalem, or Tiferet Shalom in Tel Aviv. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, some of the leaders of the movement are receiving training and ordination by the Israel branch of HUC, and while they are interested in maintaining their own brand or separate, unaffiliated rabbinate, there is necessarily mutual influence in each direction. On the other side of the spectrum there is crossover from the “*dati*” side. Some of those who consider themselves *datiim* participate in the services of some the *kehillot tefila* and also have leadership positions in some of the *batey midrash*. The full extent of the mutual influence and impact of this crossover would be an interesting topic for further research.

Judaism and an aspiration to experiment and avoid being labeled.⁶⁹ The plot thickens when we consider that the Jewish North American community is in a state of flux from many points of view. The criteria for determining demographic trends for the Jewish population are still largely based on affiliation to synagogues⁷⁰ and other behavioral identifiers like intermarriage, philanthropic contributions, lighting Shabbat or Chanukah candles, attachment to Israel, and so on. North American Jews who do affiliate are making a choice, ambivalences notwithstanding, and this implies both autonomy and readiness to make an investment of financial and time resources.⁷¹

However, as the numbers of "identifiable" and "identified" Jews are reducing, there have been scholars such as Horowitz (2000) who call for recognizing that as Jews feel less "other" in the North American general society, the self-identification and the identification of Jews by communal organizations should include some of the behavior data mentioned but also the emotive attachment. This leads in turn to a more fluid, less dichotomist and less rigid communal determination, a process related to but distinct from the fluidity in the identity of Renewal Jews. Some Jews belong to the JCCs or are active in Jewish

69 A further manifestation of this attitude is the increase in the number of Jewish community day schools where students and their families do not need to identify with one particular movement or way of being Jewish. See Kramer, M. (2003).

70 The awareness of the dichotomy of "affiliated" or "not affiliated" as a lens through which to view Jewish life in North America and the emergence of changes in the culture, the economy, and the technological revolution have led many to conceptualize new models of Jewish communal life. The new thinking encourages local, intimate, movable, innovative organizations. See, for example, Windmueller (2011). While this represents the forefront of Jewish communal thinking, there is still reliance on the traditional definitions when it comes to determining statistical trends. The questions asked in demographic surveys still include questions about denominational affiliation as well as other identifiers: lighting Shabbat or Chanukah candles, keeping kashrut or not, etc. See, for example, Dashefsky (2012).

71 Over the last decade a new phenomenon has been taking place in North America. Many young people establish communities that are not affiliated with any of the existing movements. These independent communities have some commonalities with their Israeli counterparts in that they do not want to belong to any of the established frameworks, yet they do want to be engaged in Jewish life. One of the important differences between the emergent North American and Israeli communities is that the North American participants are usually knowledgeable and engaged in Jewish life and they desire more intimacy but also more intense Jewish life than that presented by the liberal movements' synagogues (See the 2007 report written by Synagogue 3000 and Mechon Hadar).

Federations or Jewish institutions of social justice.⁷² Others self organize in small intimate groupings with more fluid, innovative, and mobile membership. This trend is principally characteristic of the desires and needs of young Jews (Windmueller, 2010).

There are many Israeli programs that are trying to make themselves known in North America, not just through the typical venues of public relations and fundraising, but by actually offering programming that is tailored to North America, as well as resources for that programming in terms of staff and content, thus pointing to new directions for those living there. The export process is in its first stages of experimentation. If some of the components of the Israeli model are imported into North America, adjustments will be necessary to compensate for the linguistic and cultural differences. On the other hand, viewpoints and readings of North American learners examining the same texts and issues will surely bring new perspectives to Israelis, an angle that will be interesting to explore in future research.

At the same time, Israeli Renewal, which is beginning to export its unique products to North America, remains staunchly independent of the more "established" North American movements that have opened shop on Israeli soil. However, there are mutual influences in and from each direction that are important to mention.

The North American *Havurah* movement is part of the *Zeitgeist* bringing these Israeli groups to the fore even if there has been no conscious attempt to emulate its ideas and customs. At its inception, the *Havurah* movement was concerned with providing an "alternative institutional framework for its members to pursue their evolving Jewish styles" (Reisman, 1977, p. 9). The alternative included less hierarchical structures of governance and leading services, and empowering its members to be full participants in their Jewish lives. The attempt to provide an alternative and its direction finds an echo now with the Israeli communities discussed in this paper. The *Havurah* movement's philosophy has developed a style that succeeds in bringing the personal into the religious and encourages divergent interpretations of texts and prayers. Yet at the same time that the individual differences are encouraged and celebrated, creating communities of involved Jews has been the movement's hallmark. Both Israeli *kehilot tefila* described in this paper pride themselves on building communities that extend

72 Examples are Hazon, an organization that advocates and works towards sustainability, and AJWS (American Jewish World Service), connecting Jewish values to help needy communities worldwide.

beyond the time span of Kabbalat Shabbat. One of the ways of creating the sense of community is by sharing personal perspectives and stories as part of the service. Members of these groups form friendships and connections by marking lifecycle events (moving to a new house, children's bnei mitzvah, weddings, illnesses, etc.) with communal gatherings that extend beyond scheduled prayers.

The Neo-Hassidic tradition, with its singing and ecstatic expressiveness, appeals to the *Havurah* movement as an antidote to the formal environments of North American synagogues. Similarly, for the Israeli communities, singing, even ecstatic singing and dancing, are a core element of their identity. It is one point of connection with the North American Jewish Renewal Movement, which has also been influential in the development of the style of the *kehillot tefila* in Israel, even if its influence is less conscious.

An example of such an influence appears in the brochure inviting people to Beit Tefila Israeli. Even before services start we know we are in the domain of an alternative community that prides itself in being a place where one can meditate while participating in Shabbat services. Meditation and introspective spiritual practices influenced by the Buddhist traditions have become popular both in North America and in Israel (Loss, 2010).

Another North American institution that holds music – instrumental and vocal – at its core and has been particularly influential in the development of the two communities is Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (BJ) in New York City. Groups from the Israeli *kehillot tefila* come regularly to BJ to get inspired and learn skills, and the BJ rabbis go regularly to visit them in Israel. Besides sharing music in common with the Israeli *kehillot*, BJ resembles them in likewise placing a high priority on community building, egalitarianism, and strong social consciousness. There are also marked differences: BJ depends on highly charismatic professional rabbis to lead it, while the professional staff in the Israeli communities began with no paid leaders. Today they each pay their leaders and are defining the roles of the leadership as they grow. The other major difference is that BJ is a large synagogue located in one of the biggest metropolitan centers in the world, and even though Tel Aviv is a major metropolis, the numbers and scale of the institutions is very different. The Reconstructionist movement leaders, and other North American scholars and theologians who experiment with feminine God language, have inspired (not necessarily in a consciously direct way) the Israeli groups, which, as mentioned, have adopted such

terms as *ruach ha'olam*, *magen Avraham v'ezrat Sara*, as they appear in the Reconstructionist *siddur* Kol Haneshama.)

As this paper goes to press, Elul of Jerusalem and the Alma Institute of Hebrew Culture in Tel Aviv, two of the established and successful *batei midrash* of Israeli Jewish renewal, have taken the first steps towards exporting their educational philosophy and methodology to the United States. At present, programs are running in Princeton, New York, and Washington, D.C., and further initiatives are at various planning stages. In addition, BINA from Tel Aviv has begun a gap-year program for North American high school graduates in Israel, as well as programs for American young adults who are interested in exploring Israel through *Tikkun Olam* (social justice) programs combined with *beit-midrash* style study in Israel. While BINA's programs do not take place in North America, they do expose North American Jews to a style of Judaism different than what they know from home or from previous exposure to Israel. Similarly, Beit Tefila Israeli's summer program on the Tel Aviv beach draws not only many Israelis to *tefila* (sometimes for the first time) but has become a destination point for many North American tourists (Blum, 2012).

One change that makes these points of interface possible and compelling is a sense that Israeli and North American Judaism have both changed enough so that each can learn from and contribute to the other. Ruth Calderon, one of the leaders of this movement, said in the 41st JRF convention devoted to establishing connections with the "Renewing communities in Israel":

There is no more "we" and "you". There is no more: "We will give you money and you will be the ideal Jewish State." From now on it is "WE". We each have what to learn from each other. It must be a shared enterprise from now on.

There is indeed among some of the Israelis and to a degree among some of the North Americans a desire to connect in more meaningful ways than the typical venues of financial support. International travel and the Internet have made this desire an easier one to satisfy even if it has not yet been pursued on a large scale.

One angle of interest is how a truly pluralistic emphasis, when introduced in the North American setting, may enrich and broaden the content or even the "palette" of Jewish components that unaffiliated Jews are prepared to draw from to paint their cultural lives. An example from the religiously identified populations of North American Jewry

is "*mitzvot bein adam le-chavero*," which are emphasized in Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox settings much more than in liberal Judaism. These include a marked emphasis on *shmirat ha-lashon*, *bikkur cholim*, and other *gemilut hassadim*, though less markedly, while attention to *tikkun olam* is the reverse. A related point of convergence is that in both communities there are large portions of the population that do not find their place in the established, normative existing frameworks and in both there is a need for meaning making and finding/creating a community.

Yet, what kind of an impact will these initiatives ultimately have? It will be an interesting and important direction for future research to examine whether and how any of the elements discussed in this paper will enjoy successful transfer out of the Israeli context — taking into account the appropriate cultural programmatic translations and adjustments — especially for those North American Jews for whom synagogue life does not seem to offer an appropriate path.

In Israel, this connection between identity and educational frameworks is also salient, because it is the *hiloni* identity that has placed a wedge between Jewish cultural knowledge and the non-"religious" population. The identity shift is changing this by broadening the range of what one "owns" Jewishly, and this change is in turn further shaping identity.

The role of social justice frameworks, which is so important for the Israeli organizations, can also be assimilated into the North American context. For example, North American Jews are offered opportunities to get involved in economic, social, and ecological justice through a range of programs like the American Jewish World Service, Hazon, and others. These programs emphasize cultural Judaism and its call for justice through creating alternatives to synagogue affiliation or established Jewish settings such as Jewish Federations. However, they are not linked to frameworks for weekly or even monthly involvement once participants have completed them, nor do they create settings for engaging with Jewish ritual or study as ways of exploring or transforming identity. This is especially lacking for Jews who have not found their place in rigorous study institutions that tend to absorb graduate activists, such as Mechon Hadar in New York City, or the various *minyanim* that are based around intense ritual and require knowledge as well as commitment.

Even if the Hebrew language is not accessible to those who study texts in North America, thus narrowing to a degree the rich layers of association available to those who engage in textual studies, it is

interesting to consider the possibility that social justice combined with study or ritual might be a vehicle worth exploring in the service of a more multifaceted, complex Jewish identity. The range of possibilities is wide and deserves a fuller examination, but it is important to note that there are individuals and organizations attempting to learn from their counterparts on both sides of the oceanic divide. Since the phenomenon is relatively new in Israel, its echoes in North America are young and its direction not yet clear. While drawing on influences from their more experienced counterparts in the North American Jewish community, these groups are crafting a new and uniquely Israeli approach to ritual and to an encounter with the holy and the Divine. Poetry, song, politics, traditional prayer, community building, and commitment to gender equality and pluralism combine to create a new language and a new tool that strives to provide comfort and inspiration to those feeling the darkness of the forest or living, as one of the leaders of the Renewal Movement said in a presentation, on a metaphoric “4th floor” of the building of this exciting and challenging reality.⁷³

Conclusion

Resulting from this confluence of elements, the “new *hilonim*” of Israeli Jewish Renewal, in their search for meaning and identity, are constructing not only institutional and communal innovations, but also a new category of identity that is neither one of the extremes of the commonly accepted Israeli secular-religious dichotomy,⁷⁴ but contains

73 This is the fuller version of the statement mentioned:

"Our grandparents deliberately rejected Jewish tradition and they knew exactly why. Our parents accepted the rejection and had no time to ask why and what it meant. And now, the young generation has no idea how they got here, to this country and this situation which is so alienated from our roots, It is as if they lived on the fourth floor of a building and they don't know why and how. They need to figure out how they got there and what they are doing there."

74 Some of the labels that have been used as self-definitions are: *Yehudi Mithadesh* (Renewing Jew, which was used in this paper) “*Hiloni lite*”, mentioned earlier in a slightly humorous manner, echoes the description of “*dati lite*” used by some who define themselves as “religious,” but who are not very strict.

Most other definitions define their Judaism in relation to the more traditional “*dati*” side: “*Yehudi Haloni*,” (“Window Jew”), plays with the sound of the word “*hiloni*,” but describes the desire to be connected to the larger world through a window (*halon*) and not to isolate oneself through window shutters. “*Yehudi Hofshi*” (“Free Jew”) has been in use for many years. The freedom described here is the freedom from *halakha* and its binding nature. Ari Elon (1990), a teacher of Talmud, plays on the term “rabbinical

views and actions previously considered conflicting, rather than accepting the imposition of a label that excludes parts of their narrative and experience. This is accomplished through the transformation of the re-encountered past, its symbols, texts, and traditions, and its integration with its secular values, lifestyle, and concepts. The transformation echoes back and forth between the individual and the communities that foster this new Judaism and, as such, creates a framework of socially conscious organizations that, through their structures, philosophies, missions, and educational and leadership methods, echo the longing for authentic, creative, and compelling Jewish engagement that is free of affiliations and labels on the one hand and the desire to fully participate in secular non-Jewish life on the other. As the movement enters a phase of expansion and stabilization, it offers the opportunity for more organizations in Israel and the Diaspora to learn about it and adopt some of the elements that have been successful in promoting integration and transformation towards meaning, excitement, and wholeness in Jewish life.

This study constitutes a preliminary discussion on a new phenomenon that is rooted in the need for secular Israelis to draw connections between Jewish tradition, transcendence, modern Israeli sensibilities, and the desire to be part of and create a community in which individuals can support one another, connect to their heritage, and make meaning of their lives. The people active in these prayer communities (as well as others involved in an active search for connections with Judaism and Jewish tradition) do want to ask questions and they don't necessarily want to have specific answers.⁷⁵

The directions for further research are many. Within Israel it will be important to see how the movement develops and grows and how sustainable it is over time. There are some collaborative efforts beginning among larger institutions. Will they continue and grow? Do the signs of a budding new Israeli identity indicate sustainable change? Is the combination of Torah, *Avodah*, and *Gemilut Hassadim* (learning, worship, and social activism) a formula flexible enough for an evolving

Jew" – *Yehudi rabbani*, invoking instead the self-sovereign Jew, "*Yehudi riboni*," who acts out of personal autonomy but who doesn't feel bound by the edicts of rabbinic *halakha*.

75 "I want this to be a place where people feel free to ask questions. This is a place of questions and not of answers. That is who we are and this is what I am the most comfortable with." Interview with Rani Jaeger, April 2005, Jerusalem.

Jewish continuity that is diverse and multifaceted?

In North America it will be important to follow the first modest attempts at collaboration between the two communities and learn what elements, if any, are most suitable to adaptation. Are there similarities between the Israeli and North American secular Jews, and if so, what can the North Americans learn from their Israeli counterparts and vice versa? What is the potential reward of the convergence between the search for meaning in North America and that on the Israeli side, which to such a great extent provided the fertilizer for Israeli Renewal?

There are many promising aspects to Israeli Renewal, in terms of the individuals and the Israeli society in which they live. As an evolving trend, it changes, responds, develops, and adapts in tandem with dynamics in Israeli society. It also responds to trends and changes taking place in Jewish communities around the world, especially in North America. There are signs of the beginnings of mutuality and possible collaboration. As this phenomenon continues to follow its course, new variations of Jewish identities will emerge, locally and globally. Given the unexpected and creative dimensions that have unfolded until now, perhaps the only certainty for the future is that this continued journey promises growth and will continue to defy prediction.

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Interviews and conversations with multiple individuals. Among them Shay Zarchi, Chen Tzfonl and Bini Talmi from Nigun HaLev; Meir Yoffe, director of Panim for Jewish Renewal, Ruth Calderon, head of Alma, Home for Hebrew Culture, Rani Jeager, Esteban Gottfried and Galit Kedem of Beit Tefilah Israeli, Moti Zeira, head of the Midrasha at Oranim; Roni Yavin and Rivka Miriam, heads of Elul Elu V'Elu; Tal Shaked, head of the Yeshiva Hilonit, and many others.