BEING JEWISH IN THE 21st CENTURY

CHALLENGING THE BINARY OF RELIGIOUS VS. SECULAR: THE CASE OF MASORTIIM

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Many people believe that there is a clear divide between ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ or ‘secular.’ Yet a group exists that challenges this binary, they are known as Masortiim. The term ‘Masorti’ is a common term used in everyday parlance to describe a particular approach to Judaism that is shared by many Jewish Israelis, particular those of Middle-Eastern origin. The term also fits the Sephardic experience to a large extent, although many Sephardim would simply describe the same phenomena as simply ‘the Sephardi way;’ this is particularly true of Western Sephardim whose congregations are comparable to "modern orthodox,” yet do not have official dogma apart from a concern for maintaining tradition and a modern outlook on life. The minhag of the local synagogue coexists with an acceptance and tolerance of private individual approaches to Jewish law.

The cultural experiences of Middle-Eastern Jews - who arrived in Israel after its establishment — varied, and the influence of European culture, politics, and colonialism were equally varied. Many Middle-Eastern Jews did not face the same types of religious and identity issues as European Jewish populations, particularly with regard to the Enlightenment period. This resulted in a different approach to Jewish religious communal life than was the case for Ashkenazim. Middle-Eastern and Sephardic Jews did not develop denominations, as did Ashkenazim who created Reform, Liberal and Orthodox distinction. Nor was the clear distinction between religious and non-religious characteristic of their Jewishness. As such, the notion that one can be considered religious or not depending on observance of Jewish rituals, dietary customs, or synagogue attendance, is somewhat alien to Middle-Eastern and Sephardic Jews.

As a case in point, the Kippah (skullcap) becomes a focal point for distinguishing between the so-called 'religious' and 'non-religious' (secular). For some, the kippah is an obvious marker of religiosity, particularly for Ashkenazim, and I have had several anecdotal experiences of it being so. On a Friday night, I once went to an LGBT nightclub in Tel Aviv that played Middle-Eastern music. We had brought in Shabbat at the home of an Algerian Jewish family in Ashdod, and had all worn kippot throughout the evening meal and the socialising that took place afterwards. The heads of the household refrained from switching the lights on and off in communal areas, yet younger members of the family had no issue with switching the bathroom lights on and off. Everybody drove to the meal and subsequently drove home, and myself and my friend went to Tel Aviv by car. I took my kippah off before getting in the car and we listened to music on the radio. In the club I saw several men wearing kippot and dancing either alone or with other men, it did not seem strange or out of place, and the wearing of the kippah seemed like a marker of cultural identity rather than religious observance. Indeed, the very act of paying to enter a nightclub and buying drinks on a Friday night would be the antithesis of 'religious.'

This contrasts sharply with a more recent experience on public transport in London when my partner was wearing kippah after attending a Friday night service. We were sitting on the bus and a young man sat opposite us and was looking intensely at my partner and eventually stated "you're wearing kippah on the bus and it's Friday night?" To which my partner responded without hesitation "I'm Reform." I pointed out to the young man that was using his phone on Friday night and he giggled and said "oh yeah, and I'm on the bus!" Then he put his phone in his pocket as if to signify his recognition that it was Shabbat. I wouldn't know if the man was Ashkenazi or not, but in retelling the story to Sephardi friends afterwards they thought it was probably the case. I was similarly asked why I was wearing a kippah when I entered a synagogue in Toronto that hosted Oraynu Humanistic Jewish Congregation, my answer was simply "because I'm in a synagogue" to which the response was "yes, but you know you don't need to wear it, right?" to which I responded that I believe I should wear a kippah out of respect for the place and the people that own the building, which seemed satisfactory to my interlocutor. Among Israeli Jews, the above scenarios evoke iconic images of Masorti practices and the differences in perception among Ashkenazim and non-Ashkenazim with respect to religiosity. The anecdotes highlight religious behaviours that defy the dichotomy and also lie on the margins of what are considered orthodox and 'Reform' (if Reform in this context is taken to mean anything that isn't orthodox yet still religious).

There are several ‘Masorti’ practices or behaviours that would be considered “inconsistent” by many. Playing electronic music to celebrate an occasion associated with religion is one such example; those considered ‘religious’ would not play music on Shabbat or on a Yom Tov, and whilst some may consider doing so to be a violation of orthodox rules, it is also not uncommon for this to simply continue happening. A scenario like this both encapsulates the Masorti habitus as well as highlights its supposed [in]correctness in relation to rabbinic halacha (Jewish Law). Thus, this scenario does not fit the supposed norms of religiosity versus non-religiosity. Masorti behaviour is often imagined as more lenient — leaning less on halacha — but this is often not the case, especially when minhag is concerned. Usually it is the eldest male that recites the kiddush for the entire family, and it is the eldest woman that lights candles; and whilst a Reform family might light candles at the dinner table regardless of whether sunset has long passed or not, a person considered Masorti would not. I grew up with a Moroccan Jewish family in semi-rural England, and the mother of the household would like Shabbat candles at ‘the correct time,’ meaning that in winter the candles were lit several hours before dinner. The eldest son (the father had passed away) recited kiddush at dinner and blessed the hallah and we would watch a film after dinner. There was never any discussion of whether this was deemed correct behaviour or not. The mother went ‘so far’ as to keep a Shabbat candle lighting time calendar on the kitchen wall, whilst simultaneously cooking chicken bought from a non-kosher supermarket (no kosher supermarkets were available to her anyway).

Katz and Zloczower [1961] commented on Yemenite Jewish families in an Israeli town in 1956, noting their “traditional” approach to religiosity noting that that research on immigrant groups ought to pay more attention to ethnic differences and cultural factors. Zvi Zohar [2001] analysed decision-making in halacha among rabbis in Middle Eastern countries in modern times, and noted an approach to tradition that allowed for possibilities and flexibilities not afforded to European Orthodox communities. Yaacov Yadgar and Charles Liebman [2009] have commented that masorti styles of observance are active religious choices that deserve more academic attention, and Yadgar [2010, 2012] subsequently researched the substance of masorti orientations and identities in greater depth.

There is now more acknowledgment that the binary of *religious* or *not-religious* (*dati* or *lo-dati)* is inaccurate and misleading [Yonah & Goodman 2004; Goldberg *et al*., 2012]. Here we would be reminded that each individual’s story — and the religious influences in their lives — is highly

relevant. For those exhibiting masorti style approaches to Jewish life, their particular paths all have in common a “hard-to-define” (or “inconsistent," , etc.) quality. With respect to religion and secularity, they are not only placed firmly in the realm of “in between,” but also are in counterpoint to mainstream Jewish orthodoxy.

In conclusion masorti approaches to Jewish observance exemplifies how Jewish identity and practice cannot be neatly categorised into "religious" or "secular" boxes. Instead, Masorti approaches represent a fluid continuum where tradition, cultural identity, and personal choice intersect informed by, yet in contradiction to, Jewish law. For Middle-Eastern and Sephardic Jews, practices that may seem contradictory or inconsistent by orthodox standards are authentic expressions of Jewish life. These practices are far from passive or random, and reflect deliberate choices rooted in familial and communal traditions, cultural values, and a flexible approach to halacha. By challenging binaries, the masorti experience offers a more nuanced view of Jewish identity, and brings to light some of the complexities of that binary. Humanistic Judaism includes both those who have distanced themselves from orthodoxy and those who are drawn to tradition but seek a framework that aligns consistently with their beliefs, illustrating the broader significance of the masorti approaches to a reimagining of how Jewish identity in the 21st century can be expressed.

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