

Prologue: A Note to the Readers

“Judaism is averse to generalities. Its tendency is to make ideas convertible into reality, to interpret metaphysical insights as patterns for action, to endow the most remote principles with bearing upon our everyday conduct. In its tradition the vague became definite, the abstract concrete, the abstract concrete, the absolute historic.

What are the events that endow us with awareness of God? We do not gain that awareness by the mind’s assault upon the riddles of the universe, or in the mind’s surrender and waiting for guidance. The Jewish form of religious experience is always in acts, in carrying out a command, in our instilling a spiritual quality into the things we are doing.

There are those who attempt to grasp God by speculation alone. We Jews have a unique way of religious experience. Israel’s reply to Moses – “We will do and we will hear” – was interpreted to mean: *In doing* we perceive. By enacting the spiritual on the stage of life, we perceive our kinship to the divine. Our acts, then, are waves that flow toward the shore of God. In the Jewish mind the action sings and regularity of fulfillment is the rhythm by which we utter our tunes. Our dogmas are allusions, intimations; our creed is an allegory, yet our actions are definitions.

We do not imitate; we respond. To our souls the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* is a way of entering into fellowship with the ultimate will. In giving ourselves to the goal we feel how He is a partner to our acts.

Jewish Law is a sacred prosody, for the divine sings in our deeds, the divine is disclosed in our deeds. Our effort is but the counterpoint to the music of His will. Judaism is living shared with God.

Restoring the divine invested in us, we do not have to bewail the fact of His shore being so far away. In our sincere compliance with His commands, the distance disappears. It is not in our power to force the Beyond to become Here; but we can transport the Here to the Beyond.”

Dr. Avraham Joshua Heschel
(Heschel 1996: 78-79)

In agreement with Dr. Heschel’s words cited above, this thesis argues that through continual practice in orthodox Judaism, a skeptical outsider can begin to feel at home in the midst of the faithful’s center. In native terms, “*Na’ase v’Nishmah*” [We will do and we will understand]. From an insider’s perspective, Dr. Heschel exclaims, “In the Jewish mind that action sings and regularity of fulfillment is the rhythm by which we utter our tunes. Our dogmas are allusions, intimations; our creed is an allegory, yet our actions are definitions.” This thesis is an ethnographic account of Heschel’s poetic claim.

This account will say something about Hasidic social reality, but like all accounts, it will leave a lot unsaid. I have chosen to tell a particular story in a particular way, and the understanding that I want to share with my readers is a partial one. Therefore, this prologue is a qualifying note to the readers for the sake of bringing the particular perspectives of this project into focus and clarifying the specific angles of my anthropological approach.

Text

I am an anthropologist of religion and I am a religious anthropologist. I believe in an anthropology that is deeper than its different schools of thought. In my mind,

anthropology is a discipline that arose from the need for human beings to understand one another. Its ability to critically address that need is what it should be measured by. One way to critically address that need is to provide compelling explanations or accounts for confusing or counter-intuitive aspects of the human condition. However, another anthropological approach could be to suggest a certain silent, open-minded, and free-thinking stance toward social reality which doesn't try to figure everything out or make things more complicated than they should be. As Talmudic Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel wisely said in *Pirke Avot* 1:17:

“I grew up among the Sages. All my life I listened to their words. Yet I have found nothing better than silence.

Study is not the goal, doing is. Do not mistake “talk” for “action”. Pity fills no stomach. Compassion builds no house. Understanding is not yet justice.

Whoever multiplies words causes confusion. The truth that can be spoken is not the Ultimate Truth. Ultimate Truth is wordless, the silence within the silence. More than the absence of speech, more than the absence of words, Ultimate Truth is the seamless being-in-place that comes with attending to Reality.” (Shapiro 1993: 18)

Indeed, silence can be a powerful and noble analytical tool to use for making sense of social realities and is especially useful when dealing with religion and religious experience.

By religion, I mean a way of being that is deeper than words, dogma, or ideology. Religion for me is something that involves walking on a path in a way that engenders an inherently anthropological perspective. As Stephen Gaskin writes:

“Religion is a *generic* term for how we relate to our Universe and how God and our Universe relate to us, and what is our proper relationship and perspective in the Universe.

There shouldn't be anything deeper than your religion. Your religion is how you really get along with folks – not what you may claim your religion is.

Your religion ought to make a difference to you in your daily life; it ought to make it easier for you, not in the sense that you don't have to try, but that it *makes sense for you*. If you're not getting along with your kid, it ought to help you out with your kid. It ought to help you during childbirth; it ought to help you during the death of somebody who's close to you. It ought to help you through the heavy passages in life.” (Gaskin 1976: 27)

My beliefs about anthropology and religion definitely saturate this text and I admit them here for the sake of intellectual honesty.

Indeed, the way I have constructed the text and the way I suggest you read it can be understood from both religious and anthropological perspectives. This is an ethnography of a religious community. In this ethnographic account, I want to represent the people in their own terms and those terms are inherently religious. I do not intend to debase either the critical perspective of anthropology or the religious perspective of

Hasidic Judaism by suggesting an approach which integrates the two. However, I do intend to argue against the assumption that the two perspectives cannot be reconciled and I have written this text partially in an effort to shatter that notion.

Gender

You will find that there are no women in this ethnography. I prayed and studied in a space that was all male. Women did their religious learning in separate schools and when women prayed at Shabbat services they were silent and out of sight in the balcony. I only knew and spoke with women in the Breslov community who were the wives or young daughters of the men I studied with. My opportunities to speak with women were limited to the times when I went to the homes of my teachers to learn or to have a ritual meal.

Through the few opportunities I was able to have conversations with Breslov women, I got the sense that common cultural and religious space exists between the sexes despite the gender hierarchy and divisions inherent in the orthodox Jewish tradition. For instance, men and women both study Torah, pray, observe the Sabbath, keep the commandments, and help each other raise their families. However, though you can find common ground between them, the sexes are definitely separated. The women's world seemed to be as inaccessible to men as the men's world was inaccessible to them. And because my access to the female social world was severely limited, I am limited in what I can say about the Breslov women's cultural experience.

I can say that many of the women, like the men I knew, came into the Breslov community from backgrounds similar to mine. That is, these women had been on the outside of this ultra-orthodox world and had chosen to take on a Hasidic lifestyle in the process of walking their own learning and questing paths. I will share a journal account of a conversation I had with one such woman from the Breslov community whose name I will call Leah. She and her husband were hosting me for Shabbat and I was able to talk with her while she prepared the first ritual meal:

"I have spent the afternoon talking with Leah while she has been preparing Shabbos dinner and dealing with her four daughters. She is a Breslover Hasid and came from a background like mine. That is, she came from a non-observant family and had gone to university in the United States. It was the first time that I've spent a long time talking with an "ultra-orthodox" woman. Through our conversation it seemed to me that she had chosen to live this life out of her own free will and this fact was a critical challenge to the

false assumption that women in this Hasidic world are inherently oppressed by or victims of the patriarchal religious system that determines their reality.¹

She told me the story of how she became involved with Breslov and she gave me words of guidance. She suggested certain books that I should read and she recommended that I purchase the book of psalms to pray with. We talked about the Breslov edge or quality that was so attractive and powerful for her. We talked about prayer and God and meditation. We talked about the process of accepting Jewish religious ideals that happens once they are deconditioned from their Christian meanings and learnt in their Jewish contexts. Words like sin, hell, and Messiah become understood in different and more dynamic ways when you read how the sages teach about them.

Leah had gone on pilgrimage to Rebbe Nachman's grave in Uman, Ukraine. She went with a women's group which makes me know that there are worlds and universes among the women of Breslov that I could never have access to. She challenges my tendencies to be judgmental about the fact that women in this world are hidden. I do not feel comfortable with simply accepting either the traditional feminist or Hasidic perspectives on the issue of gender. I can only say that it is not as black and white of a reality as it seems and that most of the time this issue remains for me a confusing and grey silence.² (4/26/1996)

As expressed at the end of the above journal entry and in its footnotes, finding a representative voice which is sensitive to both feminist and Hasidic perspectives is a difficult task. I therefore choose not to take sides on the issue and remain silent about it in this thesis. While I actively deal with the apparent antimony between anthropology and religion through a textual construction and narrative voice that integrates the two perspectives, I passively deal with the assumed antimony between feminism and Hasidism through silence. I realize this silence is problematic but intend it to suggest that skeptical readers should think twice before assuming that the gender divisions among Breslov are inherently negative

For those who do want to gain a better anthropological understanding of women in the Hasidic world, I recommend reading the following ethnographic works: *Educated and Ignorant: Ultra-Orthodox Women and Their World*, by Tamar El-Or, *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America*, edited by Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, and chapters 18 and 21 of *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry*,

¹ “[T]he Hasidic woman is as likely to be oppressed by outsiders’ misrepresentation as she is to be oppressed by her community of laws and values. Where there is no white, Western, Protestant model of community, the feminist investigator cannot apply the yardstick of criticism bred by the legacy of white, Western, Protestant feminism.” – From Bonnie Morris’ “Agents or Victims of Religious Ideology?: Approaches to Locating Hasidic Women in Feminist Studies.” Appearing in (Belcove-Shalin 1995: 160-180).

² “Feminism and Hasidic Judaism are ideologies with conflicting approaches to the subject of womanhood. American feminist thought challenges the traditional limitations on women’s roles received from generations of Western religious codes; Hasidism promotes ultra-Orthodox Jewish law, infused with mystical interpretations on the complementary nature of the (separated) sexes. Feminist thought offers a broad range of secular, legal, political, and socio-economic interpretations of woman’s status; Hasidism steadfastly preserves an exclusive religious vision, wherein separate roles and expectations for male and female are divinely ordained laws, received as revelation from the Almighty for the Jewish people.” (Belcove-Shalin 1995: 161-162)

by Samuel Heilman. While I restrict this account to the gendered fields of male ritual space and do not pretend to represent women's cultural experience, I would like to leave the possibility open that the specific social realities and transformative processes I describe also speak to a more universal reality through their very particularity. Nonetheless, a study which gives an account of the story I tell from the women's perspective would give a much fuller understanding of Breslov culture and could verify or qualify the universal applicability of this thesis' general claims.

“I”

My ethnicity, gender, and religious curiosity all allowed me to gain more direct access to the social and religious center of the Breslov community than an outsider who is female, non-Jewish, or an atheist might possibly have. Maleness, Jewishness, and faithfulness are indeed privileged in their world. However, I had my own barriers, such as an inability to speak Hebrew and very little knowledge about the traditions of Judaism, that put me at a disadvantage in terms of access. It would also be a mistake to assume that because you are not male, Jewish, or a believer in God, you have no access to the Breslovers' center. There are many people who do *tshuvah* [return to Judaism] who are female, non-Jewish, or even non-believing. The point is that there is not equal opportunity for all outsiders to experience the Hasidic world as viewed from an insider's perspective.

In admitting the fact that I was a privileged outsider for reasons of gender, ethnicity, and faith, I am describing some important features of the anthropological and emotional window of the “I” that narrates this ethnography. I realize that this ethnographic account will be subjective and suggest that readers see the “I” that wrote this as one of many possible windows into Breslov social reality. I use the “I” to offer a particular form of objectivity. This objective view does not come from a silent “I” peering through an interpretive lens, recording all that I see as if I am uninvolved with the social reality I describe. Instead, this particular objectivity comes with an inter-subjective view which shows “I” relating with Breslov. I am no less a subject of this research than the Breslovers who befriended and taught “I”, yet this ethnography is not about “I”.

This ethnography is about the Breslov community's center that I experienced, touched, and was touched by. I therefore encourage readers to see through the “I” in

order to gain insight into dimensions of Breslov social reality that otherwise may have remained difficult if not impossible for outsiders to access. Ultimately, I am saying throughout this thesis that you can come to understand an insider's perspective through participant observation in their cultural practices and through letting go of your former notions of self and other, insider and outsider. This project can best be criticized in terms of its ability or inability to clearly and strongly communicate that message.