

# Difficult secularity: Talmud as symbolic resource

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## Summary

Religious systems are organised semiotic structures providing people with values and rules, identities, regularity, and meaning. Consequently, a person moving out of a religious system might be exposed to meaning-ruptures. The paper presents the situation of young people who have been in Yeshiva, a rabbinic high-school, and who have to join secular university life. It analyses the changes to which they are exposed. On the bases of this case study, the paper examines the following questions: can the religious symbolic system internalised by a person in a religious sphere of experience be mobilised as a symbolic resource once the person moves to a secular environment? If yes, how do religious symbolic resources facilitate the transition to a secular life? And if not, what other symbolic and social resources might facilitate such transitions?

People have to deal with the unpredictability and the uncertainty of the diversity of modern secular lives, and often strive for meaning and values. Cultural and religious systems provide people with structures that bring regularity, orientation, community and meaning. Contemporary societies put inclusive cultural or religious systems at stake. Also, in the current balance of social forces, extreme religiosity might appear as a threat to occidental, liberal values. Consequently, the adhesion to religious values or to an inclusive religious system is not necessarily taken for granted. Some people convert to religion, join sects and religious

groups, while others leave religious communities to join secular life. Some people stay out of such communities, but mobilise religious values or fragments of systems to engage in a “religious bricolage”, the self-making of a personalised religious kit (Campiche, 1997). However, joining a religious system, leaving it, or having access to religious narrative, symbolic objects or values do not necessarily and immediately solve meaning needs; moreover, these movements in themselves create ruptures and call for meaning-making. How is a religious system functioning as a symbolic system satisfying people’s need for orientation and meaning? How does it function when the person is exposed to a situation for which she has not been prepared within her religious environment? And what happens if a person cannot mobilise her religious system to address successfully ruptures with which she is confronted?

To address these questions, the following theoretical proposition is made: rather than examining religious systems and their symbolic components *per se*, one needs to examine how a given person actually *uses* them *as symbolic resources* as she is intentionally engaged in addressing specific issues (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson and Psaltis, 2003; Zittoun, 2006). The questions to be examined are thus

the following: how can a person mobilise parts of an internalised religious symbolic system as resources to address issues external to her religious experience? And which other social and symbolic resources can she use to address ruptures to which she is exposed?

The present contribution to the question of use of religious systems as symbolic resources is limited to a single case. This paper is based on the observation of a small group of orthodox Jews who left the inclusive sphere of experience of a Yeshiva, a rabbinic school, in order to study in a secular university. Jewish orthodoxy offers a very strong corpus of texts and rules, and teaches hermeneutic competencies: a set of heuristics of thought, that allow scholars to induce and deduce other cases, or to interpret some new events or cases in the light of canonical situations (see for ex. Billig, 1987; Levinas, 1982; Ouaknin, 1986; Zittoun, 1999). In theory, an orthodox Jew, expert in these matters, should be able to link any new, unexpected situation to the corpus, to elaborate a multi-voiced meaning of it, thus interpreting it in the light of the tradition. However, once confronted with the secular world, the young persons observed here did not use religious resources: they mobilised non-religious cultural elements to confer meaning to their new life situations.

The first section of this paper presents the key notions of this psychological approach. It details the notions of *transitions* following *ruptures* of the taken-for-granted in people's lives, and of *resources* which might facilitate these; it also exposes the problem of *leaving religion*. The second section presents the methodology of the case study of young orthodox Jews coming back from Yeshiva to secular life. The third section examines the rupture these young people experience, and the fourth section highlights various resources they use to deal with newness. The fifth section finally

indicates general issues raised by this case study.

## A semiotic psychological approach to change

From a cultural psychological perspective, the world in which people constitute themselves as human is inhabited by symbols encapsulating meaning, and circulating through time and space (Benson, 2001; Cole, 1996; Marková, 2003; Valsiner, 2005; Wertsch, 1998). Societies thus provide individuals with semiotic devices that they can use to confer meaning to their lives, and it is through expressive symbolic means that individuals participate in society. Symbolic activities are thus the locus of encounter between what is most peculiar to individual's interiority, and the shared knowledge and understanding of societies (Obeyesekere, 1977; Winnicott, 1971).

### Cultural elements and symbolic resources

The notion of *cultural element* can be used as a generic to designate any complex constellation of semiotic units (signs that carry shared meaning), distinct from other constellations, organised and structured in particular ways. Here two main categories of cultural elements will be considered.

A first category is that of cultural elements that have their meaning given by their inscription in a particular symbolic system. Religious books, objects, or sets of beliefs, are thus cultural elements that can be part of a bounded religious symbolic system. Such a system is diffracted upon various interdependent supports, and is regulated by some authorities (or "warden of the frame", Grossen and Perret-Clermont, 1992) who define what belongs to the symbolic system and what does not. Judaism is such a bounded symbolic system; it includes texts of reference, various cultural objects, rules and norms, social regulations and forms of authorities, which all take their

meanings from their location in that given system. The rules, norms and principles can be described as hierarchically organised (Geertz, 1972; Valsiner, 2001, 2005). In the case of orthodox Jews, such a system can tentatively be described as follows:

- Level 1:** At a first level, specific rules are guiding concrete, embodied actions and perceptions (e.g., praying, not eating pork, not looking at young girls' exposed shoulders);
- Level 2:** The tradition defines rules and intentions for classes of actions and typical situations (e.g., suggesting the study of specific texts; preventing from eating lunch in a non kosher place);
- Level 3:** The tradition offers principles that have constraining forces. Such commitments or *meta rules* include the value of learning and of studying religious texts; the value of the otherness; the value of improving oneself; these are likely to canalise and organise certain types of activities;
- Level 4:** The tradition defines fundamental beliefs: there is one God, and it is an honour and a duty to respect the very special relationship between God and his creatures.

Level 4 is a basic assumption in a given community and is bonded to identity. Level 3 meta-rules, as means to respect the latter, are diffracted within the texts and in everyday situations, guiding practices at level 2 and 1. In a Jewish orthodox milieu, such rules are likely to be strongly actualised, re-enacted and reassessed within the social field and the interpersonal relationships (meals, prayers, familial songs). They compose the architecture of the self (Zittoun, 2006): symbolic culture is non-dissociable from the person, and constitutive of her apprehension of the world and of herself (Geertz, 1972; Nathan, 1991, 1992).

A second type of cultural elements are bounded or limited by a material support – e.g., books, films, songs, or paintings. These, too, are organised constellations of semiotic units, but their material support fixes their boundaries.

Cultural elements “exist” for people who “experience” them – reading a novel, participating in a rite – that is, when they link them with their embodied memories and feelings. Thus, cultural elements always refer simultaneously to something in the real world, and to how other people have related to it.

Experiences of cultural elements of both types eventually become internalised and constitutive of people's personal culture (Valsiner, 1998). They can thus extend the range of people's experience, and their knowledge, skills, images and emotions, about themselves, the world or others (Vygotsky, 1934; Winnicott, 1971).

Cultural elements can be objects of experience *as such*, that is, for their explicit function or meaning – reading a novel for the fictional experience it offers, participating to a rite in order to participate to that rite – but also, they can be used in relationship to *something else*. Cultural elements used in relation to something that exceeds their intended meaning can be said to be used as *symbolic resources*. A symbolic resource can thus be defined as a cultural element used by a person *intending* something beyond the meaning or aesthetic qualities of the cultural experience itself, just as any cultural tool can be used (Brentano, 1874; Vygotsky and Luria, 1994; Zittoun et al., 2003). For example, a book can be read in order to get some sense of a foreign country to which one will travel (Gillespie, 2006). Cultural elements mobilised as *symbolic resources* can thus offer complex forms of semiotic mediation intended to facilitate the apprehension of new events and thoughts.

### **Ruptures & transitions**

In their everyday life, people can experience ruptures that have different sorts of causes. The social world itself can be disrupted – as when a war starts; people themselves can move place, or the settings of their activities can be modified; relationships in which they are involved change; and at a more individual level, they might physically change, or come across new ideas. As a result, what they use to take for granted might be put at stake, and people can feel a sudden or progressive rupture. Perceived ruptures can thus be followed by *transition processes*, through which people try to restore their sense of continuity and define new regularities. Three interdependent processes of transition are likely to occur: (1) people engage in repositioning and identity redefinition (Duveen, 2000); (2) this calls for new forms of knowledge (Perret-Clermont and Carugati, 2001); (3) and it requires the elaboration of emotions and the restoration of an inner sense of continuity, both being part of meaning-construction processes (Bruner, 1990; Perret-Clermont and Zittoun, 2002). Transition processes are based on the mobilisation of previous knowledge and skills, which have to be recomposed or reorganised in an original way to avoid rigid repetitions (Janet, 1929; Piaget, 1974). Yet the danger is that such creativity might lead the person too far from what he or she used to be, or to a change which is not acknowledged by his or her social world – that is, to forms of alienation (Lawrence, Benedikt and Valsiner, 1992; Valsiner, 2005; Zittoun, 1996).

### **Symbolic resources and transitions**

The general assumption held by the present approach is that people use symbolic resources to support processes of transition (Zittoun et al., 2003; Zittoun, 2005, 2006). Symbolic resources can guide and canalise social positioning, promote knowledge development, and might enable sense making, the elaboration of

emotions and their unconscious prolongations (Duveen, 2000; Green, 2000; Valsiner, 1998, 2005).

In principle, cultural systems provide people with means to support regularity and predictability: they structure time through recurrent rites and events. They also usually offer procedures to deal collectively with deviance, the unpredictable, and individual ruptures (the loss of someone, birth, illness, etc.) (Levi-Strauss, 1962; Moro, 1998). Cultural systems can be more or less open – that is, more or less ready to integrate new events, or to adapt to new conditions of the contexts (Deconchy, 1973). But what actually occurs at the level of the person who has internalised such a system, when she is confronted with a challenging rupture?

### **The rupture of coming back to secular life**

The young people presented here all define themselves as orthodox Jews (cf. also Bilu and Goodman, 1997). They know Jewish tradition very well, including Biblical and Talmudic (Jewish law) texts of reference, and have expertise in interpreting them. They share the experience of having lived in a sphere of experience entirely shaped by the same religious system, and of moving to a new, secular sphere of experience: the transitions lived by young orthodox Jews coming back from Yeshiva to secular life.

Moves in and out of religious communities have been the attention of researchers. Joining religious life is both a question of conversion (change in beliefs or values) and of socialisation (becoming a member). Religious communities often propose specific settings welcoming newcomers, marking the stages of their inclusion, with the help of more experienced members (Anderson, 2000; Francis and Katz, 2000, Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger and Gosuch, 1996). Leaving a religion is usually a more problematic affair. As communities mostly condemn it, they usually do not offer

any accompanying structure to the leaving person. For her, it involves the loss of one's social network and emotional support, and often brings her to face a secular world for which she is absolutely not prepared (Lawrence, Benedikt and Valsiner, 1992; Nathan and Swertvaegher, 2003; Shaffir, 2000; Zittoun, 1996). Social scientists usually examine *deliberate* moves out of religious settings: a person loses faith, or is attracted by other forms of life (Bar-Lev, Leslau and Ne'eman, 1997; Shaffir, 1997). In the example of leavers of Jewish orthodoxy, some organizations have begun to offer a support and accompanying setting to facilitate the transition out of religion (Shaffir, 2000).

In contrast, this paper examines a group of young people *unwillingly* leaving an inclusive, orthodox sphere of experience: raised in a religious community in England, they have been encouraged by their family and social group to spend one or two years in a Yeshiva (rabbinic school) in Israel. After that period, their parents call them back, and require them to accomplish a university curriculum which will provide them with a profession. It is expected that, as adults, they will be able to have a "secular" profession, while pursuing their religious study and life in their free time. The young people examined in this paper are thus confronted to the problem of *leaving religion*. However, in contrast with cases documented by the literature, they have not chosen to leave it. In other words, they move out of a religiously structured sphere of experience, without renouncing its symbolic system of propositions and values, that is, their internalized religion. The question is therefore, whether in absence of the corresponding community, these internalized religious cultural elements can become resources to address secular life.

## Researching uses of religious resources

Reflecting in terms of perceived ruptures and chosen symbolic resources puts a strong emphasis on individualised pathways, yet constrained by sociocultural threads of meanings and forces (Moscovici, 1997). This calls for a methodology that captures the dynamic tension between socially prescribed organizations of life-patterns, and the manner in which these appear in a particular life-world. One way to do so is to study people on the basis of their trajectories and the system to which they belong, as suggested by Valsiner and Sato's "historically structured sampling" method (2006).

The participants chosen for the present paper share an equivalent experience of *coming back* from Yeshiva, although they have various past and future trajectories. *Processes* in which each of the young persons engages can then be compared. Second, all these young persons belong to the same network and share activities, which have to be documented (Valsiner and Sato, 2006).

Various data collecting techniques are combined. Young people were contacted through the local Jewish society in an English University town whose meetings I attended for one year. There, six participants were asked to be interviewed on "the role of cultural experience in our everyday life". The present analysis is, for the major part, based on these interviews, and on other information helping to capture people's field of experience. First, I have some familiarity with the Jewish tradition although I have not lived an orthodox life (Zittoun, 1996, 1999). Second, I observed meetings and shared activities of the local Jewish society, where I was accepted as a peripheral participant: my status of researcher was publicly announced, I was obviously not orthodox, yet I am Jewish. Third, I got acquainted with some of the additional cultural elements mentioned by the

young persons (films, novels). Fourth, I interviewed the Rabbi of the society on his role in the group, his intentions toward the students, his perception of their needs, and my understanding of their situation. This enables a multiplicity of perspectives on the data (Valsiner and Sato, 2006; Zittoun, 2006). Fifth, the theoretical framework to account for these data has been developed through a wider study on uses of symbolic resources in transitions, at various ages (Zittoun et al., 2003; Zittoun 2005, 2006), and modified by that particular case study through an abduction process (Valsiner, 2007). In effect, the Jews community was approached with the expectation that, thanks to their familiarity with Talmudic hermeneutics, religious Jews would develop an expertise in using religious symbolic resources in new situations. However, as the analysis progressed, the subjective importance of the rupture (relatively to other young people), as well as the difficulty of using religious resources called for a new set of hypothesis and further theoretical elaboration.

### **The interviewees**

The four interviewees presented here come from an orthodox background in England. Some went to Jewish primary schools; all went to secular high schools, in urban areas largely frequented by religious Jews, and attended Sunday courses or regular private classes given by a Rabbi. All spent one or two gap years in a yeshiva in Israel before going to University, and justified this choice as “natural” within the social group (all classmates would do so; parents encouraged it). At the time of the interview, their studying situation was as follows (first-names are fictive, sub-discipline of study hidden): Abraham: 1<sup>st</sup> year, literature, two years in Yeshiva; Benny: 2<sup>nd</sup> year, literature, one year in Yeshiva; Dinah: 2<sup>nd</sup> year, literature, one year in Yeshiva; Eli: Postgraduate, history, one year in Yeshiva.

As mentioned, the interviewees presented

here have been interviewed in the frame of a study on uses of symbolic resources in youth transitions. These four interviewees have been isolated among other interviews with Jewish students, for they present a very consistent group; data is highly saturated. They share a similar rupture, and the fact of having been familiarised to a clear set of cultural elements. This very little group is thus chosen as exemplar of the processes I am trying to articulate: that of the possible use of an internalised religious symbolic system as resource in a secular environment.

### **The technique**

The interviews were semi-structured, lasting between one and one and a half hour, and organised along two dimensions. One was temporal: starting from the present situation of the person, it explored these young people’s direct past, their childhood, their relationship to their families and their representations of the future. The second was linked to cultural experiences: it explored the objects that the students had brought with them to their university rooms, their religious practices, leisure time, and cultural experiences. Interviews explored thus the students’ experience in Yeshiva and in this University town, what they perceived as a rupture, and their uses of symbolic resources. The interviews have been recorded, and analysed with a software supporting qualitative analysis, Atlas.ti. The analysis combines case studies, a transversal analysis and theoretical work. The coding frame was partly pre-organised by theoretical questions and previous research (Zittoun, 2004, 2005) (what are the ruptures? what cultural elements are mentioned, in relationship to what?). Other codes were defined through an analysis of 30 interviews with young people leaving through transitions (Zittoun, 2006) (specific sorts of resources used, the role of others, reflectivity, degrees of elaboration, etc.). Some codes were specifically defined for this subgroup.

## The transition from Yeshiva to secular university

Religious Jews experienced the rupture of leaving yeshiva to come back to England in order to start studies in a secular university. To have a sense of the implications of this rupture, it is important to give a view of life in Yeshiva; the following description is based on a student's narrative and on the literature (see e.g. Ouaknin, 1986; Shaffir, 2000).

A Yeshiva is a full time, Jewish study school, where most of the day is organised around prayer, both collective and individual (practicing Jews pray three times a day), study, both with peers and individually, and a few domestic tasks. A Yeshiva offers a field of experience which is *framed* in time and space, isolated from other sociocultural influences, with its own regulation, and its "warden" (the Rabbis, the head of the Yeshiva, etc.). Young people are there willingly, in a sphere of experience where there might be, thanks to its highly structured and ritualised routine, space for a certain type of intellectual and spiritual exploration. This sphere is cut from other worldly influences. The Yeshiva also provides a social arena where young men (or women) with similar interests, background and aspirations can meet; time and study and effort are shared with peers; a very particular emotional and social atmosphere develops within the collective study and prayer; no people who are strongly different are met during that time.

The Yeshiva thus offers a protected frame, in which a rich human network enables religious people to live an everyday life which is totally isomorphic with their internalised hierarchy of beliefs, norms and rules. For religious Jews, the study of the scriptures, the laws and the traditions they gave birth to, is one of the main ways through which one actualises one's reverence to God (an overarching rule, which can be considered as located at level 4 of the above-mentioned semiotic hi-

erarchy). More specifically, it enables one to achieve a more specific principle, the duty of becoming a good person and improving the world in general (level 3 of the hierarchy of values defined above). One of the main ways of doing so is: "Jewish learning, because it is good for the world, that too, but because it is really a good thing to do from a religious point of view" (Benny). Learning is seen as good for the balance of the world in general and learning is good for an individual in his/her relationship to God (level 3). These rules give rise to a class of practices (level 2): the duty to teach. This duty is constantly repeated in everyday, material action and rituals (level 1): it is discussed widely within rabbinic and mystic literature, philosophy and tales, and is expressed in the usual everyday prayers, grounds fundamental rules.

Hence, in a Yeshiva, one studies Torah – which includes Talmud (Jewish law and its multiple layers of interpretation and controversies through the centuries, mostly Michnah and Gemarrah), Tanakh (the Pentateuch), the post-biblical literature, and other issues such as philosophy or liturgy, under the supervision and the authority of Rabbis. Students study in pairs of "Haverim", or friends, who give each other response or contradict each other's interpretation of a given text portion. A great part of the study is linked to the identification and the resolution of contradiction within the text, and the deduction of application of rules or part of the text to new hypothetical situations (Billig, 1987; Ouaknin, 1986; Steinsaltz, 1996). Also, religious Jews try to follow as much as possible the 613 Mitzvoth, the 613 "laws", which include obligations (among which are imperatives to study, pray etc.) and interdictions (among which the ones related to food and hygiene), regulated and adapted to various situations by the Halakhah, the law. Yeshiva life, which is collectively organised around them, facilitates each person's conformity to these. Women are traditionally not submitted

to these obligations, but they have to respect the interdictions. For a long time, scholar women have been very badly considered, and religious Yeshiva for women are a relatively recent phenomena (“liberal” movements have created such schools and the status of Rabbi has been open to women for about 20 years) (see De Lange, 2000; Lawrence, Benedikt and Valsiner, 1992).

After one or two years of life in Yeshiva comes the rupture. The students decided, for themselves or more likely, to satisfy their parents, to get a university degree, which would give access to a remunerated profession, on the basis of which they could later on, as adults, settle down and have a family, and continue their study of Talmud. Their choice of this University comes from their previous knowledge that it has an important Jewish community enabling a religious life.

University life is not constructed around the same set of religious values as a Yeshiva, and does not facilitate actions following from them. The Yeshiva does not prepare its students for such a change. Consequently, the religious young people felt unprepared for life in a secular University. The vocabulary used by some of them expresses the rupture felt: a “split” between two worlds is experienced. One young man thus tries to articulate this rupture<sup>1</sup>:

[After Yeshiva and its inclusive atmosphere] then you come to a place like this. And here, firstly, the opportunities for doing the things you were doing in Yeshiva are obviously far far far less. Firstly there are so many other things to do. And also the apparatus is not really there so much; there are relatively very very few sort of orthodox religious Jews; and there are not so many books, and everybody is SO busy, and sort of stressed whatever – not everyone

but – and I mean – in a similar sort of way, perhaps there are some similarities, in a similar way that in Yeshiva people would spend all day studying, here people would spend all day doing, you know, studying, or doing students’ things... (Eli)

In contrast to Yeshiva, University life presents religious young people with a social environment which does not support the set of values they have internalised. The rupture can thus be described as a move from a sphere where internal and external semiotic systems were isomorphic, to a sphere where these are disjoined: religious persons now have to rely on what they had internalised, without any external support.

Concretely, students first have to deal with a newly acquired autonomy – what has to be done in everyday actions (laundry, cooking, sitting alone in one’s room), but also at the level of orientation and organisation. Do the students have the means to achieve actions that were until there guided by the external support of the Yeshiva? Have they internalised the rules at level 4 and 3, so to redefine by themselves local intentions (level 2) and specific actions? Second, students are now confronted with very different people, and they have quickly to define how to deal with them. Students make their choices – some decide to avoid non-Jews altogether, others try to relate to them. A third difficulty is identified: how to conciliate their religious commitments with the secular academic and social life, that is, are the values compatible, and how can one divide one’s time so as to fulfil both one’s religious requirements and one’s study program? In other words, students’ sense of continuous *identity* is challenged, and the question is how to maintain it beyond the rupture. They address the situational demands (meeting new people, satisfying study requirements). They also question the “appropriateness” (from a religious perspective) of living in such a place, and hence need to address the issue of the *meaning* of the rupture itself.

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1 Transcription conventions: *italics* designate the interviewer’s interventions; ...indicates an interruption in the person’s discourse; - - are pauses in the discourse; CAPITALS indicate an emphasis in the discourse; [comments] are added by the author.

## Resources for the transition into a new sphere of experience

After such a rupture, people have to engage in processes of transition. To achieve such transition, people have to define new conducts. These externalisations will require a combination of previous forms of knowledge, processes of accommodation to the new situation, and uses of new environmental opportunities. What types of resources do these students find to maintain their identity, to adapt to the new demands of the situation, and to confer meaning to the gap?

Our psychosocial perspective invites to focus not on purely individual traits, but rather on forms of knowledge or conducts that have been acquired in other, previous social situations, and internalised. However, knowledge is not context-free. Social psychology has highlighted the extent to which social structures organise the circulation, dissemination and transformation of symbolic devices. People are located in some spheres of experience, within some societal contexts, and social and interpersonal dynamics give them more or less access to cultural elements, and more or less freedom in what they can do with them (Duveen, 2000; Falmagne, 2003; Moscovici, 1997; Perret-Clermont, 2004).

In the sphere of experience provided by orthodox Yeshiva, it seems that Rabbis strongly encourage their students to stay in, and to become eminent Talmudists, rather than going back to the secular world, negatively evaluated. Also, the study of the texts is done for the sake of the study of the texts, not to address external, real-life issues (this is contradictory with the original purposes of many of these texts, which was to provide guidance to new everyday situations). Altogether, the “warden” of the religious sphere of experience thus (a) render illegitimate students’ move to secular life; (b) restrict the use of religious texts as tools to address issues internal to the tradition.

The question is thus, given these constraints, can people use the knowledge they have at their disposal as symbolic resources, and if so, what for? Here, three sorts of resources used by young people are examined: social resources; cognitive skills and specialised forms of know-how and knowledge; and symbolic resources which might support the work of meaning-making of the situation.

### **Social resources: recreating an inclusive sphere of experience**

A first very important element in the religious students’ life at university is the Jewish Society and its chaplain, the Rabbi. It allows the students to meet three or more times a day – for the prayers, for study in the morning (*shiour*), for Kosher lunches, and various activities, learning and celebration in the evening. It allows the 15 very religious students to recreate around them the type of structure that had been offered in Yeshiva (or in their homes) – although it is this time spread out in time and space, since the students have to run through town a few times a day, from the synagogue, to classes, to the Rabbi’s, to classes, etc. The Rabbi meets the students during most of these occasions with his wife and children. He teaches to the religious students and also to a wider group of academic and non-academic Jews in town. Hence, a partial yeshiva-like sphere of experience is created and maintained by the Rabbi.

### **Know-how: religious conducts as resources for identity**

Religious elements can become resources for these young religious students. These support identity, and confer some skills. Students are reflective about their uses of religious actions in that respect.

First, their general attitude toward learning is *constitutive of their identity* and part of level 3 metarules:

Firstly, truly I am a religious Jew. And it is a Mitzvah to learn Torah, as much as possible. So that's why... that's a main reason I want to learn. (Eli)

The content of what I do is irrelevant. No. But it is less relevant. – It is more the fact that I am doing, rather than WHAT I do. I mean... Ideally I try to understand what I am doing, and trying to internalise that, I suppose, to the next time. So it is important in THAT sense. But I think it is more the fact that I am doing it – which IS important. (Abraham)

Second, their *voluntary commitment* in the study is part of who they are:

By fixing certain times to learn, I think it shows that you... it shows a certain amount of serious... I shows that you attach a certain amount of seriousness to... to it. Or of devotion as I said before. Rather than just saying oh I have three hours... I'll study a bit now. That it is something that is fixed, it is important, I think. (Abraham)

Third, they are aware of the *identity-constitutive power of practices and activity* (level 1):

Essentially, Judaism is a very pragmatic religion. I mean... you've got to do this in a certain time, you've got to do this in a certain time, you know, you've got to eat Matza then, you have to sit in the Succah then... I mean, It's a religion of doing, it's... it's also a religion of enquiring, it is less a religion of separation. It is also... as I said, it is a religion that's alive, it is not dead on the page, it is not one of these necrophiliac religions. I mean, you're sort of living it, doing it as well. (Eli)

They also are aware that their identity is highly linked to a group in space and time, and that their practices are reaffirming their location within sociocultural and temporal frames. Students insist on their place in a tradition; they recognise the value of their predecessors and of their Rabbis, and express their intention to carry on this knowledge and to transmit it – for example through teaching positions or as counsellors in summer camps.

As a result of their awareness of the religious means to achieve their identity, they

also know that accomplishing these practices contributes to their psychological *well-being* (level 1 becomes diffuse as a result of the application of level 4 commitments) (see Geertz, 1972; Valsiner, 2005):

I feel better; immediately afterwards, but also generally if I put in on a more general pattern of learning, I feel more steady, and more happy, and more focused. (Eli)

*You said that studying Jewish texts is "meaning of your day", can you explain that?* If I wouldn't study then I would feel kind of empty... Erm – I also think it is kind of... it is based on a) the fact that I feel it is important to do. I also think it is important to stay connected to... to Judaism, to God essentially. Because studying His texts, or studying Jewish texts its what keeps you... it what connects us. – So without this kind of... it would be a kind of statement, saying that I don't care anymore, which – would be quite a [failure] from my point of view. (Abraham)

After the rupture, studying religious texts acquires a reconstructive value. Not only do students act in conformity with deeply interiorised before the rupture; but also, they become reflectively aware of the constitutive power of these conducts. They know that level 3 rules are not only theoretical ideas; if they lead to intentional study (level 2), and guide concrete activities (level 1), they enable them to feel who they should be. They thus can be said to reconstruct on an internal plane the system that was previously externally supported (Vygotsky and Luria, 1994).

The problem is, still, that these aspects of their life are defined *within* the field of religious activities, these are not formulated in a way that would encompass the confrontation with otherness.

### **Know how: heuristics of thinking**

There are other ways through which the religious symbolic system offered bridging resources: skills developed within the traditional learning might be transferred to secular studies. As is described in the literature on Jewish

learning and reported by the students, various psychological operations are commonly involved in religious studies. First, specific *modes of reasoning*, dialogical and non-strictly logical – ways to question the question, to decompose the problem in other problems, or to change perspectives – are required. A second aspect of this study mentioned by the students is the root-seeking part, as in the study of etymology in the Houmash (the Pentateuch). The study of etymology of the words and their interpretation makes salient one of the principles of Judaism – as regulated as it is, every one should find his own voice, or place within the tradition. The third aspect of Jewish study mentioned is the way it supposes one's personal and psychological engagement in the content; studying religious text is a way to learn something about human beings, and to reflect upon oneself. Finally, a fourth particularity of the study of Jewish texts is their proximity to actions; understanding a point, or respecting an argument, leads to “better actions”.

How can level 3 meta-rules organising Jewish studies, the intention in front of each text (level 2) and specific skills and practices of questioning a text (level 1) be organising one's action and thought in the field of secular studies? Here, I will rely on students' (guided) self-reflections, and also make a few inferences on the basis of non-reflective discourse.

This influences students' ways of apprehending their secular studies in various ways. Here, it guides specific *heuristics of thinking*:

*Does the way you have learned to analyse Jewish texts influence the way you look at modern texts?*  
I think so... Certainly my approach t... to writing essays is... Yes I do find that I – approach texts like I however would, say Gemarrah [Jewish law] or something. Anyway, my supervisor often comments that my approach is legalistic. Which is, I guess, from my background. Because I tend to look at the question, and then to define the points

of the question, discuss the question rather than discuss the book, as such. (laughs) I suppose that is my background of Gemarrah. – – – I found out... I don't know because of my nature or... I found out that I have quite a logical way of thinking, I think, as well, to reason with idea, or to structure an argument. (Benny)

It is a way to address and question, to structure an argument, point per point, and to organise reflection it in a particular dialogical manner. It also includes usually a worry for the *etymology* of terms. Hence, talking about a recent essay, Benny spontaneously mentions the etymological issue:

And if you are not careful, you know, if you are not careful with the etymology of the words, like you know, just now, I am discovering that the etymology of the “self” doesn't mean the inner [but just the appearance] *In English?* Yes, this is what an author I'm reading on Shakespeare says. (Benny)

Talking about the *content* of the studies, the assumption of the students seems to be that they must be meaningful – rather, there is a particular *epistemological attitude* toward the text, which reflect rules at level 3, and intentions facing a piece of text (level 2): it is not so much the text's contents that matter, but one's active use of them and assumption that it will teach something. Dinah tries to describe this epistemological attitude, of which she became aware when confronted with secular students:

But I suppose the way I always learned and, the way I have always having learned in religious setting, with people that had a religious approach, might change the way I am learning English. Because I ... because I come with an assumption that, that ... I want as much as possible to get from it an understanding of other things, something else, or to change my state of mind in a good way, or help me learn how learn about things that people say. Judaism has that approach, that if you don't understand, or you think it's weird or it is rubbish, it must be that ... (laughs) you don't understand, and it is far more clever than you are. And you

have to try harder. I am hoping that, I don't know, that studying English, would ... I mean, part of what I'd like to learn is to- – to listen to texts, but I hope that it might help me somehow to listen to people better. (Dinah)

General religious orientations and commitment can thus shape one's attitude toward texts within non-religious fields of experience, and shape specific practices – here, a form of transfer of skills. This extended religious epistemological attitude (to accept the text without questioning its source or socio-historical location) is quite different from the one developed in secular studies; the danger is that the students will be negatively judged for this attitude by the institution. Additionally, Dinah appears to follow this logic of transposability: studying Jewish texts changes her attitude to literature; but, ultimately, studying literature might change her attitude to the secular world.

### **Traversing the gap: symbolic resources**

Can the religious resources confer meaning to the rupture itself, and promote a life in a non-Jewish context? As explained by the Rabbi, Yeshiva masters do discourage people to leave to the secular life. In some sense, it might be thought that this renders illegitimate any mobilisation of religious symbolic resources to address secular issues. Also, although the Jewish tradition of interpretation potentially offers powerful tools (the texts) and methods (hermeneutic reasoning) to redefine meanings to any new situations, traditional orthodoxy seems to envisage only historical or Talmudic cases for these hermeneutic explorations. Thus, the students seem not to mobilise by themselves the texts to address real events that affect them. Hence, to think their relationship to the secular world, they spontaneously mobilise *external, non-religious symbolic resources*.

Abraham explored self-help and psychological literature. Berne's transactional analysis was useful to address the issue of structuring time:

We all should learn to function like the heart – because the heart, the way it works, is one third of the time physically pumping, and two third of the time resting; so the way you should may be structure a day, 8 hours your doing your work, 8 hours your due – for yourself, whatever it is, and 8 hours a day sleeping. So: you know, that has been a quite useful model, that I try to integrate. (Abraham)

The metaphor of the heart is used by Abraham as a resource to reassemble the split parts of his life; the problem of being a religious Jew and a secular student becomes redefined as a problem of everyday time-management.

Eli, too, came around the issue of different values and worlds of experiences in an indirect way. When questioned about his literary choices, he develops:

Now, I was talking about this sort of... difficulty somehow in getting a balance between all the aspects of life. The *Glass Bead Game* [by Herman Hesse]- basically, there is a sort of college on a hill, completely isolated from everything else, where the people there are very involved in a sort of esoteric learning, which is difficult to understand what is and what sort of impact it has on anything else, and then again on the outside world obviously. And there is one character in it, who is really firmly in one world, and he feels the tension between the one world and the other world. And that, I mean I could really, I really read that, in terms of having been to Yeshiva and coming to University, obviously there weren't exact parallels, but I could relate to that very strongly. Erm – and, I don't think the book actually helped resolve the conflict, the actual conflict, it didn't really help, it sort of more... it demonstrated the differences, I think – - but it helped. It is nice to know that other people are thinking the same things you are. (Eli)

In the *Glass Bead Game*, the main character is a brilliant student chosen to enter a remote school, where an obscure, but esoteric knowledge is studied. The main character eventually decides to return to the mundane world, and there is a long way for him to define both his place there and the status of his special knowledge. Similarities can be found between Eli's

story and the novel: structurally (the return story), semantically (being chosen to be the holder of a rare knowledge), and emotionally (anxiety, pride, loneliness) a strong resonance between life and text can be created. The text might be invested, and provides Eli with its transformative structure. Hence, the text offers a narrative line that links two split worlds. The text appears as a symbolic resource used by Eli to elaborate his experience of coming back.

### **Using religious resources to think the gap**

Yet the Jewish tradition is very rich, and it would provide with a very important repertoire of potential resources. This is where the action of the Rabbi as a mediator becomes fundamental. In the Jewish Society examined here, the Rabbi tries to create a social setting of a good enough quality, where using Jewish texts as symbolic resources is legitimate to address secular issues. He exerts his mediation at various levels. First, he proposed to redefine the confrontation with a secular world and the articulation of the “two worlds” as a positive experience, in a Jewish perspective (as the duty of being open to the world). He hence creates the possibility of the “bridging” by entering at the level of students’ meta-discourse. Second, he studies texts in a traditional way – which recreates the intellectual, social and emotional ambience of the Yeshiva – while addressing issues directly relevant to the problems students face. Here, the text is pushed slightly beyond his context of validity because the students are exposed to new forms of experience. Within this protected space, they experience the possibility of bridging their “yeshiva” type of activities, with their worries about pubs and parties. Third, he proposes meeting around a secular topic, for which he proposes a selection of short abstracts from a range of Talmudic texts; these are discussed in large assemblies of religious and non-religious Jews. The rabbi thus seems to reformulate current issues in the terms of a traditional argument, which renders

them acceptable from a religious perspective. These discussions are quite striking, for the students get very involved – some at the level of the Talmudic texts, but quickly, drawing examples of their everyday situation – which they are not supposed to do in traditional spheres of experience.

One might thus say that the Rabbi tries to create a transitional structure between the Yeshiva and the secular world: a structure that acknowledges the richness and the rules of the former, yet opens it to the latter; a space that does not judge what is right or wrong, and where consequences of actions are suspended. Finally, traditional cultural elements – texts and practices – appear to easily provide resources for supporting identity and developing competences. However, the content of such elements cannot be easily used as symbolic resource to confer meaning to new forms of life, as long as such uses have not been legitimated.

## **Studying uses of symbolic resources and their constraints**

This paper has examined cultural change from the perspective of the person unwillingly moving from an inclusive sphere of experience to an open one. Based on the case of religious Jews coming back from Yeshiva, it has focused on the symbolic resources actually used by people to support the required processes of transitions – identity redefinition, skills and knowledge learning, meaning making.

The initial cultural element these young people have access to, is Orthodox Judaism, which has been analysed as a complex hierarchical semiotic organisation. One could have expected that this system, offering sets of deduction rules, would facilitate the definition of actions in new fields of experience. It appears that young people use religious symbolic resources to maintain identities and to develop some skills; yet when it is about meaning

construction, they seem to use symbolic resources from outside of the religious symbolic system.

Why can an inclusive religious system not be used as resource when a person is exposed to a situation to which she has not been prepared within her religious environment? An analysis in terms of social legitimation can be proposed. On the one hand, our psychological perspective assumes that people have a particular and unique life story; their past and current ruptures and spheres of experiences, and the significant others with whom they interact, mark and determine possible uses of available symbolic resources. On the other hand, a given sphere of experience – here the Yeshiva – defines the extension of validity of the rules it promotes; here it dismisses the “outside word”. More specifically, research on learning indicates that it occurs in social, interactive and emotional settings, structured by high level rules, which are concretised in actions and thinking, and structure identities (Perret-Clermont, 2001; Perret-Clermont and Carugati, 2001; Pontecorvo and Pirchio, 2000). These high-level rules become deeply part of people’s worldviews, and stay with them across contexts. In contrast, specific expertise (including knowledge and skills) is easily lost in new spheres of experience, when a person is confronted with new problems, or when her identity is put at stake. Transfer of knowledge hence requires the possibility to “bridge” spheres of experience. As seen above, mediating adults can support that bridging (Heath, 1996; Zittoun, 2004). Thus, if this paper shows how people can find and use symbolic resources to support transitions, it has also suggested that uses of symbolic resources require dynamics of social acknowledgement. When these lack, then people cannot mobilise symbolic resources and expertise deeply attached to a specific sphere of experience.

Nevertheless, when such a symbolic system cannot be mobilised, we have also seen

how people can engage in creative mobilisation of other symbolic resources available in their cultural environment. These resources then can become means to symbolically bridge otherwise exclusive spheres of experience.

Finally, through a case study, this paper has proposed conceptual tools for examining how inclusive cultural systems could provide people with symbolic resources which they can use when they face an imposed rupture. The perspective proposed here can thus help us to reflect on the more general issue of cultural translation in cases of migration, be it from one country to another, or from one scientific tradition to another. It proposes to examine the homeostasis between internalised symbolic systems and the one constituting a person’s sphere of experience, and supported by institutional, social and symbolic means. It suggests that, in order to overcome disjunctions, meaning making requires protected spaces, tolerating ambiguity, double sense and plays with codes, sometimes with the help of a legitimising mediator. It finally indicates that, in such spaces, people might use symbolic resources facilitating such exploration, translation and distancing.

## Acknowledgements

I would like especially to thank the members of the Jewish community who accepted to be interviewed by me. The study reported here has been supported by a European Marie Curie Research Fellowship, a Corpus Christi College Research Fellowship (Cambridge, UK), and the Swiss National Research Foundation. The paper has been enabled thanks to the kind hospitality and stimulations of the Department of Psychology at Clark University (MA); I finally thank Alex Gillespie and an anonymous reviewer for their useful advice.

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