

Within Israel studies today, interests in media and culture, along with more traditional studies of ethnicity, are combined in new research undertaken by two scholars at Bar Ilan University. Their larger project, a comparative study of popular religious behavior of Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, poses innovative questions about the relationship between nation, culture, and ritual.

It is commonplace to categorize Israeli Jews as *dati* (literally religious but in the Israeli context Orthodox), *masorti* (traditional), and *hiloni* (secular). The trouble is that we don't know what these categories mean to the people who so identify themselves and while we do know that there is certainly a correlation between how one defines oneself and how observant one is in religious practice, the relationship falls far short of perfect. The reason, as we have learned in a series of interviews we have just begun to conduct, is that many people identify themselves as *hiloni*, *masorti*, or *dati* because of their own preconceived notions of how others identify them. For example, we have learned that there are *Ashkenazim* whose level of religious observance is like that of most *masortiim* but who refuse to

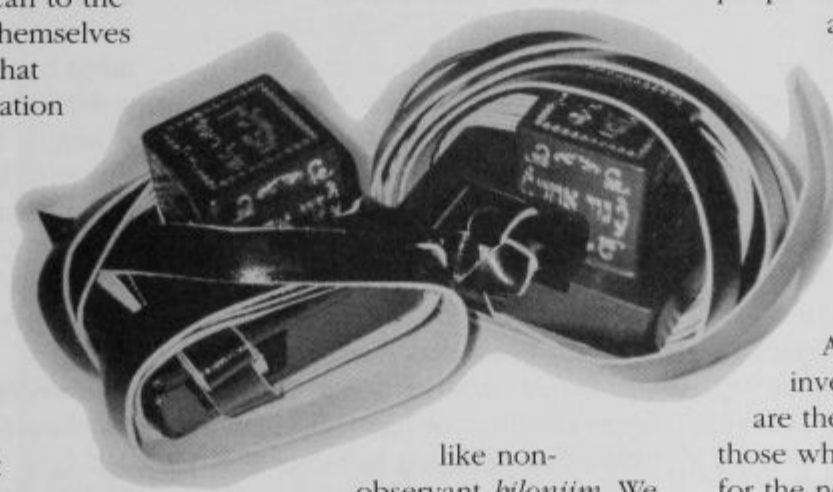
identify themselves as *masortiim* because they believe that this is a category reserved for *Mizrahim* (*Sephardim*). On the other hand, we have interviewed *Mizrahim* who identify themselves as

Israeli Jews indicate that they participate in a seder, 71 percent light candles on the Sabbath, 67 percent fast on Yom Kippur, 55 percent have a special Sabbath meal, 48 percent recite (or hear)

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masortiim for the same reason. According to them, all *Ashkenazim* are either *hiloniim* or *datiim*. These kinds of perceptions can work in the opposite direction as well. *Mizrahim* who want to be like *Ashkenazim* are likely to define themselves as *hiloniim*. Such definitions, in turn, may impact on behavior. This self-categorization is especially the case for *Mizrahim* (mostly women) who marry or want to marry *Ashkenazi* men, who choose to call themselves *hiloni* and as a consequence behave

kiddush before the Friday night meal, and 41 percent build a *sukkah*. Forty one percent also report that they refrain from working in public on Shabbat. The conclusion is inescapable. The majority of Israeli Jews observe many Jewish practices in their home, including practices which are not always easy to perform. Whether this stems from a belief that God has commanded one to observe these practices, or whether it is a sense of obligation to one's family, or a sense of Jewish peoplehood, or something else, or all or some of these, we do not know and we are not certain that those who observe these Jewish practices know, even when they have an answer ready at hand.



like non-observant *hiloniim*. We are not urging sociologists to abandon the categories of *hiloni* and *masorti*. It is too late for that.

We do know a great deal about Jewish practices among Israeli Jews. According to the latest Guttman report, 85 percent of

Another question we are investigating is how important are these practices in the lives of those who observe them; especially for the non-Orthodox. It is probably very important for some and of trivial importance for others. But we can make some educated guesses. It seems reasonable to assume that among the non-Orthodox, the observance of Jewish practices is linked in some way to a sense of Jewish

peoplehood. Israeli Jews claim that belonging to or being part of the Jewish people is very important in their lives. A decade ago, in his book *Zehut Yebudit-Yisraelit*, Yair Auron published the results of his interviews with second- and third-year students in teacher's seminaries. Sixty eight percent of the students in *mamlakhti* (non-religious) seminaries reported that their Jewishness played a very important or an important part in their lives.¹

In the light of the pervasiveness of Jewish practices, it is surprising to find that Israeli media, whose programming presumably reflects popular culture in Israel, gives very little expression to characteristic Israeli-Jewish practices. To understand our point we must recall Jurgen Habermas' distinction between state culture (the culture generated by the state itself) and civic or public culture, which in democratic societies exists independently of the state. Israeli state culture can be distinct from the culture expressed by the media. In Israel today, we find, unlike thirty years ago and more, that there are considerable differences in the values expressed by the two cultures and the state culture has lost the impact and influence it once had. Our interest is the public or civic culture. Our focus is on the public media which is directed to the broad spectrum of the Israeli-Jewish population rather than a specific segment of the population.

We are not arguing that Jews, Judaism, or even religion are ignored in public culture. They have their place in both television and the cinema, but they are representative of the religious *other*, of *them* and not *us*. Judaism-Jewishness is identified as

"Orthodox" and generally represented by a stereotypical character. Religious Jews might cavil at such treatment. But they do have their own media outlets, their own radio stations and a set time which is allotted to them on state television to do with as they please. The Jewish behavior of non-Orthodox Jews, those who affirm their Judaism and participate on a selective basis in Jewish ritual

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The relationship between Judaism and Israeli culture has an ethnic component as well. As we have seen, there are differences between the attitudes of *Ashkenazi* Israelis and *Mizrahi* Israelis to the Jewish component of their Israeliness and this too is reflected in Israeli culture. *Ashkenazi* Jews are far more likely to adopt an understanding of Judaism which imposes sharp distinctions between secularism and religiousness and leaves little space for what is best termed religious traditionalism—religious behavior based on custom and family tradition that is tied to a sense of ethnic or national identity rather than religious behavior that is dictated by authoritative interpretations of sacred text. Jews from Islamic countries have retained a strong measure of traditionalism which is dictated by family custom rather than rabbinic fiat, but *Mizrahim* are minor voices within the ranks of those who

dominate the agencies of Israeli culture.

This condition, wherein Jewish practice, at least Jewish practice in a non-Orthodox context, receives no recognition in the public media is satisfactory to two groups—the Orthodox establishment, on the one hand, which thereby maintains its monopoly of Jewish practice, and the Jewishly indifferent secularists on the other who do not want to be exposed to religion. But the absence of any legitimation or affirmation of Jewish practice in the media may be a contributing factor to its decline. Our

study of the manner in which the non-religious Israeli is projected in the Israeli media is part of a larger study that seeks to examine the Jewish behavior of the non-religious, both *masortiim* and *hiloniim*. A number of studies have described with some detail the ritual behavior and the nominal beliefs of *masortiim* and *hiloniim*, usually under the rubric of Jewish identity.² What we are undertaking will explore the extent to which these beliefs and behaviors constitute some kind of coherent system, a form of popular religion. We want to understand how behavior and beliefs are changing over time, and what relationship they have to national and ethnic sentiments.

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