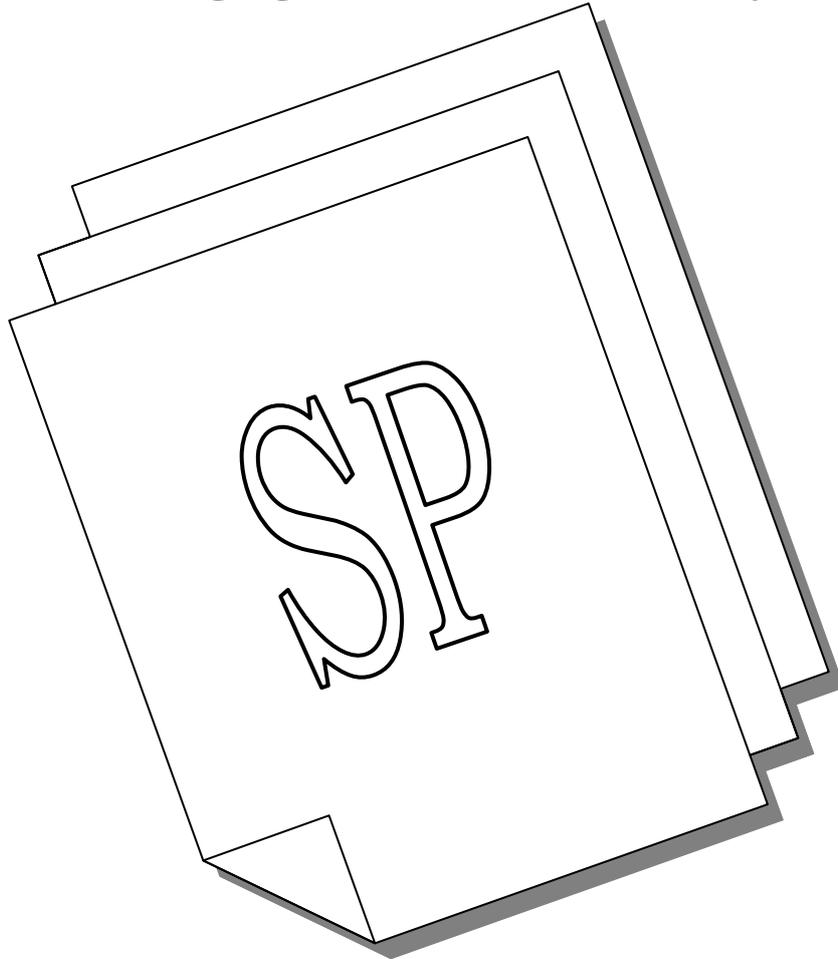


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# **Intercultural Mediators: Women Organizers of Henna Rituals of Yemenite Jews in Israel**

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## **Abstract**

This article is dedicated to women who conduct henna rituals that became very common among Yemenite-Jewish young couples in Israel. Based on the interviews and observations of these rituals, I conclude that their organizers consciously and unconsciously play the role of intercultural mediators. They mediate between past and present, between tradition and modernity, between Israeli culture and Yemenite culture, between the cultures of different ethnic groups, and between the younger and older generations. They view this syncretic process as necessary for preserving the traditional ritual following its transfer to the new social context.

## **Introduction**

The concept of mediation has become very popular in Israel and worldwide since the 1970s, and especially over the past decade. Mediation was developed as a legal form of alternative dispute resolution or as a service to the community in different areas (Shemer and Bar-Guy, 2001). Mediation helps formulate mutual agreements that lead to a common solution accepted by both parties and to mutual recognition (Bush and Folger, 2005). The basic assumption of mediation is founded on motifs of cooperation and not of conflict over resources, positions of power, beliefs and values (Schellenberg, 1996; Stewart, 1998).

Intercultural mediation in the community is a comprehensive practice that deals, in our case, with the relations between the absorbed immigrant community and the absorbing society and its institutions. In multicultural Israeli society, intercultural conflict is an inevitable part of social reality, hence the central role of the formal mediator and the accompanying systems (Shemer and Bar-Guy, 2001). The meaning of mediation between cultural groups is recognition and celebration of differences, rather than their denial (Jaffe, 1998). The intercultural mediator must understand the values, behaviors, feelings and needs of each party. In addition to being a translator between cultures, the mediator also functions in balancing the contrasts between them and helps maintain the unique identity of each culture (Friedman, 1992). Our stereotypic perceptions of the "other" are deep mental constructs, of which we are usually unaware and which are difficult to change. Faure (2000) asserted that these stereotypes cause misunderstandings and are an obstacle to communication between people and groups. However, cultural images that both groups maintain regarding each other may facilitate interrelations between them.

Salacuse (1999) proposed several ways for mediating a cultural divide: to learn about the culture of the “other” while not referring to stereotypic perceptions; to help the “other” become more familiar with your own culture; to use a third culture for mediation, or intertwine elements from both cultures in an integrative mixture. McLeod (1981) compared the work of the intercultural mediator to that of a teacher. Indeed, similarly to the teacher, the mediator must be knowledgeable about both cultures and use this knowledge to teach each culture about the other.

This article describes a unique type of informal intercultural mediators – specially-trained women whose job is to organize the henna rituals of Yemenite Jews in today’s Israel. The role of an organizer of this ritual became more prominent as it has turned into one of the hottest trends among young couples in Israel (Sinai, 2008; Shitrit, 2003). The comeback of the henna ritual in the recent decades signifies the process of return to the roots and awakening of the religious and ethnic traditions in multicultural Israel (Lissak, 1993). This article does not focus on henna ritual organizers as ethnic entrepreneurs in an era of ethnic awakening (Mizrahi, 2005), but rather on their role as intercultural mediators. In 2006-7, I carried out six interviews with organizers of henna rituals for Jews of Yemenite origin, supplemented by participant observations of the rituals they organized. Four of the organizers were aged 60-65 and two were younger, ages 35-40. The older organizers told that they immigrated to Israel at a very young age, but learned the henna custom while still in Yemen, from their mothers and grandmothers who were professional dressers. The younger organizers said they had been connected to the Yemenite culture from childhood, and were present at numerous henna rituals. They were invited to sing at these events, and after acquiring enough knowledge on this topic decided to turn their hobby to occupation.

### **Marital rituals in Yemen**

Marital rituals in Yemen were large and impressive social events in the life of the individual and the community (Nahum-Levy, 1962: 148-168; Kapah, 2002: 158-209). Because of great resources invested in these rituals and due to their perception as a religious commandment, relatives and acquaintances from the community and from nearby villages, as well as Muslim neighbors, participated in the preparations and in the actual rituals. The marriage rituals therefore contributed to endorsement of interpersonal and inter-community relations, helped fortify community solidarity, and cultivated good relations with the Muslim majority. Marriage celebrations were not a one-time ritual, limited in time and space, but rather a long chain of events continuing for several weeks. During this period the bride and groom became disengaged from their previous social lives and began adjusting to their new status. The dispersal of the Jewish communities in Yemen and difficulty of travel between them due to topographic conditions created great variations in the ritual performance between the regions: the capital of Sana’a and large cities on one hand and the villages on the other, as well as between the villages themselves. Unique styles of dress, song, dance, duration of the celebrations and ritual customs evolved over time. These differences reflected the lifestyles, social and economic conditions of the Jews in the different regions (Amdor, 1986; Muller-Lancet, 1984).

Most Jewish communities in Yemen conducted marital rituals in the week preceding the wedding day (*waad al’oros*). During this period the bride and groom were in a liminal state characterized by Turner (1967: 93-111) as a state of “no longer” (single) and “not yet” (married). This period was defined as moratorium, during which they turned “invisible” structurally, if not physically. Their first names were taken from

them and they were called “bride” and “groom.” The liminal couple is found in overt passivity and absolute acceptance of the authority of the adults who represent the “common good” of the community, which the couple must learn. The bride and groom are forbidden to work outside the home, and are under constant supervision, just like little children in need of oversight. The wedding week included a string of rituals intended to mentally prepare the couple for the peak – the wedding day. Rabbis and community dignitaries were present at these events. The rituals took place concomitantly or alternately, in the home of the groom’s parents or the bride’s parents, and strict separation between men and women was maintained, as dictated by Yemenite tradition. Each ritual had a function, and was accompanied by unique dress for the bride and groom.

The bride’s henna ritual was usually celebrated on Monday evening, and the groom’s was usually celebrated the following morning. However, the bride’s henna ritual, the subject of the current paper, was more extravagant than the groom’s. It also served as a more significant rite of passage for the bride, and was very emotional, since most brides were very young, usually around the age of 10-12. The boy usually married at the age of 16-18 (Eraqi-Klorman, 2004; Mundy, 1995: 10). As in other traditional societies, the early marriage was part of the patriarchal structure whereby the young couple merged into the extended household of the groom’s family (Rubin, 2004: 40; Rubin, 2005: 143). The henna ritual was therefore part of a process by which the bride turned from girl-youth into man’s wife, separated from her parents’ home and moved into her husband’s home. This explains why many activities during this ritual were focused on the bride’s family, home and the people closest to her.

### **The magical significance of henna**

Henna is a fragrant bush with white inflorescence, which originated in India and spread to Asia and North Africa. It was used for ritual purposes in Israel during the times of the Bible, the Mishna and the Talmud (Gonen, 1997: 60; Dori, 1982: 38-44; Pardess, 2000: 22). Fragrant oils were prepared from the leaves, seeds and flowers of the plant. Folk medical wisdom attributed the plant with healing properties. The henna leaves were dried and ground into a fragrant powder, and ground pomegranate shells and nuts were added in order to obtain a darker red color. The powder was kneaded with water, rosewater or wine until the dough was ready for spreading. The dough was used to dye textiles, skins and parts of the body. The henna’s red color was also regarded as beautiful.

The custom of dyeing hair, hands and feet was common among Indians, Persians and Arabs, as well as the Jews of the Islamic countries, including Yemen, who adopted the cosmetic use of henna and its application in marriage rituals from their Muslim neighbors (Tschernowitz, 1984: 191-193; Kapah, 2002: 125-127). On regular days, the women in Yemen spread the dough on their hands and feet in a plain layer, and the men used it to dye their graying hair and beard. The body areas on which henna was spread were wrapped in cloth for a few hours, usually at night. The cloth wrappings were then removed, the dried dough was peeled off, and the fragrant and red parts of the body were washed. The color does not wear off for several weeks.

In addition to medicinal and cosmetic properties, henna was also attributed with magical properties and was commonly used in pre-marital rituals. The bride’s and groom’s liminal period between being single and married was perceived as a dangerous time. According to popular belief, their defenses at this time weakened and physical and mental injuries were to be expected from demons, spirits and the evil

eye. Different societies used different means of protection and fighting against these, including henna (Klein, 1979: 79-83; Westermarck, 1926: 190-209). Henna was not only intended for beauty and health, but also as a beneficial magic potion (Gonen, 1997; Klein, 1979: 83). It was believed that the red spots on the skin will protect the couple against the dangers lurking around them and will deter the evil eye. Green, the color of henna leaves and powder, was also intended to ward off the evil eye. The red color remaining on the skin was like “a marriage seal” and symbolically reflected the future processes of change in the couple’s life.

The changing color of henna from green (dry powder) to red (moist paste) also symbolized the transformation undergone by the couple during the henna rite of passage. By changing their skin color (identity), henna also prevents the demons from recognizing the bride and groom. Henna plant’s green, as well as its shape of a cluster with white inflorescence, symbolizes fertility. The powerful fragrance also turns it into a passion arousing perfume. The red color was also intended to add beauty to the joy of marriage and to become part of the splendor of the couple’s dress and jewelry.

### **Dressing the bride**

The bride’s henna ritual included a sequence of activities that enabled preparing the bride for her new life and to introduce her to the community’s expectations and social messages. The first ritual activity was the ritual of dressing the bride (*halibas*). This ritual took place in a side room, usually without singing, by a woman who specialized in dressing the bride according to the custom in her region (for example, Hilger, 1000; Kapah and Lancet, 1963). The bridal clothes and jewelry were supplied by her family and the groom’s family; if necessary, items of clothing and expensive jewelry were rented. The groom’s gifts were intended to ensure the traditional gendered division of labor in Yemen already at the pre-marital stage, where the wife was dependent on her husband even for her basic needs. The clothes and jewelry served as status symbols, and were unique to the different areas of Yemen. As I cannot describe bridal clothes in many different regions of Yemen, I will focus on the dress in the capital city of Sana’a. Jews there were richer than in other areas and the bridal outfit on henna ritual’s eve was very elaborate (Kaph and Lancet, 1963: 20-26; Muchawsky-Schnapper, 2000: 68-93).

The bridal dress for the henna ritual in Sana’a glittered in shades of gold, silver and red, which had clear feminine gender significance symbolizing fertility. The dressing woman draped the bride in two long gowns, with long sleeves: a light colored under-gown (*tahatani*) and over it a dark and wider dress (*antari*). There was a long slit in the front of the top dress, which was sewn all around with silver decorations, gold-plated chains and rich embroidery in silver and gold thread. Beneath the gowns, the bride wore trousers (*libas*), whose bottom end was magnificent and embroidered with silver threads and red silk in a pattern of stars and diamonds. On top of all the other layers, the bride wore a coat (*jalaya*) with wide sleeves. This coat was made of a golden brocade material, knit with silver and gold threads, and decorated with silver filigree buttons.

On her head, a Yemenite woman wore from childhood a typical pointed black cloth cap (*karkush*), which covered her forehead and went down to her neck and shoulders, since for reasons of modesty a woman’s hair could not be seen. The cap that the bride in Sana’a wore on the eve of the henna ritual was magnificent, and made of expensive golden brocade material. It was decorated with embroidery in braided silver threads, colorful silk threads, red stones, beads, silver chains, pearl chains and silver plaques

of different sizes. Globules of silver and gold that resembled wheat grains and symbolize the fertility of nature and plentitude of food were sewn in the headdress above her forehead. This symbol also refers to the Yemenite woman's everyday task – grinding the grains into wheat and baking bread. Three rows of gold-plated silver coins were sewn onto the fabric of the cap and were actually the woman's most important private possession. In times of need she sold some of the coins, and later, when the economic situation improved, she replenished the missing coins. A large and magnificent foil (*makarma*) of brocade and green silk fabrics decorated in gold embroidery was spread over the cap. Many traditional pieces of jewelry, made by famous goldsmiths of Sana'a, were placed on the bride's arms, legs and neck (Lancet, 1962; Eilon, 1976). The bride wore gold-plated silver bracelets (*shumeileat*) as well as different types of rings made of silver and gold and inlaid in part with precious stones. On her neck she wore an expensive and heavy necklace (*manaka*) made of many chains hold at both ends by golden triangular plates, sometimes inlaid with stones. The triangle was intended to symbolize the woman's fertility. Special shoes were put on her feet.

Perfumes commonly used in Yemen were sprayed on the bride, including rosewater and pelargonium (Muchawsky-Schnapper, 1994). Her eyes were made up with a blue material (*cohol*), in order to protect the eye against infections. Painting the eyes was also intended to prevent the evil eye from harming the bride's fertility. Since pregnancy, birth and motherhood are the main grounds of feminine identity in traditional societies, women's inability to perform these roles leads to inferiority in the social division of power (Waserfall, 1995: 259-271). The ritual activities involved in the dressing ritual were thus focused on the bride's body, and exposed rigid traditional moral codes. Her role was to be passive and give herself in full trust to the hands of the older woman who was placed in charge of her. Her young body was loaded with heavy jewelry, and the weight symbolized the yoke of her role as a wife. She was covered with wide garments that hid the contours of her body, according to the rules of modesty. Covering her body with clothes, jewelry and makeup also comprised a "disguise", which served as an additional means of protection against the evil eye which might threaten the bride's fertility. The actions of dressing the bride and covering her body are also an expression of "invisibility" principle, which, according to Turner, is one of the liminal characteristics of a rite of passage.

### **Accompanying the bride to the ritual**

The second ritual activity was procession (*zapa*), where the bride was led from the door of the dressing room to where she would sit (Amdor, 1986: 60-61; Yaari, 1999: 131). The procession was led by two to six (depending on the region) female performers singing to the accompaniment of percussion instruments in their hands: a copper tray with metal sticks and a drum. During the entire ritual, the singers and relatives who gathered around the bride sounded "wails" of happiness.

The women carried various traditional ritual accessories, which were usually borrowed, in their hands or on their heads. The interviewed women explained that since there was no electricity in Yemen, women carried large colorful candles for light. In the henna ritual they also symbolized the women's wish for light and happiness in the bride's life. One of the women carried a vessel for the candles (*mazhara*). It had a broad base and sometimes two handles. The vessel was either the color of natural clay or painted white and decorated with geometric designs and colorful dots. The vessel broadened towards the top into an open bowl, and its jagged

margins contained holders for candles and small bowls into which eggs decorated with geometric designs were placed. The use of eggs is common in rites of passage, because in many cultures they symbolize creation, beginning and the human life cycle. They are a symbol of fertility, a token of luck and a means of protection against harm by demons and evil spirits (Klein, 1979: 80-83; Muchawsky-Schnapper, 1998: 68-69). One of the women held a vessel with incense (*mebkara*), which was placed over coals made of resin of perfume trees. The incense spread a pleasant fragrance and, according to popular belief, it was also beneficial for expelling demons (Tschernowitz, 1984: 196-198). The vessel was narrow, stood on a base and had three or four layers. Thus, the candle holders and the egg bowls were placed at different heights. The entire vessel was decorated with rings inserted in its handles, or in the four arcs that connected to its upper part and ended in an egg bowl.

Several women carried straw baskets decorated with fragrant green branches of Yemenite plants regarded as protecting against evil eye: fragrant basil and rue. One of the older women carried the henna powder bowl. The bride walked accompanied on both sides by her mother and the groom's mother. The bride was in a protected and dependent state and her role was to be passive, entrusting herself to the hands of the older women who led her. They have the knowledge and the bride was the absorber and acceptor.

As the procession approached the crowd of women, enthusiasm grew. The women's "wails" of happiness got louder and longer, and the slow drumming became faster and more rhythmical. This drumming opened a chain of dance songs, a permanent item in the henna rituals script. When songs were over, the bride was placed on a specially prepared decorated and raised seat. The singers and older women concentrated around the bride and thus she continued to be protected. The seating order reflected the social hierarchy, which the ritual helped preserve. The women were offered refreshments of fruits, drinks and nuts (*jale*).

### **Kneading and spreading henna**

The third ritual activity was kneading henna by the women closest to the bride, i.e. her grandmother or mother, accompanied by rhythmic beating and singing. When kneading was finished, the grandmother or mother stuck a bundle of rue branches (*shadav*) and lit colorful candles in the center and covered the bowl with an embroidered cloth. The women singers began an additional chain of dance songs, and the women danced with the bowl placed on their heads, according to the order of their kinship with the bride.

The fourth ritual activity, with which the ritual reached its climax, was spreading the bride's hands and feet with henna (Muller-Lancet, 1984: 412; Kapah, 2002: 53). The henna spreading signified preventing the evil eye from harming the bride in anything she would do and wherever she would go. The next day, Tuesday, unique artistic decorations were drawn on the henna-dyed background, also intended to beautify the bride and protect her against the evil eye. The hired female artist decorated the bride's limbs which were spread with henna. She drew patterns on her skin with a thin stick using reddish-brown wax. These decorations were borrowed from the embroidery art of Yemenite women and included magical symbols of fertility, also familiar in other Eastern cultures (Muchawsky-Schnapper, 2000: 64-65): a triangle, a spike and three dots painted in black, brown and red. On the morning of the wedding day, which in many communities took place on Wednesday, the bride's hands and feet were covered with a fragrant mixture, which made the henna look darker. This mixture was

attributed with properties of disinfection and healing of the skin. The bride's forehead and cheeks were painted in lines and dots with a shiny black dye, for beauty and against the evil eye.

The four above-mentioned henna ritual activities were conducted to the sound of singing and playing of professional singers. The women in Yemen did not learn to read and write; in contrast to men's singing that was religious, women's singing was secular, oral, and accompanied their harsh everyday lives (Gamlieli, 1975; Seri, 2000). The songs of the henna ritual revolved around the bride and praised her beauty, her dress, her attributes and the attributes of her family. The girl's pain of separation from her family and her familiar world and the passage to a foreign place made another central theme of the songs. Singing afforded Yemenite women an opportunity to express their feelings and repressed longings. In song, she could voice things that she did not dare say overtly, because of her inferior status and the rules of modesty. Thus singing demonstrates how the women found ways to glide into forbidden areas and break social norms by the ritual activity in which only women participated, as compensation for their structural inferiority relative to men (Eraqi-Klorman, 2004; Druyan, 1992: 76-78).

### **The role of the ritual organizer in Israel**

In Israel, the Yemenite henna ritual is usually held with great splendor, in a banquet hall rather than in the bride's home. The location of the ritual enables inviting numerous guests, of all ethnic origins. It is customary for the bride's parents to be responsible for funding the ceremony, as a symbol of the traditional rite of passage of the bride from her father's home to the home of her husband. The bride's family hires an expert woman, whose role is to organize and manage the ritual. She brings the necessary items of dress and decoration, and also serves as the dresser, singer and master of ceremony. The organizer decorates the banquet hall with items that are reminiscent of the traditional Yemenite home. She spreads colorful carpets on the floor and hangs colorful textiles on the walls. She then arranges hand-made straw baskets on the carpets, which were common in the households in Yemen and were handcrafted by the women. A decorated table is placed on a platform covered with branches of rue (*shadav*) and basil commonly grown in Israel by Yemenite immigrants. The tables are loaded with refreshments (*jale*): cookies, sweets, fruits, nuts, and cold drinks.

According to the organizers I interviewed, a significant increase in orders from couples to be married has been taking place in recent years. They are interested in holding the ritual to honor their parents, and/or to connect to their ethnic roots. The renewal of the henna ritual (see also Shitrit, 2003) can be viewed as part of the process of return to roots and the awakening of the Eastern religious and ethnic traditions in the multicultural society in Israel (Goldberg, 1984; Lissak, 1993). This is taking place after decades when immigrants from the Moslem countries, including Yemen, were ashamed of their culture, due to stereotypes of their backwardness and the "melting pot" policy (Lissak, 1987; Kimmerling, 2004: 282-292).

In many cases, the henna ritual is not performed solely for the bride, but is mutual to both partners. They thus reflect the new feminist messages and the difference between low women's status in Yemen in the past and their higher current status in Israel. Modern women marry at a later age (towards the late twenties), choose their grooms, and sometimes live with them before marriage. They are more independent economically and usually not under parental or family supervision. The young

Yemenite men are not worried about undermining of the man's status versus the woman's, as it did their immigrant parents. Both partners wish to advance in society and both contribute to this progress. The behavioral patterns they adopt are those that characterize most Israelis of their generation, and success among young Yemenite women is also measured in material achievements and the level of education (Terry, 2000). The Yemenite women thus do not view marriage as a dramatic change in their lives, and the importance of the henna ritual as a rite of passage has diminished.

The organizers indicated that contrary to the past, the henna ritual today is not held at a fixed time, and is celebrated for one evening only, since in Israel time has a different value making it impossible to celebrate numerous rituals and lose work days. Contrary to the society in Yemen, which was very strict in the absolute separation between genders in everyday life and in the ritual system, gender separation does not usually present in the henna rituals in Israel. Separation is only practiced by very religious couples. The mixing of genders represents drastic change in the status of the Yemenite woman in Israel due to her passage into a more egalitarian society.

In Yemen the henna ritual was celebrated according to the custom in each region, whereas in Israel the rituals are usually uniform. The customs of the city of Sana'a became dominant in the rituals, even among Yemenite brides whose parents originate from other areas in Yemen. This is because there was a large concentration of Jews in the capital city of Sana'a, and it served as a center for economic and religious activity (Druyan, 2000). The order of the ritual activities in Israel is similar to the original ritual. However, changes have taken place in the way they are carried out, in the ritual accessories, and in the symbolic significance of the ritual, reflecting changes in the social and cultural context.

### **Traditional and modern elements in the clothing**

In a side room at the banquet hall, the organizer dresses the bride and the groom in the traditional clothing that was customary on the wedding day in Sana'a, with the addition of modern elements. Organizers indicated that this clothing is preferred by brides whose parents came from other regions of Yemen, because it is very rich and elaborate (see also Amdor, 2003: 130). They added that this clothing is as identical to how it was in Yemen as possible, since some of the original accessories were purchased from women who emigrated from Yemen. The bride's clothing includes: a golden brocade coat with embroidery on the front as well as trousers with embroidered cuffs. The bride wears a high and fancy cap on her head (*tishbuk lu'lu*) as well as expensive and heavy gold and silver jewelry on her neck, chest, hands and feet. Some of the jewelry originates from Yemen, but most is manufactured locally and is made with additions of materials and designs that did not exist in the original. The bride also wears Israeli gold jewelry.

The organizers with whom I spoke explained that the significance of the heavy jewelry is to turn the bride's attention to the mental and spiritual gravity of life and the heavy load placed on her upon entry into married life. One added a feminist interpretation and said that the purpose of wearing the jewelry is to show the bride that: "The future depends only on her, and that she has the possibility of choosing whether to turn married life into a heavy load or to make it beautiful and full of content, like the piece of jewelry that she is wearing on her neck."

The organizer puts makeup on the bride's entire face, as opposed to Yemen where only her eyes were made up with blue eyeliner. She also paints the bride's lips in dark

red and applies fingernail polish to her fingers and toes. The organizers indicated that the Yemenite women in Israel do not attribute the red color with magical significance or fertility symbolism as they did in Yemen, but rather associate it with beauty. Use of perfumes that were common in Yemen has decreased to a great extent in Israel, because of the unavailability of the raw materials and a weakening of the traditional Yemenite customs (Muchawsky-Schnapper, 1994: 141-142).

Next, the organizer dresses the groom in an outfit similar to the one that the groom wore on his wedding day in Sana'a (Kapah, 2002: 186, 254). He wears a topcoat of golden brocade and a triangular amulet on his chest as a token against evil eye. He has a black skullcap on his head with a checkered sheet of cloth sewn around it. He wears long hair side locks (*simonim*) which are glued to the cap, on both sides of his cheeks. In Yemen, the side locks were the clear national and religious signs of the Jewish man. Rue branches are attached to the ends of the bride's and groom's head coverings, and they carry branches of rue and basil in their hands. The organizers indicated that these branches are just a nice old custom, which is no longer interpreted as protection against evil eye. Parents, relatives and some of the guests may also wear the Sana'a region traditional clothing, or its modern version.

When their dressing and decorating is finished, the organizer takes the bride and groom out of the room, and they are led to the hall in a procession (*zapha*). The women in the procession carry straw baskets with sand in them, in which lit candles and colorful flowers are placed. One of the women also carries the traditional vessel for the candles (*mazhara*), with eggs placed at the top to symbolize fertility. The organizers said that the candles symbolize the light on the couples' new road, while the flowers are a festive and happy addition. The traditional incense vessel (*mebakara*) is found in use less often in the henna rituals in Israel, apparently due to a lack of supply of the incense materials.

According to the organizers, the musical instruments during this part of the evening, like the songs, are those that were customary in Yemen. They also indicated that whereas the brides in Yemen cried when they heard the sad words of the songs, most of the brides today laugh when they hear the words which are sung in Yemenite, since they do not understand their meaning. The organizers therefore emphasize how important it is for them to translate the texts and to explain the meanings of the ritual to the couple and the guests, so that they can connect to it.

Because of inter-ethnic marriages that are common in Israel today (Sikron, 2004: 63), henna rituals for mixed couples have become a common occurrence, and the organizer consciously tries to connect between the families and the cultures. They say that they do this by dividing the evening into two parts and affording expression for both cultures. One of the organizers said: "At the beginning of the evening I honor the culture of the groom and towards the henna ritual I ask to change to the bride's culture. I've had henna rituals where the groom was Yemenite and the bride was Moroccan. Therefore we began the evening with Yemenite dancing and singing, and later, the ritual turned into a Moroccan one." The organizers also asked the two families and their guests to participate during the entire ritual activity, not just their own ethnic component.

### **The singer and the disk jockey**

When the procession ends, the couple enters the banquet hall and the guests rise and cheer. The songs in Yemenite rhythm that the disk jockey plays in the hall goes up in

volume and the entire company, men and women along with the bride and groom, get up and dance to the sounds of (mainly) Yemenite and Eastern music. After a break the bride and groom change clothes. The bride wears items of clothing similar to those worn by the bride in the henna ritual in Sana'a. She wears a black dress with embroidery on the front and wears a low golden cap (*karkush*) decorated with embroidery and globules of silver and gold. The groom leaves the skullcap on his head, but changes his clothing to a simple gray dress, which resembles the everyday dress of men in Yemen (Kaphah, 2002: 250).

Sometimes the bride and groom change their clothes one more time during the evening. The organizers explained this custom by the brides liking to change clothes and showing off in more than one costume during the long evening. They also want to impress the guests, take many photographs and shoot videos for remembrance. Changing clothes also expresses the need of families that do not originate from Sana'a to show and preserve their unique dress from Yemen.

After changing clothes, the bride and groom are again led to the hall in a procession, and the organizer (or singer) sings traditional songs of farewell and dances before them. She has the couple and the guest join her, with music that is alternately Yemenite and Eastern. Afterwards the organizer walks around the bride and groom with an egg in her hand. She turns the egg in circular movements over the heads of the couple, wraps it in a bag and throws it on the floor. The organizer explained that breaking the egg was customary in the henna rituals in different regions of Yemen, since the egg symbolizes fertility.

One of the older women, usually the bride's grandmother or mother, prepares the henna mixture, while the organizer sings a special song about the daughter leaving the bosom of her family. When the henna mixture is ready, the henna bowl is wrapped in a silk scarf and held while they dance. The grandmother or mother then spreads the henna on the hands of the couple and blesses them. The parents, and then also relatives and guests, are also invited by the organizer to spread henna on the bride and groom's hands. It is customary to spread the henna on one of the bride and groom's fingers, or in the shape of a circle, as a symbol of a coin and a blessing of economic plenty. The color decorations of the henna, which in Yemen lasted for several days, are not customary today.

Observations and interviews with the organizers leave the impression that the magical significance of spreading henna is not evident to those present, and especially to the young couple. Therefore, some of the couples wash the signs of the henna color from their hands right away. According to the organizers, many brides today put plastic gloves on their hands so as not to dirty them, or their clothes, with henna. After the spreading of henna, celebrations continue until the small hours of the night. Food is served, which includes Yemenite and Israeli dishes. At this stage, the atmosphere becomes less traditional and the young generation in particular dances to the sounds of recorded music in different styles (see also Regev, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

My interviews and observations lead me to conclude that the organizers of the henna ritual consciously and unconsciously play the role of intercultural mediators. They are well familiar with the Israeli society, in which they grew up, and with Yemenite culture, to which their heart belongs. According to the ideal model of the mediator (McLeod, 1981), they must have good communication skills and accumulate

knowledge on the ritual system for which they are responsible. One of the side-goals of the intercultural mediation is dealing with prejudice on both sides due to the lack of knowledge and recognition of the other culture (Faure, 2000). The organizers emphasize this goal to a great extent and stress that when conducting a ritual for a mixed couple, they are aware of their mediating action. In the course of their ritual performance they present different aspects of the Yemenite culture to the guests: dress, songs, dance and food. They translate the texts into Hebrew and explain the symbolic meanings of the different ritual activities. One of the organizers told me that sometimes the guests, usually from a different ethnic group, would approach her and admit that the ritual caused them to change their negative opinion on the culture and members of the Yemenite community.

The organizers mentioned that their goal was transmitting knowledge on the Yemenite culture and tradition, so that it becomes part of the collective Israeli identity and society of the twenty-first century. The mixing of Yemenite and Israeli ritual elements is necessary for them in order to ensure the physical transfer of the traditional ritual to the new reality. They also realize that without adaptation of the ritual to contemporary Israeli society and lifestyle the young generation will abandon it.

An attempt to create a balance between the values and symbols of both cultures stems from the concern expressed by these cultural mediators about preserving the tradition of the Yemenite Jews. They indicated that a few decades ago the henna ritual in Israel was more authentic, but as very old women who carried this tradition died, the original ritual got diluted and weakened. One of the informants said: "I want to be an envoy of my culture and therefore I want to know as much about it as I can. The real reason I became a performer of henna rituals is to preserve the tradition before it is too late. I try to conduct the ritual in the most authentic way possible, for the simple reason that this will increase the chances for keeping and transmitting the cultural tradition over time."

Thus, the henna ritual organizers mediate between past and present, between tradition and modernity, between Israeli and Yemenite cultures, between the cultures of different ethnic groups, and between the younger and older generations. The result of this process is syncretism, which means the mixing of different cultures and the creation of a new cultural tradition as a result (Sharaby, 2002: 17-22; Stewart and Shaw, 1994: 1-36). This process implies social and cultural change in the personal and group identity, whereby major traditional elements are retained and new ones are adopted, in a selective manner. The outcome combines compromise, cultural diversity and transformation, which may in the long run influence the values of the dominant group.

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Photo from P. family archive, Henna ritual of Yemenite Jews



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