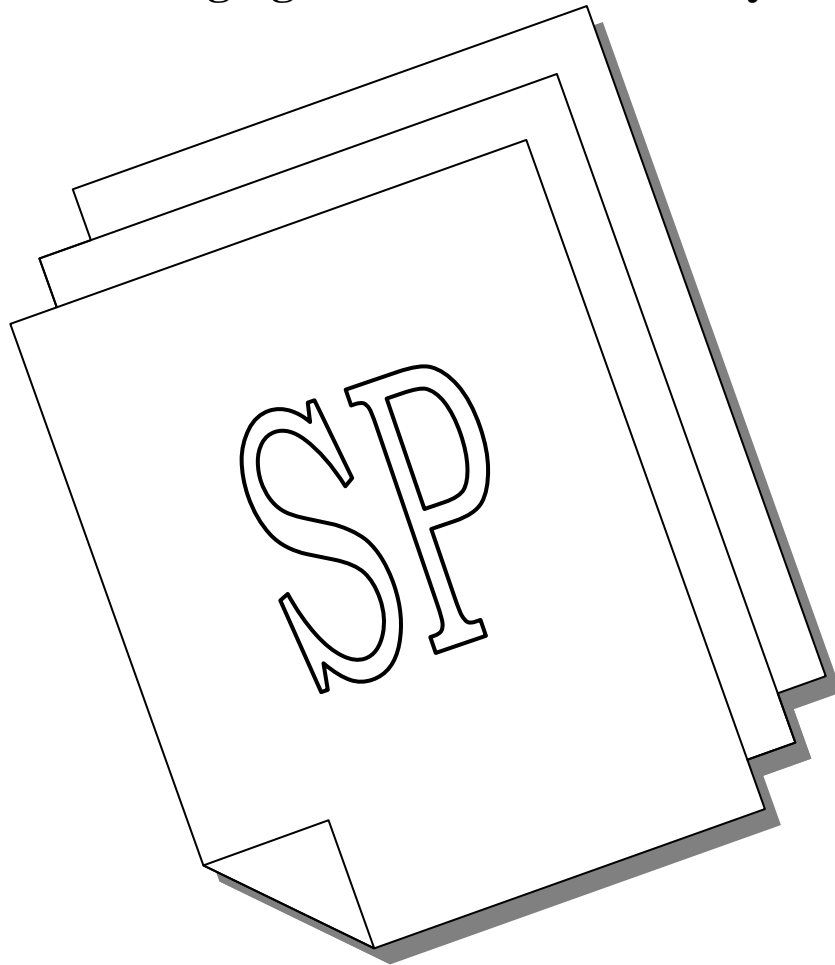


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**Between Tradition and Modernity: The
Plurality of Jewish Customs and Rituals**

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Introduction

Between Tradition and Modernity: The Plurality of Jewish Customs and Rituals

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The current issue of "Sociological Papers" aims to reflect a diversity of contemporary traditions, rituals and cultural expressions among various Jewish groups, sectors and *edot* (i.e. ethnic origin communities). The articles in this volume refer to four central social intersections that typify contemporary Israeli society, as well as sociological and anthropological discourses of today:

1. **Tradition and modernity**, coming to the fore in performance of traditional Jewish rituals and their changes in contemporary contexts and settings.
2. **Gender perspective**, such as the division of roles between men and women in various ritual contexts.
3. **Ethnic divisions**, i.e. the relations between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, ethnic categorizations generally and customs of different ethnic groups specifically.
4. **Cultural contest between religious and secular sectors** in Israel, the emerging Jewish renewal movement, and the performance of alternative rituals as a result of this conflict.

These four analytical perspectives are closely intertwined in social reality drawing on complex historic and cultural associations. To cite Israeli anthropologist Hazan (1992: 90), rituals are "...an essence of social and cultural existence, multicolored and concentrated prism exposing a panorama of relations, beliefs and connections."

The relative importance of rituals in modern societies, compared to tribal and traditional ones, has been discussed by many scholars. The existing theories lean towards one of two alternative paradigms. Proponents of the first paradigm claim that ritual as such is vanishing in modern society, while the second paradigm asserts that with changes in society rituals also evolve and new types of rituals appear. The first paradigm that asserts that rituals decline in modern society is represented by two anthropologists well-known for their research on "primitive societies": Gluckman (1961) and Turner (1977). Gluckman (1961) tried to answer the question, why do tribal societies have a higher level of ritualization compared to modern societies? In his analysis, he distinguished between two categories: *the ritual* and *the ceremony*. According to him, the ritual referred to mystical notions whose existence is impossible to prove or disprove logically. By contrast, the ceremonic event does not refer to any supernatural being but rather commemorates or notifies some real events or changes. Thus, the October Revolution Day parade in Russia is ceremony and not ritual, while the Corpus Christi Day procession in the Vatican is ritual and not ceremony (Ibid.: 22).

The first reason for high ritualization level in a tribal society derives from the fact that each social relation tends to serve manifold purposes with high moral judgment attached to it. The function of ritual is to mark down and segregate roles in such groups that may otherwise be confounded. The second of Gluckman's explanation has to do with the low level of technological development of tribal society and high dependency on the natural afflictions. The anxiety about the crops and hence food insecurity, as well as children's survival and health, the wars with neighbors, and harsh weather are translated into high ritualization in an attempt to negotiate the odds with precarious destiny. On the contrary, clear social role segregation, forwarding of moral judgments to experts (lawyers, doctors, intellectuals), and high level of technology leading to predictability and guaranteed survival may together explain why rituals are less common in a modern society.

Dramatic changes took place in the modern ritual field, including the dominance of national and state rituals (including military ones) and the introduction of so-called personal rituals, all this in coexistence with traditional rituals and their renewal. These changes called for renovation of terminology and theoretical categories, known today as a new paradigm of ritual:

Most examples of ritual invention, as well as rituals variously reinterpreted in the contemporary context, suggest that a new paradigm of ritual has gradually replaced a set of more long-standing assumptions. In the newer model, rituals is primarily a medium of expression, a special type of language suited to what is there to express, namely, internal spiritual-emotional resources tied to our true identities but frequently unknown and undeveloped. Ritual expression of these internal dimensions will unleash their healing power for the self and others. The new paradigm is directed more inward than outward, apt to define community and society in terms of the self rather than the self in terms of community. Metaphors of wholeness and attainment replace older ones of transcendence and deliverance (Bell, 1997: 241).

The second paradigm claims that new types of ritual have replaced traditional ones. We will concentrate here on three trends relevant within this paradigm: appearance of secular and personal rituals, and commercialization of rituals in the modern society. Moore and Myerhoff (1977) introduced the term “secular ritual,” this seemingly in contrast to Gluckman and Turner, who had reservations about using the term *ritual* in a secular modern context. They claimed that in classic anthropology the study of rituals has been confined mainly to religious and magical procedures, because anthropologists dealt with traditional societies in which everything had magical or religious meaning. But in a modern society a new category of secular rituals has appeared, dramatizing and imbuing national and political ideologies with non-religious sanctity. While religious rituals appeal to the other world and supernatural forces in order to improve human existence in this world, the secular rituals (or ceremonies?)¹ are concerned with this world only.

The discussion of secular rituals can benefit from adding a so-called post-secular perspective. The paradigm of secularization is challenged now by researchers in many

¹ Moore and Myerhoff themselves, in their introduction of the 1977 book that defines the term “secular ritual,” in fact used the terms *secular ritual* and *ceremony* interchangeably. Many later researches too remain inconsistent in their usage.

fields, in Israel and in Europe (Casanova, 1994; Goodman and Yona, 2004; Habermas, 2006; Shenhav, 2008). The binary distinction between secularity and religion conceived for years as linear and essential came to be questioned, and many phenomena are treated now under the category of post-secular. The term “post-secularism” is founded on a non binary division in which secularity and religion are not antinomies, but rather involved in a dialog with each other and forming elements of a single spectrum (Shenhav, 2008). Such new phenomena as secular prayer houses, secular *Batei-Midrash* and alternative rites of passage, typical for Israeli society of the 1990s and 2000s and discussed in this volume, may be viewed from the perspective of post-secularism and add further substance to the category of secular ritual.

In her study of non-religious rituals, Myerhoff (1987) coined the term “definitional ceremony” in reference to a marginal group of elderly Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe whose social life took place in an Adult Center in California. Definitional ceremonies deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality and are strategies for being seen, gathering witnesses to one’s worth, vitality and being. Storytelling, creating difficulties, making scenes, positioning themselves to be noticed, recorded, listened to and photographed by way of organizing spectacles and street actions, were the strategies used by these elders for displaying and dramatizing themselves. Following Myerhoff, Rubin, Shmilovitz and Weiss (1994) investigated the phenomenon of informal rites affirming identity change performed by individuals, privately and publicly, with the purpose of getting recognition for their new identity, which is not addressed and recognized by the existing public rituals. These events were called by these researchers “personal definitional rites of identity change;” they stress the appearance of a new type of personal rituals characteristic of modern society. Another important observation is on the inventing and constructing of ritual events. According to Grimes (2000), recent decades have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the construction of rites of passage reflecting the search of meaningful ways for comprehending the lifecycle transitions, such as birth, initiation, wedding and death, as well as other changes of personal status and identity, and reinventing ways of ritualizing them (Ibid:5).

Commercialization of rituals is another central theme of modern ritual field that received extensive research reference. Thus, many scholars claim that modern weddings in the USA, Canada, Japan and Cyprus ceased to function as rites of passage and turned to be commercial events (Edwards, 1989; Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997; Argyrou, 1996; Currie, 1993; Lewis, 1998; Ingraham, 1999). Commercial development is also common in different types of New Age rituals, for example neo-shamanism of Native Americans or Ecuadorians performing in modern American context (Johnson, 1995; Aldred, 2000).

The authors of the articles published under this cover typically draw on the assumptions of the second paradigm, i.e. emphasize the renewal of the Jewish rituals rather than their extinction, even if not all of them discuss the above-said central trends in modern ritualization. The topics of this issue are focused on the contemporary performance of traditional Jewish pre-marital, wedding, and mourning rituals, as well as the evolving synagogue phenomena. This volume illuminates the changes that have taken place in these traditional arenas within modern society and the emergence of a contemporary brand of ritualization, demonstrated mainly on the examples from different Israeli Jewish communities. Another feature of this issue is that most of its authors are current faculty, advanced students or former graduates of Bar-Ilan University's Sociology and Anthropology Department, exemplifying the

continuous tradition of ethnographic research on Jewish life that was for years a professional trademark of this department.

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