LIBRARY COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Regulated Warning

See Code of Federal Regulations, Title 37, Volume 1, Section 201.14:

The copyright law of the United States (title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law.

There Are No Words: Uncovering *Masortiyut* in Israel

Daniel P. Hotary, Ph.D.

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination.

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion
Rabbinical School
Cincinnati, OH

March 2022
Adviser: Rabbi Haim O. Rechnitzer, Ph.D.

Abstract

In this paper, I explore theoretical and methodological approaches to the comparison of religious groups. More specifically, I examine *Masorti* identity in Israel. This is the name given to and used by those individuals who observe what many people consider to be practices of traditionally observant Jews, but who also engage in behavior associated more with people professing a secular orientation. In their attempt to assess this particular approach to Jewish living, many scholars, such as anthropologist Moshe Shokeid, have described it as contradictory or even as an intermediate category. *Masorti* individuals may attend what we might understand to be Orthodox religious services on Saturday/Shabbat morning, but then drive to the beach in the afternoon, or they may punctiliously undertake a fast on Yom Kippur, as dictated by Orthodox regulations, but will unquestioningly turn on household lights on the Sabbath.

In their attempts to discuss these individuals and their religious identity in more nuanced and less derogatory ways, contemporary scholars have begun to tease apart previous categorizations into which *Masortiyut*, the quality of *Masorti* identity, has been relegated. As part of this undertaking, these same scholars have attempted to compare *Masorti* individuals to other Jews who identify as religious and observe religious practices, but are not Orthodox. In this vein, scholars have tended to juxtapose *Masortiyut* with what are dubbed liberal, or progressive Jewish movements, such as Conservative or Reform, a trend that continues today.

The problem in such comparisons is that they are almost immediately disregarded for having "missed the point of *Masorti* identity." In their writings, scholars who have made such comparisons have understood the goal of these liberal movements as attempts to justify what these particular authors identify to be lax religious behavior, and in this, these scholars argue, such Jewish living discards a mainstay of *Masorti* belief: the view that Orthodoxy is the only

authentic Judaism. Yet, I believed a case could be made for comparison with a liberal Jewish movement that would afford a more fruitful basis for uncovering and learning new things about each group.

I looked to the thought of Mordecai Kaplan, whose teachings provided the impetus for and foundation of Reconstructionist Judaism, another liberal movement. I thought that Kaplan's civilizational articulation of Judaism, an understanding that religion is not solely texts, or doctrines, or rituals, but rather a whole complex of interrelated and associated worldviews, would be a helpful discussion partner. This outlook captured more of *Masorti* behaviors than a reduction of their identity as "not-quite Orthodoxy" or "more religious than Reform." Yet, I lacked the language to carry such a comparison further.

Therefore, I looked to anthropologist Mary Douglas's Grid-Group Analysis as a way to situate this discussion. Her scheme highlights the relation between the actions of an individual and the cultural frameworks within which such action is interpreted. The resulting analysis allows for a general "mapping" of individual agency/autonomy opposed to strictures of group cohesion/conformity, thus shifting the terms of the comparison to the individual and how s/he belongs to a particular community. While such mapping is more self-explanatory for groups with strong identifiable rules locating the group socially, in which members' choices are more circumscribed and visible, it becomes increasingly complicated for groups that people label, but cannot easily identity, such as *Masorti* Jews and those who follow Kaplanian thought. This method allows for disparate populations to be placed into conversation with each other, thus opening up otherwise hidden comparisons and appreciation for what remains different.

We should be able to ask what we can say about each group that is new after utilizing her Analysis. For example, *Masorti* Jews' reliance on and loyalty to transmission, or delivery, of

information from one generation to another is paramount in *Masorti* identity. This results in practices that appear very close to those of Kaplan's followers, namely that each group proffers an immanent location of authority: the family and community, respectively. Although, each community has fundamentally different theologies and attributes authority to different sources. These topics, among others, were too readily dismissed in previous attempts at comparison.

The focus of this paper is not to reach an empirical conclusion, but to explicate a new theoretical and methodological approach to the problem. To this end, I spend a significant amount of time contextualizing the respective groups so that the Grid-Group Analysis makes sense.

Contents

Introduction

In the comparison of culture groups, one selects elements from one apparent group, such as markers of identity, philosophical outlook, or even the negotiated expression of boundaries, and juxtaposes them to what the researcher identifies as similar or parallel elements in another apparent group. This consideration brings to the fore a host of other factors, such as the parameters and specific definitions of the apparent groups under question, if more suitable elements could be selected because, outside the perspective of the researcher they may or may not actually be comparable, etc. Each of these questions and more will be explored in this paper.

Each aggregate of people that self-identifies or is identified in some way as a coherent group exists within a matrix of markers through which others can learn about the values, behavior, and attitudes of those people comprising the group, qua group. Not all markers are always present, but each one contributes to the creation of the aggregate's "groupness." These markers, as will be discussed here, may represent ideals of the group's "founder,"such as those of Mordecai Kaplan's thought, and statements from members of the group about what belonging means, explicit norms for membership, rules of behavior, and expectations that the group has adopted or set for itself, as found in Yaakov Yadgar's interviews of Masorti, Israeli Jews.

When determining how to proceed with this study, I had to decide what components I could access of the "groups" I identified, and then I had to find a way to talk about them in ways that would allow for comparison, so I would not be accused of juxtaposing the *thought* of an individual in one group vis-à-vis the *actions* of people in the other. While each component part of the matrix of "groupness" factors into what the group "is," it quickly became apparent that the groups I saw similarities between could not easily be compared based on the same variables (e.g., foundational text vs. foundational text, interview response vs. interview response, etc.).

This is how Margaret Mead takes on significance for this study. She allows for dissimilar resources and methods of analysis to be used in order to put varying components of groupness into dialogue with one another.

While it may seem as though I am comparing the thought of Mordecai Kaplan with the behavior of a population of individuals (Masorti Jews), in fact these sources are just variations of the same topic. For example, I use a historian's summary of a philosopher's thought, namely Mel Scult's biography of Mordecai Kaplan. I also use an anthropologist's summary of interview with Masorti individuals, namely Yaakov Yadgar's ethnographic analysis of his survey of Masorti communities. What I am comparing in this paper are behaviors of individuals, whether they are explicitly stated by the individuals themselves or envisioned by a theoretician and later enacted by people adhering to that philosophy. Kaplan's thought was never intended to remain solely theoretical; people lived out these ideas and attempted to implement them. This endeavor became the movement known historically as Reconstructionist Judaism. I then consider the overlap between the behaviors and ideas of these respective communities.

My goal in this work is to make explicit the scholarly exercise of comparison. In order to describe Judaism as it is actually lived in its various, diverse, and manifold forms, we have to be able to detect difference. Every act of comparison, to some degree, is the alignment of incomparable terms. To this end, I take pains to make methodically clear the terms and operations of the comparison. I believe that only by doing this can we detect difference to which our disciplinary training blinds us. While the content of this paper deals primarily with descriptions and the contextualization of a population in Israel referred to as Masorti Judaism and to the life and thought of Mordecai Kaplan, the overarching concern is actually how to refine the method of comparison.

To do this, I utilize a framework that anthropologist Mary Douglas devised in the 1970s as a way to better target and understand the operations within subsets of a society and locate the work that culture performs in such group's identities. Through the use of this framework, I argue that in the past scholars have misidentified what factors to compare with regard to understanding Masorti identity, thus creating unhelpful and easily dismissed comparisons. Such misidentification and unfruitful comparison continue in studies even today, at the cost of accurate, emic understanding.

How might forms of Judaism be subdivided into groups more than we had thought? Only by detecting groupness among Jews can we analyze them to understand their difference. I have devoted so much time to providing contextualization, as I see it, a necessary component when trying to identify and describe aggregates of individuals who operate within identities that lack or do not allow for readily recognizable external markers. Such groups may dress like members of other groups, may even believe in similar ideals, and also may behave without etically understood or clear rules/regulations. Thus, their groupness (i.e., what forms and coheres such individuals into a group) is known only emically, to the members themselves. As a result, these groups tend to get defined in less-than accurate ways, and frustrate attempts to compare them to other groups. These generalizations hold true for Masorti Jews and those who organize around the thought of Kaplan.

Once we know what the boundaries of subgroups are, we have to determine the historical, cultural, and social contexts that cause and frame their divergence from what scholars might think of as "normative" or "real" Judaism. To gain a better understanding of the environments in which these "groups" arose, in which their practices and ideals are lived out, and how and to

what they have been compared in previous and recent studies, I have focused primarily on the writings of Israeli scholars Yaacov Yadgar and Meir Buzaglo, and American scholar Mel Scult.

Yadgar has spent years studying Masorti identity from a variety of perspectives, which culminated in a comprehensive book. There he summarized 102 interviews he conducted with Israelis identified as "traditionists/Masortim" and situated their identity within larger discussions of modernity and secularization in Israel. Buzaglo, whose texts I mention only briefly here, provides a more philosophical orientation to *Masortiyut* (the quality of being Masorti/traditional). Scult is the designated editor of Kaplan's diaries. He introduced and annotated these writings in a three-volume collection, and he discussed them (along with the rest of Kaplan's biography and other, officially published works) in a masterful analysis of Kaplan's work, which I consulted for this paper.

In the work of detecting difference and diversity, we can identify commonalities of form between groups lacking an explicit socio-historical connection to each other. Such commonality must, then, be an expression of a shared aspect of Jewishness, one that scholars might not identify as such outside of traditional scholarly rubrics. The attempt here is to explore how Masorti behavior and Kaplanian thought are the more logical groups to be compared, if one endeavors to juxtapose like-against-like, as opposed to comparing Masorti Judaism and American Reform or American Conservative Judaism, which has often been the case.

Setting Terms

Jewish studies terminology is at its root an act of classification. Therefore, each term implies a group imagined within discourse. I begin with a discussion of the terms "Masorti" and "traditional." These terms are contested, not only in the content, histories, and implications of their meanings, but also in how to render them from dually Hebrew and "Jewish" cultural

frameworks, into English and secular academic discourses, respectively. Therefore, it is worth taking a moment to provide some initial clarification, so that the subsequent explanations and analysis will be coherent.

To begin, let us consider מסורתי/Masorti, the very designation of the first group with which I will deal. This term carries with it a loaded and complicated history. Early studies, conducted primarily by Ashkenazi researchers, referred to these individuals as "Masortim" (pl. of Masorti), a Hebrew term translated as "traditional" (from the root m.s.r/מסר, connoting sending/delivering/transferring messages, information, etc., and forming the noun "tradition," מסורת/*masoret*). They noted that this population selectively observed religious precepts, but also engaged in secular behavior.[1] This religiosity stood at odds with how researchers, and the Ashkenazi religious establishment, had generally understood religion and religious practice.

Yadgar has even coined neologisms in order to help clarify his own thinking around this term and its associated meanings. The Hebrew designation for this population, Masorti, and its variants (e.g., traditionalist, traditionalism) carry connotations that do not accurately portray the group's self-identification.

Both Yadgar and Buzaglo use the term "tradition" to signify an "interpretive lens, a set of inherited assumptions, belief structures, behavioral patterns, a basis for influence and authority." In short, they understand the term as providing "the building materials for one's collective and individual identity that helps to instill the world with meaning and substantiate one's feelings of belonging."[2] As a designation for a group with associated practices and outlook, the term "traditional" is something upon which one reflects (i.e., the tradition), updates, and reestablishes

---

[1] Moshe Shokeid, "Cultural Ethnicity in Israel: The Case of Middle Eastern Jews' Religiosity," *AJS Review* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 1984): 254.

[2] Yaacov Yadgar, *Secularism and Religion in Jewish-Israeli Politics: Traditionists and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2011), 16.

as conditions change. It becomes an object with which one has a relationship, and one can use it as a source of authority, to validate one's choices, and it is something to which one is loyal.[3] Tradition, then, is something that operates in a web of other alternatives from which one can choose. In contradistinction to this stance, Orthodoxy, or the *haredi* identity, as these scholars understand it, is one that lacks such reflection upon tradition because its members remain within it at all times.[4] Throughout the paper, I will use the term "traditionist" (a neologism by Yadgar) to refer to a Masorti individual, one who stands in particular relation to that which is delivered from ancestor to recipient, but is not confined to a presumed Orthodox identity.

Methodology

The following discussion is the heart of the paper, for it is only through the refinement and testing of our theories and methods that we, as scholars of religion, gain accurate views of our subject, and only through proper comparison do we glean more information than we obscure. In scholarship, comparison requires the examination of like-against-like. As a basic methodological orientation, I draw on the work of Rogers Brubaker, who questions the very

---

[3] Ibid., 19.

[4] Ibid., 21. "Tradition" is too narrow a translation of מסורתי, and the complexities of the term summarized here are beyond the scope of this paper. In some discourses, something deemed as a tradition, or as traditional, refers to a stage in social development, as is understood in the modernization thesis (i.e., a move from traditional to modern society), and it implies a condition of being less advanced technologically, etc.; in other discourses, it refers to a line of thought (e.g., the Kantian tradition), and even something contrasted to elitist culture (i.e., an identification with the "folk," and also generically as something passed intergenerationally, see Meir Buzaglo, "The Masorti," in *Rab-tarbwtiywt bmibḥan hayiśr'eliywt*, ed. Ohad Nachtomy (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2005), 154. To make matters even more confusing, the Jewish branch known in the United States as Conservative Judaism calls itself Masorti Judaism in Israel, a designation and comparison that Masorti Jews readily reject. Something deemed traditional also may imply a stance toward that thing from the past that is now considered sacred or important in many ways through its connection to the past, see Yaacov Yadgar, "A Post-Secular Look at Tradition: Toward a Definition of 'Traditionism,'" *Telos* 156 (Fall 2011): 80; Yadgar2011, 17-18; Yaacov Yadgar, "Transcending the 'Secularization vs. Traditionalization' Discourse: Jewish-Israeli Traditionists, the Post-Secular, and the Possibilities of Multiculturalism," in *The Multicultural Challenge in Israel*, eds. Avi Sagi and Ohad Nachtomy (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 152. This relationship toward whatever is handed down may also connote and imply rigidity. The former association of the term applies well to our group, but the latter implication does not. To this end, Yadgar coined and prefers the neologism "traditionist" and its variant (traditionism), to distinguish this stance from extreme conservatism to denote an adherence to tradition that is not orthodox.

existence of the category of "group." This is important because the way we speak about differences among Jews in the world, is to speak of them as groups (e.g., Reform, Orthodox, neo-Orthodox, Masorti, etc.). When we describe these groups, we are comparing difference between them. What is lost is the description of similarity. Difference teaches us how Jewish groups diverge, whereas similarity instructs us as to what is fundamentally similar of "Jewishness." Taken together, we both account for manifold forms of Judaism in the world today, and we detect novel or previously unknown aspects of the common threads between them.

The simple way to do this is to give the forms of Judaism names from an academic (etic) perspective. It is my contention that these names of groups cover over both differences and commonalities on the ground (emic perspectives). This procedure will then allow us to compare groups that appear to have no connection other than the fact that they both are "Jewish." As noted, the act of comparison in this study is a heuristic that is rooted in social categories and classifications, namely communities of Jews identified (in both emic and etic descriptions) as "Masortim." The division between the classification of an idea as emic or etic comes from anthropology. The former refers to the way in which a researcher adopts the perspective of someone from within a group, while eschewing the accepted, academic viewpoints. The latter refers to the perspective of outsiders, and often, specifically, academics, who privilege their interpretations above any internal report from that group.

Given the available data regarding Masorti observances and belief as culled from philosophical reflections by Meir Buzaglo, interview and survey results conducted by Yaacov Yadgar, along with Kaplanian thought as found in explications by Mel Scult of Kaplan's life and work, it is reasonable to utilize Mary Douglas's Grid-Group Analysis as a way to allow the

respective communities reflective in this data to be comparable. Before engaging in the analysis, it will be necessary to define Douglas's system and to define her terms.

Grid-Group Analysis is based on the approximate measuring of two variables, both independent and dependent. The independent variable is called "grid," and it is a relative measure of the degree to which the rules, norms, and structures of a cultural system either constrain the agency of members of the system ("high grid") or permit high degrees of individual agency ("low grid"). These rules, according to Douglas, guide individuals, sanction ways of behaving, and constitute a cosmology.[5] Grid refers to a way to better understand how much a cultural system regulates the individual, such as rules a person is subjected to in various social interactions.[6]

In broad strokes, one might say that Douglas's grid dimension can be understood as an expansion of an emic understanding and perspective. In this way, the rules, norms, and regulations of a respective collective are known to members of that respective community. These members know what is expected of them, they either follow these rules and regulations or they do not, and others outside of that community may or may not know these rules or regulations. If this community has behaviors that are highly controlled and regulated, then it is likely that members of the larger society in which this community exists may be able to identify members of that respective group. In such a case, it is said that this group exhibits "high grid." Members are not allowed much agency/autonomy. It describes conditions within the collective.

The dependent variable is called "group," and it is presumed to be the dependent variable because in taking an anthropological understanding of identity, all human culture is assumed to have no intrinsic meaning aside from what the group recognizes. Group is the measure of

---

[5] Mary Douglas, *Cultural Bias* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1978), 6.
[6] Ibid., 8.

cohesion/conformity of any collective,[7] thus it is dependent on whatever aspect of a collective's identity one wants to target and assess to what degree it is identifiable externally. The context of the rules, norms, and structures of the "grid," in short, is the "group." In a situation of "low group" (i.e., low group coherence), for example, when viewed from an etic perspective, there is a difficulty in identifying such a group, for there may be reduced visibility of such a community in society. At the opposite extreme, in a situation of "high group," the group may be quite visible in society, and its characteristics readily identifiable, well-defined, and coherent (i.e., it has high etic visibility).

Group, then, is an expansion of what we would consider to be an etic perspective and description. In this way, somebody from outside of a respective community can easily locate someone based on social markers of how a member of a particular community or group behaves, dresses, and perhaps may even have a sense of what they generally believe. These factors can be either low (less visible socially) or high (visible socially) to outsiders. This perspective is gained outside of the respective collective.

Preliminarily, the analyst might assume that in a situation of "high grid," in which a group member's agency is highly regulated, resulting in reduced agency to act, that the cultural system will produce a highly visible group boundary from an etic perspective, that the group in society will be coherent (i.e., "high group"). As such, the analyst would assume that the inverse must also be true, namely that "low grid" situations will produce a harder to detect, less etically visible boundary to the group, and that an emic perspective would likewise reveal more member agency, less regulated norms, and thus less group coherence. In this study, however, using Douglas's Grid-Group Analysis, I take the preliminary assumption, that grid and group, when

---

[7] Ibid., 7-8.

"group" is viewed emically, are inversely proportional. Further, I will argue that a "low grid" system will retain high social visibility of its "group" borders from an emic view (i.e., from the point of view of its adherents), and this is due primarily to the significant role that "tradition" plays in such systems and the importance that "community" has as a rallying point for its members.

For example, as Yadgar notes, for his Masorti respondents, religiosity is seen as a realm into which traditionists can enter and exit at will, and whose rules can be followed fully or partially, as desired. Many of his informants tried not to work on Shabbat, others kept kosher, and many identified their behavior as Orthodox. Yet, as Yadgar notes, many Masorti individuals make distinctions between practices in the home and outside of the home, between the personal and the public, between meat and other foods, and even between whether or not they are located in Israel or abroad when making these distinctions in behavior. Many Masorti individuals understood *kashrut* as part of following Judaism's "essence, yet scoffed at what they deemed the pointless insistence on rabbinic issued certificates. For those outside of the Masorti family or community, it would be difficult to designate such an individual as belonging to either an Orthodox or Reform Jewish "group."[8]

In his diary, Kaplan speaks often about the guilt that he experiences when he writes on Friday evening, which is the beginning of Shabbat. Kaplan stated that the "average Jew" cannot participate in all Jewish activities. In Kaplan's understanding, Judaism is a civilization, and in this way, a Jewish individual can feel that she is contributing to Jewish life "no matter what phase of it she fosters." Whatever a Jewish person does, as a decided and cognizant Jewish action, will help that individual realize the place of his contribution in the context of the totality

---

[8] Yadgar2011, 112-14.

of Jewish life, according to Kaplan. In this way, while Kaplan felt that he was violating Shabbat by writing, when according to Orthodox law he should refrain from doing so, he reconciled the act of his writing with the fact that he was satisfying his need for self-expression, which he saw as paramount to Jewish civilization.[9]

This is to say that in "low grid," "low group" systems (i.e., Masorti and Kaplanian communities), one sees a less coherent and less visible social group, with less defined and less regulated group rules, but a surprisingly and counterintuitively high degree of internal coherence. This "groupness" is based not around rules and regulations, but rather around the concept and praxis of continual communal engagement with tradition. It is through the community, and its constant grappling with what is required of its members, that dynamism is afforded to the substance of group identity and that allows for the tradition to morph according to the needs and dictates of its members diachronically. The seemingly static snapshot of Grid-Group Analysis is meant as a way to depict the available choices (and the limits to enacting them) an individual actually can make with regard to various groups to which she belongs, and it also serves to highlight the contingent nature of the "group" itself.[10] In short, it is the community that determines the contours of the group's tradition.

With this perspective, Douglas pinpoints the very issue at stake in living according to "tradition," to use explicit religious terminology, or rather, to identify with or operate within a living tradition, as both Masortim and Kaplanists do. Members of these two groups cohere together not necessarily through any sort of systematized strictures, or explicit rules of behavior, but rather according to the continually developing sense of what the group wants, demands, and

---

[9] Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Vol. II: 1934-1941*, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 19-20.
[10] Douglas, 13.

needs in any given circumstance, by dint of maintaining allegiance (i.e., involvement) in that group, at any given point. In particular when discussing Masortim, whose very name implies a relationship to Tradition, and Kaplanists, who adhere to the thought of an individual devoted to articulating a non-supernatural, immanent, but nonetheless transcendent understanding of Judaism, it is worthwhile to give a sense of how they describe their behavior and thought, respectively.

While to those outside of the respective communities of Masortim or Kaplanists, the following descriptions may appear contingent, ephemeral, and undefined, in fact the connections and bonds among those adhering to such principles are enduring, recognized, and applicable to diverse times and places. Yadgar provides an example in the argument his informants give about why and when they wear a *kippah*. According to these Masorti individuals, wearing a headcovering signifies for them a particular relationship to the sacred, and it symbolizes entry into a distinctly religious realm.[11] Through wearing a *kippah*, one externally marks oneself as operating under certain obligations and performing particular ritualistic actions. For these Masorti individuals, it as a sign of religiosity and a marker of obligation of religious behavior. It evokes social expectations,[12] and thus they may not always wear it.

In a similar vein, they attend synagogue not necessarily out of concern for the observance of any *halakhic* or religious tenant, but rather because it provides them an emotional experience.[13] Prayer, for these Masortim, also is a personal experience of which they partake privately, so that they can converse with God. Synagogue attendance and the *kippah* are ways for

---

[11] Yadgar2011, 218.
[12] Ibid., 119.
[13] Ibid., 115.

them to live out an externally Jewish life, which for them, at those moments when they engage those markers, mirrors an internal sentiment.

While in their descriptions an ideal person is to be more tolerant, more moral, and more attentive to their surroundings and community, and while they believe that Orthodoxy sets the basis for this outlook, they do not necessarily identify Orthodox dictates and lifestyles with in fact cultivating that ideal, good person. For many of these Masorti individuals, Orthodoxy is seen as an impractical choice and impossible to maintain in the modern world. It imposes too many unnecessary and unfeasible constraints on the individual.[14] Yadgar notes that many of his respondents believed most Orthodox Jews do not know the reasons why they observe certain commandments or follow a particular rabbi; they simply do what they are told.[15] In their view, an Orthodox lifestyle offers no freedom of thought. Nevertheless, Orthodox Judaism as an ideal, is authentic and something against which they assess their own behavior.

In light of this view of "proper" Judaism, traditionists view themselves as being unable to correctly observe all Jewish practices, but insist on adhering to a basic minimum of obligations, albeit in a humane and modern way.[16] In their view, they preserve a fundamental core of meaningful content of Judaism, which is in compliance with God's will. This will is expressed through traditions that are grounded mainly in home experiences, passed down from one generation to the next.[17] They contrast this family centeredness with both stringent Orthodoxy, which is unthinking, and a secularism defined as unrestrained pursuit of personal happiness.

---

[14] Ibid., 190-91.
[15] Ibid., 196.
[16] Ibid., 202.
[17] Ibid., 206-07.

Their Judaism is the only one which adequately allows for autonomy, and adherence to God's will, as defined by their tradition.[18]

Throughout his professional life, Kaplan grappled with developing a systematic approach to Judaism. As evidenced from his diary, he came upon a definition of Judaism that set the basis for his systematic approach to Jewish living. He stated that religion more generally, and Judaism in particular, could be understood as a group consciousness. In order to preserve this Judaism, one needs to preserve the Jewish consciousness. This for him did not entail preserving particular beliefs or practices, per say, but the consciousness that they express and target.[19]

The function of Jewish beliefs and practices are to integrate individuals into this larger Jewish worldview. He stated that if we took the desire to develop Jewish consciousness seriously in America, then we ought to maintain folkways that are effective for everyday people to engage in who otherwise would have a little opportunity in expressing a connection to Judaism.[20] The term "folkway" is an expression that he adapted to refer to all accepted customs and commandments. In this way he redefined the terms of Jewish living. Any associations people had with behaviors, rituals, and practices that may be understood as obligatory, was tempered.[21] He did away with a notion of strict conformity and instead focused on the spiritual sensibilities of modern society by linking Jewish practices with communities, not imposed dictates. Folkways, he states, are gestures through which a people can externalize the reality of its collective being.[22]

Jewish living, according to Kaplan's reflections, is always intimately connected to and extends from the general Jewish fascination with Torah study. As he understood it, Jews engaged

---

[18] Ibid., 226.
[19] Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Communings of the Sprit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Vol. 1: 1913-1934*, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 112.
[20] Ibid., 193.
[21] Ibid., 334-35.
[22] Ibid., 335.

in the deliberate study of Torah because it revealed God's will. Therefore, knowledge of its teachings allowed individuals to know how to achieve salvation. Yet, as he noted, Jewish communities were not always successful in reconciling this continuous endeavor with changing intellectual concerns and problems of modern Jewish life.[23] His response was to break down commonly accepted and commanded actions into their component parts and explore how each allowed individuals to achieve a sense of satisfaction in continuing to perform it or not. Thus, he continued to wear a *kippah*, for example, because he believed that those with whom one encounters on a daily basis should be greeted by another wearing a headcovering, for this type of gesture had an effect on one's demeanor, and countenance. He wanted to treat others with respect, and he believed that it was necessary for others to do so as well in order to achieve a sense of holiness in life.[24]

In another instance of reflecting on the significance of Jewish practice, here regarding donning *tefillin*, he interpreted the commandment as a symbol of freedom, and he understood freedom as being indispensable to experiencing the reality of God and the worthwhileness of life.[25] Kaplan believed that Jewish rituals had not developed for his current situation, writing in the 1930s, and he did not wonder why people saw no place for ritual. Kaplan understood his life as a struggle to reconcile the received religious dictates with the desire to be an autonomous, free individual in modern society.

When he reflected on this tension with regard to the laws of Shabbat, he reasoned that if he refrained from writing on Shabbat, then he would be cut off from the overflow of ideas he knew he would have, and he was aware that those thoughts would then be lost. He stated that

---

[23] Ibid., 356-57.
[24] Ibid., 385-86.
[25] Ibid., 474.

from a general point of view, these thoughts have no intrinsic value, but from a point of view of

his personality, they were his essence and were all that he had. If he allowed these ideas to be

forgotten, by not writing them down on Shabbat, then he believed that he would be losing a part

of his personality.[26] He understood Jewish prayer services similarly. If one were to look at them

from the point of view of aesthetic standards, then they would not be able to compete with

offerings for the modern Jew in terms of art, music, and entertainment. They had become too

rote and perfunctory. He advocated shifting the center of gravity of worship from public

gatherings to the home, and in so doing, he recognized the importance of family tradition and the

importance of close-knit communities in shaping experience.[27]

Based on the previous descriptions of Masorti communities and those individuals who

attempt to live out Kaplanian thought, family structures and close-knit communities are of prime

importance. It is in the family and the community, respectively, that individuals gain a sense of

tradition, what is passed down, and what coheres the group together. There are no concrete, rigid,

or even necessarily explicit strictures on individual behavior. In this way, both of these

collectivities exist in what Douglas would call low-grid, low-group. Individuals in Masorti

communities and in groups that follow Kaplanian thought operate with a high degree of agency

and autonomy, and outsiders would be hard-pressed to classify these members as part of any

particular, socially recognizable community.

Yet, because the expectations, senses of belonging, and ideals are passed down in

intimate and close-knit relationships, for members of these groups there does exist a strong

degree of loyalty and identification, what social scientists would call "being-in-common."[28] In

---

[26] Kaplan *Communings II*, 106.
[27] Ibid., 197.
[28] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Of Being-in-Common," in *Community at Loose Ends*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1-12.

this understanding, community is defined as individuals with shared behaviors that reflect philosophy and ideas. To outsiders, then, this behavior that looks like religious "reform" may in fact be the very actions that scholars have failed to understand correctly. These behaviors, actions, and "transgressions" of Jewish law are not part of any defined religious ideology (as perhaps they may be understood to be in Reform Judaism), but rather part of a fluid, holistic, living tradition of particular groups at particular times in particular places. Further research along these lines may bear out that scholars will have to rethink what constitutes Jewishness itself.

Douglas herself speaks frankly about the contingency of groups, their voluntary quality, and thus, of their ephemeral or potentially temporary existences. As she states:

> Grid-group analysis treats the experiencing subject as a subject choosing. It does not suppose that the choices are pre-determined […] both can interact, the individual and the environment, and either can move, because the environment is defined to consist of all other interacting individuals and their choices […] A group is not taken to be formed, solid, existing independently of the volition of its constituent members […] Every time a member appeals successfully to the paramount need to ensure the survival of the group, its being in existence can be used as a more powerful justification for controlling individuals […] Calling on an ethic of individual value, each person can be justified for breaching constraints upon his freedom. This principle is basic to low grid because it extends the individual's scope for negotiating.[29]

As we observed in the example of Masorti individuals explaining the significance of wearing a headcovering, and of Kaplan explaining his writing on Shabbat, Douglas's explanation of low-grid is a particularly insightful heuristic.

In his study of the category of "group," and the undertaking of "groupness," the activity of perceiving and treating aggregates of individuals based on certain characteristics into groups, Rogers Brubaker represents another way to escape the confines and blinders represented in etic, academic thinking. His thought combines the elements of process, contingency, and variability in

---

[29] Douglas, 13.

the concept of something that provides people with, and reflects their, perspectives of the world: tradition. He reminds us:

> Ethnicity, race, and nation [and here I add the social category of religious denomination] should be conceptualized not as substances or things or entities or organisms or collective individuals – as the imagery of discrete, concrete, tangible, bounded, and enduring "groups" encourages us to do – but rather in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful, and disaggregated terms […] in terms of practical categories, situated actions, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutionalized forms, political projects, and contingent events […] it means taking as a basic analytical category not the "group" as an entity but the groupness as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable […] Ethnicity, race, and nationhood [and religious groups/traditions] are fundamentally ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world. They are not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world.[30]

Here, we get a sense for the necessity of the role of community; all decisions made by a choosing individual (regarding tradition, praxis, and worldview) occur in the group, whose membership and content, while seemingly indistinguishable or unclear in society generally, are in fact distinct, but not systematized or restrictive internally. Therefore, they are difficult for non-members, especially academics, to see.

In particular these definitions emphasize the distinguishing characteristics of situations of "low grid," "low group." Such groups as this exist out of the ability of their members to expect, and have the capacity for, negotiation of what binds them together, what values they hold as paramount, and what this worldview looks like in practice. In short, for successfully navigating the exigencies of their tradition, which here is Judaism broadly conceived.

To help provide more context to this sort of analysis, it is helpful to verbalize Douglas's graph below. X axis = Group, Y axis = Grid

---

[30] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13, 17.

High Grid	High Grid
Low Group	High Group
Low Grid	Low Grid
Low Group	High Group

Once the graph is created, then one can operationalize it (i.e., to assign empirical phenomena,

such as behavior and philosophy, to theoretical concepts of groupness) according to different

categories culled from the data by Yadgar and Kaplan/Scult. Both behavior and philosophy are

named here as empirical, for they represent markers of groupness, as discussed above. Examples

of such categories are *kashrut* (Jewish dietary regulations), Shabbat observance, and the status of

revelation at Mt. Sinai. At the center of each quadrant would be the Jewish group and how it

accords with Grid-Group Analysis. Generally speaking, once one has the basics of the graph and

a broad understanding of various Jewish groups, the following breakdown can be asserted:

High Grid	High Grid
	Haredi
	Conservative
	Modern Orthodox
Low Group	High Group
Low Grid	Low Grid
Kaplanist	Reform
Masorti	
Low Group	High Group

According to this graph, then, we could argue that, generally speaking, Haredi,

Conservative, Modern Orthodox, and Reform groups exist in situations of High Group. As such,

outsiders can readily identify these groups as having noticeable external patterns and

characteristics. They are socially visible, and their members behave in ways that others can

identify. Within the group, however, Reform differs from the other three in that it is Low Grid,

whereas they are High Grid. For Haredi, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox groups, individual

members experience explicit and strict rules, and thus have reduced agency, while Reform group members operate with less strict, and perhaps fewer, rules or constraints on behavior.

Once a specific category is chosen for which a Grid-Group Analysis will be performed, as opposed to here in a generalized accounting of "group characteristics" writ large, variations will become more apparent, especially with regard to Grid and emic classifications. For example, Modern Orthodox groups may generally be understood as High Grid/High Group. They are identifiable, and group members operate under stricter rules and have reduced agency. Yet, from an emic perspective, High Grid does not necessarily equate to standardized praxis. What this means is that when speaking from within the group, an individual may see in society a collection of Modern Orthodox groups and assume that they keep the same rules, for example of *kashrut*, and thus individual members may freely eat at any other Modern Orthodox individual's home. This is not the case, for even the strict rules members abide by do not ensure a total lack of agency, and thus what is acceptable/*kosher* for one member may not be so for another, within the same group. It is important to keep in mind that this analysis sets a frame for, and allows for comparison. It provides a means for discussion/analysis; it is not the final result of the comparison.

What is significant in this analysis for our specific purpose is the location of Kaplanian groups in Douglas's schema. Here they can be classified as Low Grid/Low Group. Outsiders may have difficulty in identifying a Kaplanist group, and internally, there is severe variation in rules, their applicability, and enforcement. According to Yadgar's survey results and Buzaglo's reflections, Masortim can likewise be situated in that quadrant. Therefore, by this method we have comparison of like-against-like, as opposed to the comparisons previous studies, and traditional discourse in the study of Judaism, have attempted and continue to perpetuate.

<u>*Masorti* Identity Broadly Conceived</u>

The application of, or target population for, the methodology I proposed above regarding Masortim is found in the modern State of Israel, namely the Mizrahim as an academically-identified subset of Masortim. Starting in the early 1950s and continuing even until today, relations between the incoming Mizrahi Jewish population (i.e., individuals from Middle Eastern countries) with the established Ashkenazi Jewish community (i.e., individuals from Central and Eastern Europe) in the newly created State of Israel have been marked by tension and frustrated expectations. For example, Yadgar points out that these groups of Jews have served to undermine the secularization and modernization theses, broadly construed from Sociology. This theory tended to understand and present Judaism as rather monolithic. Mizrahi Jews, a percentage of which define themselves as Masorti (i.e., "traditionists"),[31] introduced and continue to maintain a Jewish identity that stands in contrast to the presumptions of social scientists regarding the role of religion in modern society.

This Jewish identity stands in multiple social spheres. It is decidedly religious (in Israeli parlance: *dati*/דתי), but also stands securely in the secular world (or in Israel: חילוני/*hiloni*). As such, traditionist/Masorti Jews disrupt the binary distinction between modernity and tradition, and they present, according to Yadgar, a modern sense of choosing in particular a non-secularist

---

[31] With regard to Israeli demographics, scholars have generally cited the Guttman Institute Report, a series of studies published from 1991 to 2009 that reflect "beliefs, observances, and social interaction among Israeli Jews," see Charles S. Liebman and Elihu Katz, eds. *The Jewishness of Israelis: Responses to the Guttman Report* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 2ff.; Asher Arian and Ayala Keisar-Sugarman, eds., *A Portrait of Israeli Jews: Beliefs, Observances, and Values of Israeli Jews, 2009* (Jerusalem: Guttman Center for Surveys of the Israel Democracy Institute for the AVI CHAI-Israel Foundation, 2012), https://en.idi.org.il/media/5439/guttmanavichaireport2012_engfinal.pdf, 30ff. What these scholars note is that remaining rather consistent throughout these surveys is the fact that those who self-identify as Masorti, or Traditional, constitute about one-third of the Israeli Jewish population, see Yadgar2009, 151; Buzaglo2005a, 153; YadgarPostSecular, 80. According to the same surveys, half of the Mizrahi population identified as Masorti, while only 19 percent of Ashkenazim identified as such, see Yaacov Yadgar and Charles S. Liebman, "Beyond the Religious-Secular Dichotomy: Masortim in Israel," in *Religion or Ethnicity: Jewish Identities in Evolution*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 176, demonstrating that *Masortiyut* remains an overwhelmingly Mizrahi form of identification, with regard to religiosity and outlook.

identity, which is bound to and by tradition, yet refuses to be labeled Orthodox or entirely religious.[32] Over time, as the new Israeli immigrants of Middle Eastern and North African extraction slowly acculturated to Israel's emerging classification as "Mizrahi," the repercussions of which continue to be played out in class, ethnic, and other disparities, it became clear that the religious behavior and philosophy of many of these Jews was something that the Ashkenazi establishment had difficulty understanding.

There are two phenomena occurring here. On the one hand is the "melting pot" ideal of modern Israel, according to which the aberrant assimilates to the emergent, developing norm, producing a loss of difference. On the other hand, the aberrant group's preservation of its different heritage means that it will disappear from legitimate, social visibility, as it is outside the narrowly circumscribed norm of the melting pot's acceptability.

Many Masorti religious observances seemed contrary to the idea of the creation of a "melting pot" society, and seemingly blurred the lines between the religious/*dati* and secular/*hiloni*. For example, members of these communities readily consumed secular culture and undertook business ventures in the public, secularized sphere, and even dressed like secular Jews, but also readily participated in religious practices. Many of these practices seemingly focused more on "heritage" and ethnic customs than on observances dictated by traditional understandings of Jewish law (*halakha*),[33] such as publicly commemorating Mimouna (a Moroccan celebration marking the end of Pesach),[34] and venerating saints, which included

---

[32] Shokeid1984, 252; Avi Picard, "Like a Phoenix: The Renaissance of Sephardic/Mizrahi Identity in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s," *Israel Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 2.

[33] Nissim Leon, "The Secular Origins of Mizrahi Traditionalism," *Israel Studies* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 26-27.

[34] Picard2017, 3-4.

making pilgrimage to their shrines (at their respective tombs, or recreated elsewhere) and requesting the benefit of power associated with their personalities.[35]

As scholars note, such behavior is not anomalous for immigrants from predominantly Muslim societies, where one cannot easily differentiate activity that is or is not outside the realm of religious law. As Bernard Lewis points out regarding such societies, that life is presumed to be religious or understood through a religious frame is a self-evident reality.[36] What is noteworthy in the Israeli context, however, is that these immigrant communities had in many ways developed a strategy of cultural accommodation to the dominant society, but had simultaneously fostered a religiosity that was, according to scholars, "midway between" Ashkenazi orthodoxy and secularism.[37]

Because Masorti individuals demonstrate secular lifestyles, but also maintain attachment to religious practices and outlook, many people have described them as having only partially modernized, or have seen them as not fitting in to the socially accepted and rigid Israeli categories of orthodoxy or secularity. Their religiosity is marked not by devout observance of *halakha*, but rather a loyalty to tradition and family patterns. This is seen as a "midway" or "in-between" religiosity, demonstrating more compromise than decisiveness, more weakness than strength.[38] Because Masorti identity has largely been relegated as a "peripheral phenomenon," consideration of their practices and acknowledgment of the "group" remains difficult to locate. Masortim are unable to distinguish themselves in terms of education streams in the Israeli school

---

[35] Yaacov Yadgar, "Jewish Secularism and Ethno-National Identity in Israel: The Traditionalist Critique," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (Oct. 2011): 470; YadgarLiebman2009, 179-80; Yoram Bilu, "Dreams and the Wishes of the Saint," in *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
[36] LeonSecularOrigins, 36.
[37] Shokeid1984, 253.
[38] LeonSecularOrigins, 25.

system structured around religious/*dati* or secular/*hiloni* state curricula, they dress like secular Israelis, but selectively wear kippot (head coverings), and eat foods similar to others.[39]

In both belief and praxis, Masorti Jews stand in relation to both adamantly religious Jews and adamantly secular Jews. As Yadgar relates from his interviews with Masorti Jews, traditionists often view Orthodox rabbinic halachic prohibitions as anachronistic in the modern age, and thus they ignore these prohibitions while still feel that their religiosity is authentically Jewish. Against the claim that Masorti Jews give up halachic practices if they are "uncomfortable," Yadgar states that traditionist Jews in fact have a method, in which they identify a "core of Jewish authenticity." This core is constituted by a minimum of practice, values, and beliefs, without which one's identity is not really Jewish, according to the responses of his interviewees. Yet, this core is constructed in relation to Orthodox interpretation of *halakha* and Judaism, and this creates issues for the project of comparison. It assigns etic classification to a group whose emic self-understanding is more complicated and dynamic.

According to Yadgar, traditionism is the mirror image of an identity based on "scripturalism." For traditionists, religious life is governed by habit and what "seems" right, while for scripturalists, it is governed by rules. For traditionists, authority is rooted in customs at home, transmitted mimetically, and for scripturalists, it is located in texts, as interpreted by learned masters, etc.[40]

Traditionists, however, do not reject scripturalism; Masorti individuals do not repudiate religious/*dati* or Orthodox/*haredi* individuals and practices. Rather, they choose to observe or not, and they view their choices as continuations of the traditions of their ancestors, adapted to present conditions. The absence of an overarching ideology as to how this translates into practice

---

[39] YadgarLiebman, 185.
[40] Yadgar2009, 174.

speaks to a refusal to impose this way of life on others.[41] Masortim do not state unequivocally that they believe in one meaning of God or another, for example. Their identity is not geared toward specific content of belief, but rather toward statements and actions to which they are loyal.

According to these presumptions, which the Israeli Ashkenazi Orthodox and secular establishment echoed of the secularization and modernization theories, the aforementioned "premodern" (traditional) religious practices of those dubbed Masortim would give way to and be replaced by modern practices, and individuals would either become secular or follow a religious/*dati* or Orthodox/*haredi* life, all in the hopes of molding into a unified Israeli national identity.[42] Masorti Jews disrupt this binary between modernity and tradition, and they actively choose a non-religious life, but one bound by communal obligations, infused with religious practices and outlook. Yet, they self-identify neither as secular nor religious.[43]

Nevertheless, as Yadgar and Buzaglo make clear, Masortim knowingly observe practices that they deem as necessary components in their loyalty to tradition. This "necessary minimum" is what respondents articulated as practices that if breached would place into doubt one's Jewishness, usually having to do with maintaining *kashrut*, Sabbath observance, and festival rituals. The practical content of this minimum, however, was left unspecified.[44] Upholding these minimum observances is part of what constitutes their maintenance of the chain of tradition, in which they see themselves as links. Again, what holds the chain together is not specified content,

---

[41] Yadgar2009, 176.
[42] YadgarJewishSecularism, 467.
[43] Yadgar2009, 154-55.
[44] Ibid., 159.

mandated beliefs and practices, or even confidence in the factuality of what their parents profess, for example, rather loyalty to the intergenerational delivery of that tradition.[45]

<u>Binaries and Cross-Pressures</u>

In his analysis of these groups into Israeli society, Yadgar uses the very binaries of religious/secular and traditional/modern as the poles or the extremes against which Masorti Jews can understand and make sense of their own self-defined Judaism, but does so a way that allows for dynamism and not derision. Masorti Jews now, in Yadgar's conceptualization, can more accurately be understood in their continually chosen identity, rather than being seen as an in-between category, which was neither religious nor secular, neither traditional nor modern, and often denigrated as a temporary and incoherent set of beliefs and practices. Yadgar captures the tensions in Masorti practice and identity, but nevertheless, continues to juxtapose categories and groups that lead to unhelpful conclusions.

In Yadgar's methodology, which involves a continuous moving back-and-forth between an ideal typical notion of a phenomenon and specific instances, as a mode of circular interpretation, Masorti Jewish identity is placed in constant relation to Orthodox/*haredi* Judaism and secular/*hiloni* Jews.[46] Each of these groups has placed pressure, both explicit and implicit, on Masorti Jews to make a clear statement regarding their identity. Are they religious/*dati* or secular/*hiloni*? If Masorti Jews declare that they are the former, then, according to this criticism, they must make an effort to abide by Orthodox interpretations of *halakha*. If they are the latter, then they should stop making pretensions of living a religious life. As Yadgar states simply, in Israel the Orthodox have a monopoly on the definition of Jewish religion, and the secularists

---

[45] Buzaglo2005a, 156.
[46] Yadgar2011, 188.

have a monopoly on the definition of freedom and progress.[47] Traditionist Jews undermine this division.

It is in fact this juxtaposition between modernity and secularization, a life lived according to the binary extremes of either *hiloni* or *dati* identity (usually understood in Israel to be according to *haredi*, ultra-Orthodox dictates), through which many scholars have understood Masorti experience. In this scheme, Ashkenazi Orthodoxy is taken as the de facto model of religiosity, a framework of life motivated by "either/or" logic, and it is to this model that Masorti life is deemed incomplete, fragmented, compromising, or inconsistent.[48]

As Yadgar relates, according to traditionists, their sense is that religion has to do with punctiliously fulfilling ritual demands and acquiring knowledge of a sacred text. Orthodoxy, then, is an ideal, an image of the religious that is absolute, fundamental, but self-admittedly impossible to fulfil and extreme in its outlook and demands. Orthodoxy, viewed by traditionists as the only authentic and legitimate definition of Judaism, is, in their view, also impractical to implement.[49] Masorti Jews in Yadgar's study explained that Orthodoxy is an absolute, a role model toward which they should aspire. While this image offers the promise of wholeness and "living an ideologically consistent Jewish lifestyle," respondents also noted that it endangers one's personal liberty, and it is coercive. According to the Orthodoxy that Masorti Jews espouse as encapsulating authentic Judaism, their own lifestyle is defined as flawed and "partial heresy."[50]

Traditionists define Orthodoxy and its interpretation of *halakha* as the only authentic Judaism, and they maintain that someone who wants to be wholly Jewish must observe all

---

[47] Yadgar2009, 163.
[48] LeonSecularOrigins, 23.
[49] Yadgar2011, 196.
[50] Yadgar2009, 162.

religious dictates, according to their Orthodox interpretations. Yet, they nonetheless claim that many Orthodox rabbinic prohibitions have no place in modern, contemporary society. In fact, they actively disregard them.[51] Nonetheless, they insist that only the Orthodox rabbinate can legitimately change, or reform, itself.[52]

Still, traditionists do not consider themselves as secularists. They portray individuals who eschew religion as empty and existing in a meaningless life.[53] Such individuals lack a Jewish identity, do not partake of Jewish values, and their lifestyle threatens Jewish collective life, possibly leading to Jewish cultural extinction.[54] Nonetheless, traditionists actively and consciously choose their identity as Jews who idealize Orthodoxy, are aware of criticism leveled against those who reject such strictures on autonomy and choice, and even level such criticisms themselves, but who knowingly do not live up to this imposed idea.[55] As a result, Yadgar notes that belief is distinct from observance, and traditionists exhibit an identity that requires constant self-justification, and produces much self-professed guilt.[56]

It is interesting to note, however, that this differentiation itself operates within a constructed binary that scholars have created, and which Masorti respondents have internalized themselves. In their reluctance to provide a definition of traditionism, beyond noting the elements of choice in relation to loyalty to that which provides meaning, scholars have shifted the debate between the binaries of religious-secular, in which they argued against Masorti identity as an in-between option, to one in which there exists a constant circular interpretation between an ideal typical notion of religiosity and specific instances of Masorti behavior. Such

---

[51] Yadgar2009, 165, 168.
[52] Ibid., 168.
[53] Yadgar, JewishSecularism, 470.
[54] Ibid., 474.
[55] Yadgar2009, 164.
[56] Ibid., 175; Yadgar2011, 65.

noncoercive Masorti identity necessitates continual reaffirmation, for it is a conscious decision to maintain and is always judged alongside various alternatives (i.e., cross-pressures) to it.[57] Such constant interpretation and comparison, however, is made between Masortiyut and Orthodoxy, or between Masortiyut and American Reform or Conservative Judaism, as will be seen. These comparisons end in easy dismissal and reveal problems with the bases of the comparisons themselves.

Yadgar points out that in theory, traditionists have been said to comprise the American Conservative movement's "significant natural constituency."[58] This designation was made, purportedly, based on the fact that both groups (i.e., Israeli Masortim and American Conservative Jews) consider themselves to be religious, and modern, but do not abide by or obey *halakha* according to Orthodox dictates. Traditionists, according to Yadgar, in a way similar to American Reform and American Conservative Jews, "knowingly disobey some halachic dictations."[59] Yet, Yadgar dismisses the comparison between Liberal Judaism (i.e., American Reform and Conservative Judaism) and Masorti Jewish identity by stating that unlike these non-Orthodox movements, "traditionists do not seek to legitimize their behavior."[60] Such dismissal undercuts the attempt to engage in fruitful comparison outside of the confines of an ideal/aberrant model.

Yadgar continues to say that while traditionists legitimize their own "forgiveness" towards themselves and their practices, in which they have chosen to not fully observe all religious commandments and yet still are happy with their lifestyle, even while knowing that it does not accord with an Orthodox view, they do not support the formal legitimization of their

---

[57] Yadgar2011, 3-4.
[58] Yadgar2009, 165.
[59] Ibid., 166.
[60] Ibid.

behavior as "halachically correct." Their trespasses were based on loyalty to familial tradition, not in an effort to institutionalize or legitimate their heresy for all Jews.[61]

According to Yadgar, traditionists adopt an Orthodox view of religion and accept Orthodox interpretation of *halakha* as the only form of religiously authentic Judaism. They believe, generally speaking, that someone who desires to be a religious Jew needs to observe all dictates, in accordance with Orthodox interpretation. Any reform against the normative strictures of emergent "melting pot" Israeli Judaism, then, is allowed only by the Orthodox rabbinate itself. This again reinforces the notion that any comparison of Judaism that is non-halachic must place itself in relation to "Orthodoxy," rather than be seen and understood on its own characteristics and tensions.

I will now transition from Masorti Jews in Israel to the American Jewish thought of Mordecai Kaplan because I have made the case that behavior and philosophy are comparable emic entities, and also because Kaplan's own context, family, and close-knit relationships bear similar patterns to the Israeli Masortim. I will go into detail regarding certain aspect of his childhood and early education because these behavioral experiences are the bases of his philosophical expressions about Judaism. He comes from the same Orthodox understanding of Judaism as those who established the Yishuv and early modern State of Israel (i.e., the source of the "melting pot" norm against which Jewish identity is judged). Unlike Masortim/מסורתים, however, Kaplan was not considered aberrant due to a different natal heritage, so much as he was considered aberrant in his own struggles being a Jew of America (i.e., a fully religious Jew, in normative Ashkenazi Orthodox terms, and a fully-fledged member of American society, that is, secular, modern, and democratic).

---

[61] Yadgar2011, 245-50.

<u>Kaplan's Formative Years</u>

Throughout his studies and career, Kaplan read extensively in non-Judaic and non-religious texts, and a perusal of his works clearly shows a symbiosis among traditional Jewish thought and texts, contemporary scholarship, and reactions to the world in which he lived. For example, he looked to the work of Matthew Arnold as a source of inspiration regarding how religion needs to remain relevant in order to provide comfort for life's continued suffering; Baruch Spinoza for the importance of human reason in understanding the ordered universe and reality outside of oneself; the universalism and pragmatism of Felix Adler, William James, and John Dewey; notions of peoplehood and collectivity of Ahad Ha-Am (Asher Ginsberg) and Horace Kallen; and the relationship between the individual and the collective of Alfred North Whitehead.

Throughout much of his life, Kaplan engaged in dialogue with and thought against, often hostilely, established Jewish religious movements and prevailing paradigms; much ink has been spilled in writing apologetics for or in condemning him. In fact, he was the first rabbi in the US to be excommunicated by the ultra-Orthodox establishment, on June 15, 1945, after he published a new *siddur* that year and *Haggadah* three years earlier.[62] He received a traditional, Orthodox education and upbringing, and even worked for a few years in a professional religious capacity in an Orthodox synagogue. Yet, he also received a solidly secular education, was ordained in a seminary that was struggling to identify how it fit into American Jewish life (breaking with Orthodoxy, but not adopting wholeheartedly biblical criticism or other reforms), and made a name for himself by proposing a school of thought that aimed at the reconstruction/renewal of Jewish life while maintaining a traditional lifestyle himself as much as possible.

---

[62] Ibid., 8.

Kaplan was born into an Ashkenazi Orthodox family near Vilna, Lithuania in June1881. Seven years later, the family moved to the United States, because Mordecai's father, Rabbi Israel Kaplan, was invited by the newly appointed "chief rabbi" of New York City, Jacob Joseph, to join his entourage.[63] Upon arrival to the US, and in an effort to maintain a traditional Jewish life abroad, Israel enrolled his son in a yeshiva. Yet, Mordecai's parents also befriended many well-known personalities in the Jewish world, often inviting them to spend Shabbat with the family and otherwise visit with them. One such figure was the controversial Bible critic Arnold Ehrlich.

Throughout the 1890s, Ehrlich was a frequent guest of the Kaplan's, and through him, Mordecai was introduced to biblical criticism of the period, which included belief in post-Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and the existence of multiple documents that were later edited together into a final Torah text that we now possess. Adding to Ehrlich's status as a controversial figure was the fact that at a young age he converted to Christianity while in Europe, only to reconvert back to Judaism in New York City.[64]

By 1900, Mordecai Kaplan received his Bachelor of Arts degree from City College, by 1902 received rabbinical ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), and in 1903 was hired to teach and preach at Kehilath Jeshurun (KJ), an Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan. During his tenure at KJ, Kaplan also studied philosophy, sociology, and anthropology at Columbia University, where he received his Master of Arts degree in 1909. By the time that Kaplan had left home for JTS and later Columbia, he had been having doubts about Jewish tradition, its origins, and its continuing relevance/value for modern Jewish life. While fulfilling

---

[63] Mel Scult, *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 9.
[64] Ibid., 10, 53.

his duties at KJ, Kaplan realized that he could not in good conscience continue to serve his congregants and be honest with himself.[65]

Solomon Schechter invited Kaplan to direct the Teachers Institute at JTS, and he remained there until his retirement in the 1960s. During his time on the faculty of JTS, Kaplan helped to found numerous Jewish institutions in NYC, such as the Jewish Center (in 1918), a combination of Orthodox synagogue and Young Men's Hebrew Association, and the Society for the Advancement of Judaism (in 1922), a place that later served as a central bastion of Kaplanian thought in the mid- to late-twentieth century. As well, he published numerous articles, books, journals, and kept a thorough personal diary, all through which he articulated, refined, and disseminated his school of thought, Reconstructionism.

Kaplanian Thought

Kaplan's thought, accessed via his formal written treatises, but also in his diaries that Mel Scult edited and annotated, preserves the aforementioned struggle of living between the norm and its aberration. In order to arrive at a general understanding of Kaplanian thought, it is necessary to see it as responding to and being deeply engaged with the prevailing religious conceptions of his time. Thus, we can start with the notion of revelation. This phenomenon is traditionally understood to mean that God gave the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. This is to say, Judaism traditionally conceives of its founding text (comprising its laws, narratives, etc.) as being of divine origin. Therefore, to briefly encapsulate the biblical criticism of this time, if the Torah turns out to be a late document, or numerous documents later edited together, written or edited after the death of Moses, even after the community's later exile, etc., then revelation is a fallacy; it ceases to be divine and instead becomes a human creation.

---

[65] Ibid., 55.

Rather than accept revelation as a mythical event of divine intervention, or as solely a human creation, Kaplan took a middle path and understood it according to its function in Jewish life, regardless its origin.[66] The Torah, along with its story of being revealed, inspires humans and directs their behavior morally and ritually, and Judaism sees this process occurring in the writings of later rabbinical texts, thus renewing its relevance to life.[67]

This stance also places into question the traditional understanding of a supernatural God, something shared by Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative Jews even today. For Kaplan, however, faith in God stems not from God's supernaturalism, but rather from assumptions that underlie human ideals. In Kaplan's understanding, the supernatural refers to the acceptance of a supreme being, a creator and governor of the universe, who is the source of laws and ideals. Kaplan's theology is based more on naturalism, which is distinct from the supernatural, it refers to a force or spirit, or process, not an entity. He advocated a predicate, not a subject, theology. In this scheme of theological transnaturalism, God is conceived of as the life of the universe, an underlying order and urge toward growth, the force interrelated to all things that fosters creativity. God can be likened to the sum of all things, "making a cosmos out of chaos."[68]

In such a theology, salvation means fulfillment, moral perfection, peace in the social realm, and completeness – both socially and individually. Instead of referring to God as the one who is loving, generous, merciful, etc., God can be spoken of as a quality, such as Love is divine, or Mercy is holiness.[69] Kaplan is well-known for saying that "God is the power that makes for salvation." The existence of these qualities is based on their interrelationship, and then they help to lead toward betterment, they can be dubbed divine, for instance. Such ideals are

---

[66] Ibid., 119-20.
[67] Ibid., 126.
[68] Ibid., 274.
[69] Ibid., 134-35.

transcendent of individuals, and they have supreme value, even though they were not issued by a supernatural entity.[70] Humanity and human groups conceived of them, and allowed for the conditions to actualize them.

Based on his presumption that the ordered universe and world are structured in such a way that human ideals can in fact be realized, having faith in the realization of those ideals stems from humanity's belief in the ability that people can overcome limitations, can make the possible actual, and can strive together to create a better world.[71] In Kaplan's worldview, the role of religion is to help in achieving salvation; that is the goal of life, and striving for it gives meaning to life, for it is each individual's achieving of their own potential.[72]

In other words, as moderns, Kaplan believed that humans are convinced that society can be redeemed and that the structure of reality exists so as to allow for the expression of all capacities of human personalities, enabling individuals to do their best, to bear difficulties and suffering, and to allow them to thrive in the actualities of life. The belief in God is a human will toward salvation/redemption, and it consists of eliminating everything that prevents humans from self-expression, cooperation, and achieving satisfaction. This belief is a process of human striving. The idea of God, then, is as a power that makes for salvation, and this power is necessarily situated, ideal, and speaks to what collectivities want and what is possible in respective places and times.

Notions of law and morality, for instance, arrive from the group of which an individual is a part, and these group developments help to determine what should be striven for and how that pursuit is undertaken.[73] Furthermore, these developments and their meanings change over time.

---

[70] Ibid., 138.
[71] Ibid., 113-14, 144-45.
[72] Ibid., 60, 158.
[73] Ibid., 40, 96-97.

With regard to the system of commandments (*mitzvot*), especially regarding a particular belief or practice, for example, Kaplan would ask what function it originally fulfilled, how this function has changed over time, throughout Jewish experience, whether or not this particular practice still serves the same function, and if not, what could take its place and achieve the same goal.[74] *Mitzvot* and rituals function to attune individuals to the divine aspect in life, promote moral development, and connect individuals to their social groups,[75] and generally speaking, Kaplan was not in favor of changing them unless an argument could be made for communal reconstruction. But changes did occur, marking his approach to Judaism as an aberration against the norm.

The fact that *mitzvot* were not issued from a supernatural God, but rather are customs/*minhagim* that came from the Jewish people, does not make them less imperative. Kaplan argued that the religious observances, *mitzvot*, and rituals (what he dubbed "folkways" instead of conceptualizing them legalistically, as they are traditionally understood) are the product of the Jewish people's search for meaning through time and across space, and they are divine to the extent that they express principles that aid in living a good life. As such, one's duty to them comes from one's obligation to care to live a Jewish life, and a life lived conscientiously within community.[76]

In contrast to Reform and Conservative Judaism, which Kaplan stated embodied sets of beliefs that presume a rational image of the universe in addition to rituals and customs, it was Kaplan's reconstructed Jewish thought that encapsulated not only rational beliefs of the world and of the commandments through which one lives in it, but also how to strengthen the life

---

[74] Ibid., 78, 178.
[75] Ibid., 79.
[76] Ibid., 239-41.

energy of the Jewish people itself. Kaplan believed that Judaism is not solely a belief system, but a group system that also included the means to the fulfillment of each member.[77] In this system, the individual must be considered from within the context of the community, and an individual can transcend themselves through relations with other individuals. The group's goals (for salvation) remain mere ideas and ideals until they are enacted through commandments, translated into Torah, in a daily effort to achieve fulfillment and apply justice and mercy.[78]

Conclusion

Through the use of Mary Douglas's Grid-Group Analysis as a framework through which to gain the vocabulary for productive comparison, it is evident that the logical groups one ought to juxtapose with each other are Masorti Judaism and Kaplanian thought, both being low-grid, low-group. To state it plainly, previous comparisons between Masorti Judaism and American Conservative Judaism have constructed the object of their study to be similar to comparing apples and oranges. They share minimal resemblances, and dismissing the comparison tout court serves to further entrench the binaries of previous comparisons: Masorti Judaism to an Orthodox norm/ideal, which then identifies Masorti practice and behavior as aberrant. American Conservative Judaism, then, is understood by Masortim as also aberrant, but also seen derogatorily through unhelpful Israeli binaries and understandings of Judaism; this is unproductive, does not aid in intra-Jewish dialogue, and does not advance any academic appreciation of comparison.

Through an exploration of the contexts in which *Masortiyut* and Kaplan emerged, developed, and in which their adherents live out their ideals, it is clear that a juxtaposition of these groups is more akin to comparing apples to apples. Douglas's Analysis allows us to see and

---

[77] Ibid., 81.
[78] Ibid., 175-76.

articulate how these two groups struggle to advance even among themselves any coherent, let alone in a systematized fashion, any religious ideal that also is implementable in practice. *Kashrut*, the observance of Shabbat, and keeping religious rituals, for example, are hailed by both groups as important to Jewish life, to creating a sense of Jewishness in life, and allow one to feel as though they are living out a core of Jewish existence. Yet, what this looks like (both to outsiders and members) depends on the particular community and household.

What coheres the group together, generally speaking loyalty and salvation, imply a close relationship among members, both spatially and temporally. Decisions are made in both groups with an acknowledgment of past dictates, but also with a realization that relevance is partially determined by context and what will allow one to feel connected but also individually fulfilled. While there exist in both groups examples of practices or beliefs that may seemingly be too far afield to allow for helpful comparison, such as Kaplan's transnatural/non-supernatural theology or Masorti veneration of saints, when assessed through Douglas's Analysis, it is possible to articulate similarities around what is authoritative and legitimate in ways that a comparison between low-grid/low-group and high-grid/high-group does not support.

For example, in comparing low-grid/low-group (Masorti) with low-grid/low-group (Kaplan), one can see "inconsistencies" in behavior born from loyalty to ancestors over rabbis versus non-observance of *halakha* born from a group decision about how to perform a folkway in productive ways. Each group exhibits high emic understandings of group boundaries, acceptability, and understandings of what is important or necessary. Each group may seem to be aberrant, but the origins of the aberration are quite similar.

On the contrary, in a comparison between low-grid/low-group (Masorti) and high-grid/high-group (American Conservative), what similarities they have (e.g., belief in a

supernatural God) may in fact serve to further distance them from each other. What is authoritative is different (family versus institutionalized re-conceptions of *halakha*), to what they are obligated/loyal is different (tradition versus reconceptualized rabbinic authority), etc. To juxtapose groups within the same quadrant allows for more nuanced readings of one to the other in ways not supported when comparing groups quadrants apart.

Works Cited

Bilu, Yoram. "Dreams and the Wishes of the Saint." In *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies*, edited by Harvey E. Goldberg, 285-313. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.

Brubaker, Rogers. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Buzaglo, Meir. "The Masorti." In *Rab-tarbwtiywt bmibḥan hayiśr'eliywt*, edited by Ohad Nachtomy, 153-62. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2005. (Hebrew)

_____. *A Language for the Faithful: Thoughts on Tradition*. Jerusalem: Keter, 2009. (Hebrew)

Douglas, Mary. *Cultural Bias*. London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1978.

Kaplan, Mordecai M. *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Vol. 1: 1913-1934,* edited by Mel Scult. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001.

_____. *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan, Vol. II: 1934-1941*, edited by Mel Scult. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016.

Leon, Nissim. "The Secular Origins of Mizrahi Traditionalism." *Israel Studies* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 22-42.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. "Of Being-in-Common." In *Community at Loose Ends*, edited by the Miami Theory Collective, 1-12. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Picard, Avi. "Like a Phoenix: The Renaissance of Sephardic/Mizrahi Identity in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s." *Israel Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 1-25.

Saadya Gaon. *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, ed. Alexander Altmann. In *3 Jewish Philosophers*, eds. Hans Lewy, Alexander Altmann, and Isaak Heinemann. New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2006.

Scult, Mel. *The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

Shokeid, Moshe. "Cultural Ethnicity in Israel: The Case of Middle Eastern Jews' Religiosity." *AJS Review* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 1984): 247-71.

Spinoza, Benedict de. *A Theologico-Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*. Translated by R.H.M. Elwes New York: Dover Publications, 1951.

Yadgar, Yaacov. "Transcending the 'Secularization vs. Traditionalization' Discourse: Jewish-Israeli Traditionists, the Post-Secular, and the Possibilities of Multiculturalism." In *The Multicultural Challenge in Israel*, edited by Avi Sagi and Ohad Nachtomy, 150-79. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009.

_____. *Secularism and Religion in Jewish-Israeli Politics: Traditionists and Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2011.

_____. "Jewish Secularism and Ethno-National Identity in Israel: The Traditionalist Critique." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (Oct. 2011): 467-81.

_____ and Charles S. Liebman. "Beyond the Religious-Secular Dichotomy: Masortim in Israel." In *Religion or Ethnicity: Jewish Identities in Evolution*, edited by Zvi Gitelman, 171-92. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009.

_____. "A Post-Secular Look at Tradition: Toward a Definition of 'Traditionism.'" *Telos* 156 (Fall 2011): 77-98.