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# Is Profane Work an Obstacle to Salvation? The Case of Ultra Orthodox (Haredi) Jews in Contemporary Israel

Nurit Stadler*
*Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

*In this article I demonstrate how devotees interpret and shape traditional components in a complex process of 'bricolage.' I discuss this process through the examination of explanations and interpretations given by members of the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel for their choice of studious life devotion over paid work and livelihood. An examination of the conceptions, attitudes and values regarding work and learning bears upon the way the community relates to worldly affairs and individual existence in the world. My analysis and findings indicate a shift from mainstream Judaism, which stresses work and the importance of wage-earning. In contrast, Haredi male members have revived religious interpretations derived mainly from well-known Biblical narratives and combined them with quotations from specific texts derived from the rabbinical tradition. Accordingly, interpretations that have been considered marginal in the Jewish hermeneutic tradition, and often suppressed by key rabbinical figures, have been drawn out of the concealed textual shelves and reintroduced into the center of religious discourse, thought and practice. In this process, the traditional rabbinical view that stressed hard work and activism in the world is transformed. This is accomplished through the redefinition of work by condemning the productive and activist image of human action bringing about new modes of thought, religious symbols and economic behavior.*

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary scholars of religion characterize the modern age as a new 'axial period' which has produced a general reshaping of the 'symbolic field' and stimulated a great religious commotion leading to novel religious configurations (Lambert 1999:303). This corresponds with a process of 'bricolage,'[1] i.e. the

* *Direct correspondence to Nurit Stadler, e-mail: msstad@mscc.huji.ac.il.* *Special thanks to the Center for Avanced Studies of Theology and Religion, The Divinity School, Cambridge University, the Ginzberg fellowship from the Hebrew University and the Israel Foundation Trustees for financial assistance towards the completion of this article. I also wish to thank Reuven Kahane for his guidance and assistance, Eyal Ben Ari, David Lehmann, Gideon Aran, Oren Golan, Jeremy Stolow, Susanna Rostas and the anonymous reveiwers of the Sociology of Religion for their many helpful comments.*

[1] By using the word 'bricolage' I am following Lehmann (2001) in his application of Levi-Strauss' account of myths in *The savage mind* (1976:16-17). In this interpretation he refers to assemblage through piecemeal processes of practices, rituals, symbols and beliefs drawn from different religious traditions. In Levi-

propensity of contemporary religions to borrow, pick and choose, imitate or project images of themselves and of others onto themselves and others, in varied ways across frontiers of time and space (see Comaroff 1985:12; Hall 1997; Lehmann 2001). This process can lead to the formation of unusual combinations of views and beliefs constituting a variety of new trajectories such as those reflected in New Age, the rise of new charismatic movements and transformations within established religious traditions. Accordingly, I demonstrate how devotees interpret and shape traditional components in a complex process of religious renewal, including the amalgamation of different ideas and textual interpretations (mainly Biblical) referenced from various historical and cultural stages. This transforms and modifies their current religiosity, cultural ambience and the way they relate to worldly affairs. To do so, I will focus on the Ultra-Orthodox (Lithuanian[2] — Haredi) community in contemporary Israel. More specifically, I will examine the explanations and interpretations given by members of the community for their choice of studious life devotion over paid work and livelihood. An examination of the conceptions, attitudes and values regarding work and learning bears upon the very relation of the community towards worldly affairs and individual existence in the world.

The contemporary Haredi community in Israel is facing a remarkable revitalization in affiliations and cultural influences. The uniqueness of this religious community lies especially in its radical and stringent religious demands, mainly manifested in the extremeness of Torah studies within the hierarchy of values and practices (Friedman 1991). A unique consequence of this commitment is their withdrawal from the workplace that has been incompatible to all Jewish communities in the past. In Israel, most Haredi men do not participate in the Israeli labor force;[3] rather, they dedicate most of their time to studious

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Strauss' account, myths are transformed precisely by 'bricolage,' a process in which a 'collection of oddments' are reassembled and only acquire intelligibility in their overall structure, each element individually having no particular significance.

[2] Lithuanian is a name used by members of the community themselves in order to define and distinguish themselves from other Haredi sects, mainly Hasidim. This distinction has extensive historical roots that represent a major transformation in Jewish history — the outcome of the rise of Hassidic opposition. The Hassidic community arose first in south-eastern Poland in the middle of the eighteenth century and spread throughout Poland. It challenged the authority of the rabbis and their whole system of values. This religious movement gained strong opposition mainly in Lithuania with the power of the Gaon of Vilna and his disciples. Opposition to the new movement gave rise to a new name, *Mithnagdim* ('opponents') that has characterized this group since then. In Israel this group no longer uses the name *Mithnagdim* in order to define itself. Instead, they prefer to use the name Lithuanian, stressing the legacy of scholarship and the school of commentators, as opposed to the word *Mithnagdim* which reflects opposition. Nadler (1997:ix-x) argues that approximately one-half of today's Ultra-Orthodox Jews are in fact not Hasidim but rather *Mithnagdim*.

[3] Berman (2000:913-914) argues that in Israel the proportion of Ultra-Orthodox men (aged 25-54) not working because of full-time yeshiva attendance rose from 41 percent in 1980 to 60 percent by 1996. These levels are unprecedented among Jews, and far exceed yeshiva attendance abroad, where young men seldom attend past the age of 25. See for comparison the situation of yeshiva students in the Haredi community of New York City (Gonen 2000).

activities in the ambience of the yeshiva (religious seminars) until the age of 40 on average (see Berman 2000). This paper will demonstrate how devotees explain and make sense of their preference of studious activity and their rejection of work and traditional livelihood. I will concentrate on two central questions: (1). What are the components constructing the Haredi perception of work? (2). How are these concepts translated into narratives and how do they help provide a convincing rationale for an "anti- economic" ethic and a new foundation for a collective identity and group solidarity?

The findings and analysis in this paper indicate a shift from mainstream Judaism, which stresses work and the importance of wage-earning. In contrast, Haredi male members have revived religious interpretations derived mainly from well-known Biblical narratives and combined them with quotations from specific texts derived from the rabbinical tradition. Accordingly, interpretations that have been considered marginal in the Jewish hermeneutic tradition, and often suppressed by key rabbinical figures (such as a fatalistic view of work and strong belief in the miraculous), are drawn out of the concealed textual shelves and reintroduced into the center of religious discourse, thought and practice. In this process, the traditional rabbinical view that stressed hard work and activism in the world is transformed. This is accomplished through the redefinition of work by condemning the productive and activist image of human action bringing about new modes of thought, religious symbols and economic behavior. To begin with, a brief explanation of the Haredi community's main features and background follows.

## THE HAREDI COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Haredi is the Hebrew epithet meaning a 'fearful' devotee. It has been translated as "those who tremble," a scriptural reference to the righteous person who fears the word of God in Isaiah 66.5: "Hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble [haredim] at his word" (Heilman and Friedman 1991:198). This name was transferred to Israel with the influx of Haredi communities from Europe. Most of the Haredi communities in Israel arrived with the establishment of the Jewish State as survivors of the Nazi genocide in Europe. As they began to settle in Israel, many scholars believed that Haredi communities were an anachronistic remnant that would inevitably vanish with the establishment of a secular Jewish state. A strong Zionist ideology enhanced opposition to the Jewish Haredi lifestyle, concentrating mostly on the consolidation of the 'new' Jews ('Sabar') who dedicated their lives to working and earning a living through the toil of their own hands. Within this viewpoint, the Haredi Jew was thus expected to disappear upon the construction of new modern Jewish culture (see Almog 1998:128).

Resistance to religious Jewish life and its legacy pointed in particular to the devotion to Torah study, interpreting dedication to studious activity as the key to the degeneration of Jewish culture (Almog 1998). Accordingly, Zionist ideology emphasized productivity, utilitarian work and, most of all, the notion of individual free will. The struggle against religion in general and critical attitudes resisting the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox life-style in particular did not operate in a cultural void, but were part of a growing global attitude condemning religion while stressing the secularization of people's lives (Stark 1999:249). In contrast, since the 1950s religious communities in Israel, and most particularly Haredim, have encountered an enormous growth in membership, as well as political and cultural influence (Friedman 1991, 1993).

The Haredi community in Israel, mainly the Lithuanian variant, considers itself a direct off-shoot of the European Orthodox Jewish legacy. As such, the community stresses an ideology that tends to reject modern culture and a Western life-style and to profoundly condemn every expression of the latter's features. Most scholars have viewed the Haredi community as embodying what is often referred to as a "culture of the enclave" (Berman 2000; El-Or 1994; Friedman 1991; Shelhav 1991; Sivan 1991), stressing punctiliousness and stringency in the observance of the Halakhic rules.[4] Accordingly, Haredim look upon anyone who embraces or adjusts to the legitimacy of modern culture as embracing an essentially anti-Jewish attitude, and therefore as a potentially contaminating influence (Heilman and Friedman 1991:3).

*(a) Text Based Community and Male Interpretations*

Traditionally, all Jewish religious communities were constituted as "text-centered" (Halbertal 1997:1), meaning a community based on male literacy and interpretations of sacred texts. However, where in the past social behavior was transmitted mainly by socialization through imitation of behavioral models in the family and the community, in the case of Haredim in Israel today, thoughts and behaviors are constantly molded through sacred texts (Soloveitchik 1994). The interpretation of everyday life is based on the interpretations of male experts, virtuosi of sacred texts, who possess the power to translate textual knowledge into everyday practices. Thus in Haredi communities, rather than learning practices through imitation, behavior is constructed and transmitted through popular interpretations of sacred texts. It is not surprising perhaps that every Haredi home I visited contained a large number of sacred books, as well as instruction manual books based on the sacred texts. Beside the canonical texts such as the Talmud, Shulhan Aruch, and Maimonides, one may also typically

[4] Halakhah — Jewish practice. Observant Jews today seeking the answer to a Halakhic question are likely to refer to the "Shulhan Arukh" ("Laden Table"), the latest and most widely accepted of the authoritative codes of Halakhah (de-Lange 2000:59).

find "popular literature" imparting everyday life instructions based on new interpretations of the canon. The reliance upon the text for every purpose leads not only to immense popularity of these texts and the sacred words but also to their adoration and worship, thus altering meanings and practices. This tendency to traditionalism and the use of an invented imaginary past is what makes the community so novel (see Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1983).

*(b) 'Community of Learners': An Island of Tradition within a Modern Milieu*

Deuteronomy (6:7) commanded the study of Torah, "when you sit at home and when you walk abroad." This command has been accorded extreme centrality in Haredi interpretation and contemporary construction . It obliges all community male members to join the yeshiva as a part of belonging to the community and its legacy. This obligation is stressed by the use of central symbols in their imaginary-invented cultural and traditional past[5] — especially the rational school of the Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Elijah Ben Solomon and his disciple Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin.[6] This use of the past in the community stands in sharp contrast to the historical account of this tradition. In Lithuania, among eastern-European Jewish communities, only a handful of prodigies, who were members of a select elite, dedicated their lives to studious activities. In present day Israel, all adult male Haredis are obliged to devote most of their lives to the yeshiva (see for comparison Ben-Sasson 1984; Etkes 1991). This alteration has led to a legitimization of Talmudic studies and teaching as a source of livelihood, as well as requiring a new interpretation of the rabbinical tradition, specifically the relationship between studious activity and work. Accordingly, most community members, both men and women, do not participate in the Israeli economic market, and the few members who do participate, mainly women, are mostly engaged in public services or educational practices (see Berman 2000).

## METHOD

The focus of this research is on male devotees and their role as interpreters of sacred texts and authoritative investigators of knowledge and behavior.[7] One of the important features of the community is the strong division between men and women, which is based on the acceptance of the ideal male as a Torah scholar and of the ideal female as his helpmate and supporter. Accordingly, as

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[5] For elaboration on the Haredi use of the theme of tradition see Stolow (2000).

[6] Those are the two dominant personalities of the Mithnagdim camp, and most original theologians striking with the Hassidic movements in the eighteenth century Europe (Nadler1997).

[7] Following the Eastern European Jewish legacy, see Nadler 1997:151-170.

Boyarin shows (1997:156) since the study of the Torah is the modality by which male dominance over women is secured in rabbinic discourse, it fulfills the functions that physical domination does in other cultural formations.

In-depth interviews with forty-two male members were conducted in Hebrew[8] between 1997-2001. The interviewees were comprised of yeshiva students, rabbis, journalists, traditional scribes and writers. Most of the interviews (32 out of 42) were conducted with young yeshiva students (between the ages of 16 to 28). Since I am a woman I was not allowed to conduct interviews within the yeshivas. However, I was often invited to interview the students at the homes of their parents. Even though many typical presentations (popular and academic) of Haredi communities portray the Haredi man as hostile or opposed to the presence of women, my being a woman did not prove to be a major impediment to my research. On the contrary, I believe that being a woman was advantageous for me, since my interviewees assumed I am ignorant about their culture and knowledge. Accordingly, informants were keen to talk with me, were very articulate, and were willing to be interviewed and to recommend their friends and acquaintances as potential interviewees. In that respect, access to the field through key contacts was easy and significant for establishing credibility. Moreover, to minimize any possible tension that could have arisen, most interviews were conducted with the assistance of one other yeshiva student. This manner of conducting an interview eased the fragility of the encounter's first moments and helped to present my questions more accurately.

In order to interview devotees, who spend most of their time in a yeshiva environment, a suitable form of interview had to be developed. The interview had to enable me to understand the distinctive practices by which religious interpretations and exegeses were formulated. Accordingly, as mentioned before, most interviews were conducted in cooperation with key informants who were part of the Haredi world and with whom I prepared the questions to be asked and the texts to be interpreted before each interview. These key informants helped me choose interviewees from a wide range of Haredi yeshivas and we chose the most central texts concerning work together. Thus, meeting with a yeshiva student accompanied by one of my key informants also created an encounter between two scholars that simulated the typical setting of a yeshiva learning experience. After some time, once I had begun to master the manner in which discussions took place, I too participated in the discussions. In accordance with the study's aims, discussions revolved upon devotion to studious life, paid work and livelihood. These topics were discussed while collectively reviewing canonical texts relating to work and livelihood. This activity emulated Yeshiva learning practices, thus enabling me to reveal the manner in which members

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[8] Haredi-Lithuanians use the Hebrew language as do most other streams in the Haredi society. Only small sects, mostly Hasidim, currently use Yiddish today in Israel.

interpreted the concept of work using canonical texts and how perceptions of work are re-constructed today.

Interviewees interpreted a wide range of sacred sources and modern rabbinical texts that enabled me to investigate diversities in discourse use and behavioral changes in the community. Throughout the interviews, I constantly inquired about the meanings and controversies derived from the text, as well as their implications for Jewish tradition. As these interviewees discussed such sacred texts comprehensively, giving them a range of interpretations, I was afforded an opportunity to confront the interviewees about their individual interpretations of the main aspects of the Jewish tradition. This confrontation gave rise to anomalous interpretations, paradoxes and criticism of contemporary norms within the community and its cultural context.

Since the eighties, the Haredi society has been engaged with mass production of popular texts. This includes a wide range of books, manuals and journals dealing with the regulations of everyday life: the woman's role, the family, Jewish holidays, rituals, etc. These texts are published inside the community and sold in special shops located in the community streets and they are available to everyone. For my research, I selected 167 instructional handbooks — tutorial materials for community members that are produced by males and especially meant for male members. These include instruction books for yeshiva life, children's literature, *kuntras* (small instruction books for yeshiva students) and manuals that instruct yeshiva students on issues of everyday life.[9] Many of these texts have sections or chapters that question work, relate to the problem of attaining an occupation, or deal with economic education. A hermeneutical analysis of various popular texts published within the Haredi community provided an understanding of the ways in which devotees have shaped their justification for withdrawal from all forms of participation in the Israeli labor market.

## FINDINGS: CONDEMNING WORK — CELEBRATING STUDIOUS DEVOTION

As reflected in the findings of this study, explanations and interpretations for men's withdrawal from the workplace are expressed in three main forms. The first form stresses the role of miraculous events as an explanatory tool for individual and family economic maintenance. The second form invokes preordination as opposed to free will and individual responsibility for economic success. Finally, the third views work as a distraction from the higher calling of study and therefore as an obstacle to salvation. These properties are not part of mainstream Jewish interpretations, rather they constitute a novel approach to

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[9] This is in sharp contrast to texts produced by community members for the secular camp (newspapers, cassettes, etc.), other religious camps or proselytizing literature (see Caplan 1997).

the relationship between work and study, the sacred and the profane. This illustrates a process of 'bricolage' which is the steering wheel of religious transformation. In the following section I would like to elaborate on how this process operates as the main tool of engendering a community's transformation in both its relationship to work and its reconstruction of specific religious concepts.

*(a) The Appearance of the Miracle as a Sign of Divine Economic Guidance*

*"Cast your burden on Yahweh, and he will sustain you" (Psalms 55:22)*

In an instruction book for yeshiva students entitled *Sefer Binyan Olam* (The Book of World Construction 1996) the author asserts:

> . . . Even-though in Yirmiyahu's times there was no more manna coming from heaven, with all of that the nutriment to yeshiva students in all generations kept appearing as a miracle bound to fulfil all of their needs . . . that is so to prove to all Israel what he the Lord has ordered, to show all generations that the All Mighty granted support only to those who dedicate their soul to diligence in studious activities. And if not always in the most superior manner as manna from heaven, His providence existed in every generation in order to remove his [the yeshiva student's] concern to work [dereh eretz] or earning a living [parnasa] . . .

This interpretation raises a major question asked by the religious observer dedicating all of his time to studious activities: How can one survive without work? Similarly, other Haredi texts and discourses also utilize the word *parnasa* (livelihood) as opposed to the term appearing in the traditional canonical literature, *avoda* (work). This is, of course, not by chance, but part of a careful selection of vocabulary and symbols created to contest the existential dilemma. Through their use of the word *parnasa*, Haredi authors are separating work practice from its artistic, divine or transcendental characteristics, emphasizing only the most profane nature of the activity of work. The author of the book quoted previously advances this issue first by adding a Biblical citation juxtaposed with a direct reference to the narrative of the "desert generation" and the appearance of manna from heaven. Thereupon, the author uses a reference to the rabbinical tradition. He starts with a quotation of the claim that contemporary times might not be worthy of the miracle of the divine manna, and continues to articulate his own argument. In so doing, he stresses that economic assurance, gained by every contemporary yeshiva scholar, is a consequence of one's own dedication to studious-contemplative activities. He ends the paragraph with a claim of reassurance, stating that every Torah scholar will be the subject of the miraculous if he only strictly dedicates his life to studious-contemplative activities. In this way, members of the community materialize miraculous events within everyday life. This claim of the miracle as an explanation for economic existence in Haredi-Lithuanian literature is most surprising, since the Lithuanian tradition is often characterized (by scholars as well as community members) as one which adopts rational theories for explaining world events (see Ben-Sasson 1984). This refers to the tradition of the *Mithnagdim*,

who emphasized rational study and methodology while vehemently rejecting mysticism and Messianic experiences. In opposition to this, when the miracle emerges as the sole explanation for economic success or action, it presents a novel mystical interpretation for behavior in everyday life.

The miracle is a familiar concept in Jewish texts, but it was suppressed and condemned in many ways by Jewish traditional figures (see Kreisel 1984). Traditionally, Lithuanian communities rejected miraculous beliefs and practices (Nadler 1997), highlighting rational religious practices (according to the teachings of the Vilna Gaon and Soloveitchik.) The Haredi community in Israel sees in the resurgence of the miracle a device for the maintenance and construction of its boundaries and a way of reinforcing faith. Instead of expanding models of participation and achievement in mundane activities, the community emphasizes miraculous events and contemplative practices. Let me focus on the way they elaborate on miraculous events by using Biblical narratives.

The Bible is full of miraculous events, and presents a rich textual foundation for this purpose (see Zakowich 1991). As we can learn in this case, the idea of the miracle is borrowed from the Biblical tradition and is translated, transformed and revived for the devotee. Looking at the Mikrah texts, miraculous events appear very frequently and often are performed by God, his messengers or prophets.[10] Accordingly, community members use Biblical interpretations of the miracle as well as many of its canonical features. Following that, the miracle is transferred from the context of Biblical events to become an intrinsic part of everyday events in the contemporary world. At the same time, the miracle ceases to exist purely as a rare event, but rather penetrates everyday experience as a permanent-divine escort, as well as an organizing device in the life of the scholar.

Members of the Haredi community often refer to the event of the miracle as a solution to profane needs when contemplating the ideal life-style of the religious devotee. Miracles arise mainly in connection with conditions of economic anxiety, crisis, confusion or moments of financial distress. These moments are explained and justified through the use of Biblical narratives, mostly by selecting narratives and symbols that express divine manifestation and wonders. For example, a young yeshiva student from Jerusalem explained the embodiment of the manna narrative in his scholarly everyday life in times of need as follows:

> . . . You must understand that in the traditional literature our situation is explicated as manna from heaven. Thus, a person that has succeeded in reaching a virtuous position and that is utterly dependent on God Almighty is inside the confined definition of manna. That is a very high level reached only by the people of the desert. You must see that for us all, the issue of

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[10] The Mikra (Old Testament) is full of miracle stories, of healing, saving from epidemics, wars, the restoration of the dead, etc. (see Zakowich 1991).

> manna is a very large subject in our life. That is to say, what is manna? Is it spiritual nourishment combined with the worldly together as one? Is manna worldly nourishment at all? If it was merely spiritual, it means that our Rabbi Moshe never could have eaten from it and survived forty days and forty nights. . . . That is to say, our body, in very simple words, is connected to our soul, and a person can reach a certain position that the purely spiritual principle will so profoundly dominate his life and body that he will eventually survive merely from this spiritual existence . . .

This young yeshiva student utilizes the Biblical metaphor of manna as a strong indication of the idealistic life embedded in the possibility of being a contemplative soul fully dependent upon God's divine guidance. The story of manna operates as a cosmological tool to re-organize believers' everyday lives according to what they perceive as the Biblical spirit. Thus, according to this view, there is a powerful, as well as a desirable possibility of separating oneself entirely from any bodily constraint. According to this view, a full detachment from bodily constraint can be achieved by following the practices of total devotion to the spiritual realm: a devotion to the world of the Torah through studious activity thereby re-constructs the spiritual level of the community and individual existence. This view assumes that if a person strives towards complete withdrawal in order to open a path to the sacred (the numinous), the devotee must separate himself from earthly activities, mainly his existential concerns and work activities, followed by any profane preoccupation. This is the reason why, in texts as well as in interviews, work is consequently interpreted in relation to the first sin in heaven:

> . . . There is the one whose nutrition comes in satisfaction without sorrow, in ease and not in scarcity, and everywhere he goes he will succeed and prosper. But there is the one who goes out to his work very early and toils and suffers and even though in the sweat of his face he shall eat humble bread, and drink meager water. And there are occasions that after all this toil and burden he longs for bread and must earn a living from charity, that is why a pious one (the Tsaddik) relies totally on his faith that his nourishment is provided from the beginning of the year . . .

The author of this Yeshiva instruction book applies a novel interpretation to the famous passage, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Genesis 3:19). Thus, he emphasizes the fruitlessness of hard and efficient work. According to his definition, such activities can lead to tension, and at the end of this path, to a total social dependency. Instead, he highlights the way of the pious (Tsaddik), for whom nourishment is secured, since it comes from heaven via the omnipotent power of God. In this manner, the author moves through different levels of cultural discourse in a twofold manner: first, he interprets modernity by criticizing its assumptions and practices as applied to work, mainly by pointing out what he views as its absurd results. At the same time, he engages in a novel way in textual criticism and translations concerning many aspects of the hermeneutic Jewish tradition, thus reviving ideas and meanings that were once on the

borderline of tradition — the fatalist belief in God as the provider of any existential means.

As demonstrated in community discourse and text, the miracle is used as a device for incorporating a strong view of God as omnipotent. In so doing, devotees symbolically restore the features of the Biblical God's absolute transcendence and Biblical assumptions about the relations between God and man: "He creates man, instructs him in His commandments, guides his steps, listens to what he has to say, watches over him" (see Elior 1993:148). The Haredi interpretation restores these characteristics where God's powers are perceived as unlimited and are applied to spheres that were previously perceived as the responsibility of the individual, especially in his fulfillment of earthly-existential means. The concept of the miracle emerged very frequently in the interviews, especially in relation to the necessity of work as a means of survival. As a consequence, the miracles that most frequently came up in the interviews were miracles in the economic sphere.[11] Accordingly, this novel conception of God and the enhancement of the belief in miraculous events change the idea of the individual in its relation to self and the world.

*(b) Enhancing Fatalism, Reducing 'Free Will': Faith Versus Temporal Endeavor?*

Following the idea of God as omnipotent, strengthened in community discourse, one must ask about the way in which believers perceive their control and ability in planning and shaping their own lives. As mentioned previously, God is interpreted as the exclusive provider of earthly needs and, accordingly, an obligation to work diminishes. In addition, the importance of God's work and worship is broadened and extended to most every day practices. This priority given to God's work and worship is not novel to Jewish tradition; it is rooted in the social practices at the time of the Talmud (Greenberg 1971:1322). But in their writings, the talmudic scholars emphasized moral value and praised this worldly work (melaha) (Eyali 1987:80; Aberbach 1994:38), as well as calling for a separation between Torah studies and work (Itim La'Torah). This view emphasizes the individual's free will in constructing his own life, and provides the religiously observant with areas of freedom even though everything is ultimately under God's will.[12]

The main shift we noted in community discourse is towards the appearance of the miracle and reliance on God's powers. This shift is a response both to the assumption that human autonomy is embodied in the modern work ethic and to

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[11] This miraculous appearance can be compared to the analysis of the revelation of the numinous (in Rudolf Otto's words 1917), as an epiphany, a gift of grace (see Wuthnow 1994:1).

[12] Wochenmark (1977), in his book *The concept of fatalism in Judaism*, stresses the critical views in Jewish tradition towards fatalism and the emphasis given to the observer's free-will.

the traditional division between labor and Torah studies. Instead, Haredi members currently emphasize the ultimate mastery of God, the need to worship him and to abandon profane work. This view was never approved or accentuated (even though it has existed in some writings) in the writings of the rabbinical canon (see Aberbach 1994), and was always considered marginal. As opposed to that view, the miraculous narrative is emphasized and approved of in the community, appearing not only in leaders' writings and discourse but also in members' descriptions as a discourse that has been internalized and is being used by most interviewees. The following example illustrates this theme. One of the main issues discussed in the Haredi sphere relates to the tension between belief (*emuna*) and endeavor (*hishtadlut*). Investigating the idea of endeavor highlights several points about the relations and interpretations of human profane activity and centers my argument on the question of human free will versus fatalism. A young yeshiva student explains the view of endeavor and its relation to the Biblical curse as follows:

> . . . If you ask me, the ideal man in Judaism is reflected in the model of the first man — Adam. He was sitting the whole day and doing nothing with the supposition that God would provide food for him without any endeavor on his part. But man is obliged to work, since this is his curse and it has to do with the recompense that man owes. How much he will actually do is not important . . . not an endeavor for money since you receive according to what you deserve even without any endeavor at all . . . but you work only in order to repay your curse . . .

This interviewee portrays Adam, the first man, as a passive figure: he is doing nothing, he does not work for a living, and he relies completely upon God's will in the fulfillment of his human needs. Adam, according to this interpretation, has no will of his own and is completely dependent on God's preordination. This interpretation gives a central place to meanings such as the carefree, restful body, characterized by a non-productive anticipation of God's nourishment and care (see Brown 1988 for a comparative view). The Biblical image of Adam as the first male body corresponds to bodily images of the scholar reflected in numerous Haredi instruction books: a perfected ascetic body striving to avoid shame or sin, which threaten to contaminate his life. Therefore, this body is not expected to work, toil or engage in any physical effort in order to survive; but acts only in order to repay and work for God. Actions are thus designed and dedicated solely towards God. This way of re-constructing the narrative of creation minimizes human free will and the possibility of influencing life events, and repudiates any responsibility of human actions. Most interviewees articulated this view, especially when their economic situation was discussed. In these moments they used the Biblical image and stressed that individuals' activities are subordinated and watched just as the interpretation given to the body of Adam in heaven. The idle, motionless, inactive body gains religious goodness and is thus privileged in the eyes of God, and as such, worthy of a miracle. They have also stressed that the active man, who labors in the temporal world (an

interpretation that was dominant in the canonical texts), is considered modern, and shows up the modern player as pretentious and as a sinner. The two images of manhood with their relation to work, the Talmudic and the modern, are tested and rejected simultaneously. The only image that is legitimized is of the studious man, and as such the activities, rhythms and presentations of this body are emphasized and instructed. For example, in the introduction to a Haredi book, *The believer in contrast with the endeavorer* (Maor 1984), the author, a Rabbi in the community, explains:

> . . . endeavor (Hishtadlut) is a general name for all devices, efforts or actions performed by man in order to improve his life, health, economic and social condition. Endeavor is an obligation for all Jews, and according to some rabbinical figures, a commandment (Mitzva). The problem with endeavor is that it appears to be in contradiction with the statement of God. So to speak, it looks as though different worldly endeavors are useful to man in health, livelihood (Parnasa), coupling and social relations, and that's why the individual, with his nature, is attracted to endeavor himself in those actions. But, it must be clear for every devotee, that all he receives, will be according to his right even without endeavor on his part. This is why when man has invested in endeavor, no wonder he will gain God's denial and disapproval . . .

This paragraph reflects the interpretation given to man's action in this world by the community. The author sets forth his account by denouncing all meanings that in his view were highlighted by modernity: the efforts and actions performed in order to improve human economic and societal conditions. Subsequently he returns to what he interprets as tradition. The "old interpretation" embedded in the rabbinical view is defined as a contradiction to God's commandment. Again we see how tradition is respected (by the citation), but at the same time re-interpreted. What is stressed here is the contradiction between the 'man of action,' dedicated to worldly endeavor, and the 'man of faith,' dedicated to spiritual enrichment. The man who works, striving to improve his surroundings and economic conditions, is perceived as the enemy of God. In this manner, the personal will of the individual is reduced to a minimum, and everything is placed in the hands of God.

This view manifests a fatalistic belief unfamiliar to Jewish traditional thought, a view that assumes an expectation from God to provide the individual's materialistic needs. By referring to fatalistic faith developed in the community, I point to the strong tendency towards the belief that every event is preordained. It is a doctrine in which everything is subordinated to fate and as such assumes an external power irresistibly decreeing every event and relieving the individual from responsibility (see Wochenmark 1977). In this model, the re-interpretation of God's duties separates man from the secular realm, diminishes man's involvement in the world and decreases his free will in determining his own destiny. Religious devotees following this theory abandon the need and the perception of needing to influence their economic conditions.

*(c) Work as an Obstacle to Salvation*

The soteriology of Judaism is a central theme that will not be discussed here. However, it is important to stress that in rabbinical texts, occupation in worldly affairs was never interpreted as an obstacle to salvation. The Jewish canon generally honored and valued work (Eyali 1987), claiming that the individual was invigorated by being involved in earthly activities. The Sages, for example, devoted much of their writings to the value of work, with special attention to manual work. Their reasoning was usually based on the assumption that work can prolong religious-moral life, thus enhancing an individual's freedom and respect in the world (Aberbach 1994:92). This view is strongly connected to the idea of the world as a positive and productive place for human kind.

In most writings and interviews, the profane world is interpreted as a place of probation and is explained as an illusion or a bridge to other worlds. This conception is part of a re-interpretation of man's first sins, a Biblical narrative that is concretized in the community's everyday life and religious behavior. A yeshiva student from Jerusalem describes this view of the world and the interpretation of work as a curse:

> The Haredi view would argue that work is a penalty for man's sin, a punishment. It requires a minimal involvement, so we have to reduce our engagement with these [worldly] affairs; thus, all this is just a game, if God is to provide us with everything we are only players and this is just a game.

This interpretation stresses the motives of sin and punishment embedded in the expulsion narrative, interpretations that were marginalized by the rabbinical tradition. This process involves the revival of meanings derived mainly from the Bible. When discussing the narrative of the expulsion from Eden, contemporary rabbinical authorities tend to stress that labor was inflicted on man as a curse. This, in turn, contributes to the derision of all work-related activities. For example, in a consent letter recommending a yeshiva book, *The believer in contrast with the Endeavorer* (Maor 1984), a Rabbi writes:

> The obligation to endeavor for your livelihood and other earthly necessities is inflicted on man as a heavenly decree; 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread' (Genesis 3:19). Man must see this as a tax that must be paid immediately and a curse that he cannot escape . . .

This paragraph relates the narrative of the expulsion to the relationship between faith and work. According to this view, all activities in this world are interpreted as negative and are related symbolically to the consequences of the original sin. This religious view, firmly established within the community's writings and discourse, advances a negative approach toward the world. Correspondingly, it instructs believers to forsake material substances and dedicate themselves to activities which are studious, contemplative and ritualistic by nature. This demand obliges the believer to uphold an absolute belief in God

and an utter reliance upon divine intervention and control over man's destiny. In accordance with this belief, the graver the economic threat to one's well being, the stronger the rabbinical decree to embrace religious activities while rejecting materialistic ones. This view, as mentioned previously, is emphasized especially when problems of economic sustenance arise. In most interviews, these questions raised the three justifications analyzed here. However, it must be stressed that they were followed by claims of distress and apprehension, especially from the youngest generation. For example, a young yeshiva student criticized the community religious elites and their need to change the community's relationship to work:

> . . . They don't want to create an alternative for the yeshiva, they prefer distress and confusion to change and reforms. This is not a matter of regular people but this kind of alteration can only be preceded by great leaders . . . changes today are very dangerous and they know it. They are afraid of destruction, this is why they preserve the situation as it is . . . and many problems arise, economic distress, educational problems, especially with students who can't deal with yeshiva lifestyle on the one hand and can't look for work on the other hand . . .

The interviewee is criticizing the leaders of the community who, according to him and many others, are responsible for the economic plight of the community. He is well aware of their reservations and constraints but he is also worried about the paradoxes which affect his generation. These critical opinions have not yet materialized into movements or practices. The justifications described here are still powerful and are dominant in all interviews and community texts. But the student's comments may display a leaning towards a generational change and religious modification.

## SUMMARY

Through the study of Israeli Haredi devotees' perceptions of work, this paper has demonstrated that while shaping and constructing community religiosity, male Haredi members have constructed a different view of work and livelihood than that manifested in mainstream Jewish culture. Through the analysis of various texts and interviews, I have argued that in their quest for justification upon their withdrawal from Israeli labor market, Haredi male members have reshaped religious interpretations derived mainly from well-known Biblical narratives and conveniently useful quotations from the rabbinical tradition. In this process, interpretations that were considered marginal in hermeneutic traditions and often suppressed by mainstream rabbinical figures, have been restored or re-interpreted (as demonstrated, for example: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Genesis 3:19); "Cast your burden on Yahweh, and he will sustain you" (Psalms 55:22)). Accordingly, the traditional rabbinical view that stressed hard work and this-worldly activism is reevaluated and interpreted as a potential threat to human salvation, individual ties and group solidarity.

This intricate view serves as a religious interpretation to justify men's withdrawal from the Israeli labor market.

This complicated form of justification is influenced by two main consequences of the community situated in Israel. First, as analyzed in the article, is the need to emphasize the role of the studious man as the community's keeper of boundaries and existence. The ascetic features of the yeshiva students are highlighted and serve as strong social and cultural tools to impose moral and structural limits upon members. Second, is the need to build a strong argument against external criticism especially from the secular camp and other religious groups that participate in the labor market. Israeli public opinion deals frequently with Haredi withdrawal from the labor market and the need to support their activities. This criticism might influence Haredi apologism stressed by miracles and fatalistic conceptions.

This analysis stresses two major religious transformations in contemporary society: first there is a shift in orientation, meaning a move from a this-worldly orientation and rewards towards otherworldly religious attainments. Following Stark and Bainbridge's (1985) discussion of current religion, the Haredi community in Israel, in reinterpreting ideas about work, maintains a high state of tension with the broader society. The Haredi community does this by replacing a strong emphasis on worldly practices and secular concerns about work with fatalistic ideas and transcendental, contemplative forms of behavior. The second major religious transformation is a change in the relations between humans, the world and God by stressing the power of God as the sole entity responsible for man's economic existence. Thus, according to this view, devotees no longer need to engage in labor activities, and moreover, work activity is seen as a threat to human salvation.

These findings in the Haredi Israeli case have important implications for the study of religious modification and 'bricolage.' Scholars traditionally used the process of bricolage as the propensity of different religions to assemble through piecemeal processes, practices, rituals, symbols and beliefs drawn from different religious traditions and heritages (Comaroff 1985, Demerath 1999, Lehmann 2001; Rostas and Droogers 1993). The contribution of this study points to the relevance of the analysis of bricolage and its transformative implications also within religious traditions. Following the analysis in this paper, my suggestion is to focus not only on the encounter between different religions and the process of bricolage stemming from different sets of religious symbols and interpretations. Rather, I suggest that focus be placed on the unique ability and propensity of contemporary religion to integrate and borrow a variety of different meanings from its own traditional texts and different symbols embedded in its own historical backgrounds. The analysis of this process will enable us to understand how devotees construct practices in both religion affairs and the modern secular society. For example, Demerath (1999:4) claims that sacred elements borrowed from one sphere of existence may serve to erode the salience of sacred elements

from another sphere, and/or compensate for erosion once it has occurred. Following these ideas, this paper points to the manner in which the canonical religion in a process of bricolage blends varieties of traditions, symbols, textual heritages and ideas but selects them with caution. In the Haredi case examined in this article, devotees revive specific texts from the Jewish tradition, interpreting them as the original Torah voice. This reanimation is accomplished by newly concretized Biblical narratives that serve as cosmological tools in the construction of a new social hyper-transcendental reality. The mechanism is one of religious fragmentation of the "grand Jewish narrative" by combinations of different, even contradictory, views from a variety of narratives: miracles, anti-utilitarianism, extreme contemplative practices, total dependence on God's will, afterlife beliefs, spiritualism, etc. In order to justify their withdrawal from the labor market, Haredi devotees incorporate a new vocabulary based on modern assumptions, and use it to reinforce and assemble "true" Jewish knowledge, images and practices. Members of the community do this, not only in order to consolidate a coherent worldview but also, as demonstrated, to forge novel critical ideas embedded in the Jewish hermeneutical tradition. In so doing, they present a religious extremism that is expressed through fatalism. This places them alongside many other current religious groups who emphasize radicalism, charisma, messianism and fundamentalism.[13]

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[13] Such as apocalyptic Catholic groups, millenarian sects and fundamentalist groups.

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## APPENDIX

Amongst the large number of books published in the community, I concentrated only on books and manuals meant for yeshiva students. The intended audience is easy to discern since designated readers are regularly indicated on the books. For example, a manual entitled *Eshet Hail* (the virtuous woman) contains a profound discussion of texts about women, and the introduction indicates that this book is dedicated to all yeshiva students who are dedicating their lives only to studious activities in the holy yeshiva.

I followed the indications on the books and also took advice from my interviewees on the books they use, prefer or recommend to their friends. Only after I had a large number of publications (mainly from the 1990s), did I begin selecting them according to my questions and subjects. Accordingly, I selected four main themes:

a Literature on matters of livelihood written by current rabbinical authorities of the community
b Instruction manuals on work, livelihood and money matters, written by a variety of authors who are not necessarily well-known, but who dispense advice to all Haredi men, teaching them how to behave in economic affairs, how to choose a job when there is no other choice, and about the religious aspects and consequences of choices.
c Special issues for yeshiva students, instructing young scholars on issues of money, work and the right decisions for every yeshiva student. These books are written by specific rabbis from the yeshiva world, who are experts on matters of morality and ethics. They include long, complicated debates on traditional sacred texts, dealing with the concept of work and labor in the Jewish tradition in general and the necessity of these times.
d Short manuals for future grooms. These books are very popular since they also serve as wedding presents, they use popular language, and have very short paragraphs explaining the role of men in family life. These books have advice on economic issues and provide many

**APPENDIX (*Continued*)**

examples from everyday life, especially stories on yeshiva students having problems with matters of earning a living, stress in the yeshiva, financial problems, family disputes, etc.

The analysis of the material in these books contributed to our understanding mainly of the official view constructed in the community since the eighties. These observations highlight the more accepted view of collective values and notions. Along with the ideas and perceptions revealed in the interviews, I believe we can learn more about the perplexity of their perspectives, conditions and accordingly their critical views on matters of their state as monks living in hard conditions and mostly circumstances of poverty.