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SPIN, SWEAT, and SHAKHARIT?
WHERE THE SPIRITUALITY OF AMERICA'S HEALTH AND
WELLNESS CULTURE MEETS JUDAISM

SAMMY KANTER

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion
Rabbinical Program
Los Angeles, California

Advisor: Dr. Leah Hochman

Abstract

America is increasingly becoming a country of people who identify as having no religion. Even among America's Jews, fewer and fewer practice the religious aspects of Jewish tradition and opt for other cultural or ethical markers of belonging (as seen in the 2020 Pew Study of American Jews). Yet, this decline in religious behavior does not tell the whole story of American Jewish religiosity. The Pew studies also show high numbers of Americans with no religion and non-observant Jews that report belief in a higher power. Upon closer examination, however, Americans are practicing a remix of religious practices. For example, a Jew in one's 20s might find community in a Jewish kickball league or try to make sense of the world through astrology and/or study Taylor Swift lyrics as sacred text. The "Remixed" are filling their spiritual needs outside of traditional religion. In the past 25 years, America's health and wellness sector has seen an explosion of options to take care of one's body and soul simultaneously. By using spiritual, biblically charged language, fostering community, and empowering spiritual gurus, companies like SoulCycle and CrossFit attract thousands of people annually who report coming for the workout and the spiritual benefits. This research explores what about these companies appears to capture the time, energy, and dollars of America's Millennials and Gen Zs. By exploring its overlap with Jewish thought, this thesis seeks to place health and wellness spirituality within the Jewish conversation and to encourage organized Jewish communities to understand health and wellness spirituality in a new way. By exploring how these health and wellness experience foster connection to transcendence, one another, and a spiritual leader, I conclude that Jewish communities could use these experiences to become more relevant and spiritual for today's spiritual seeker.

Acknowledgements

Coming into rabbinical school, I dreamed of completing a project like this. I am incredibly grateful I had the faculty, coursework, internships, and general support to be in a place to fulfill this dream. Thank you to Dr. Leah Hochman, who helped me craft this crazy idea into something I hope resonates with many. You guided and shaped my vision, and I am grateful for your support and thoughtful questions and edits. Thank you to Rabbi Dr. Dvora Weisberg, who convinced me to go to the Los Angeles campus because of her commitment to create the unique rabbinical school journey I sought. Dvora, you have guided me through the high highs and low lows of school, and I hope your care and leadership shines through this work. Thank you to Jeremy Leigh, who changed the way I look at the world, Israel, the Jewish people, and sociology in general. Thank you to Rabbi Josh Mikutis, Jane Weitzman, and the JDC team for taking me on a journey to explore Jewish Peoplehood and making it such a core part of my Jewish identity and my rabbinate. Thank you to SoulCycle instructors Olivia Ward, Melanie Griffith, Parker Radcliffe, David Zint, Lisa Moloshok, and Dacoda Clarke. You all gave me a sense of spirituality I had not found before, and my rabbinical school journey and this thesis is inspired by your wisdom and energy. Thank you to my family and friends for listening to me talk about SoulCycle for 10 years, and thank you for playing along with me when I explain how this topic is a real academic topic! Lastly, thank you to my rock and partner for life, my husband Zvi. I knew you were a keeper when you immediately embraced my passion for workout classes. Thank you walking beside me through life and making life's journeys a joyful adventure.

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A Religion of Nones

“It’s in our DNA to want to believe in something, to feel something, alongside other people seeking the same....Life is much too peculiar to go at it all alone,”¹ wrote linguistics scholar Amanda Montell in her book, *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*. For generations, organized religion has been a primary modality for connecting to transcendence. Yet, as the most recent Pew Research Study has shown, America is becoming a country of religious Nones (people who choose not to affiliate with a specific denomination). As the largest religious demographic in America today, there are now 81 million Nones and counting.² Like others who study religious behavior, author and theology scholar Tara Isabella Burton describes Nones as people who report having no religion. This rising segment of the American population is present among the Jewish community as well. In the 2020 Pew Study of US Jews, 40% of Jews ages 18-29 as identify as a Jew of no-religion, or a None.³ In a sharp increase from the 16% of those 65+ or 19% of those ages 50-64 who identify as a None, these statistics caused alarm among the organized Jewish community about the changing involvement in Jewish life.⁴ These Jews still identify culturally, ethnically, or by family background, however, this trend represents a major shift in how Jews perceive their Jewishness in America.

These statistics, however, do not tell the whole story. In a 2018 Pew Study of all Americans, 72% of Nones reported they believed in a higher power or spiritual force distinct from that which

¹ Amanda Montell, *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2021), 284.

² Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites* //is there a full title?// (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), 16.

³ “Jewish Americans in 2020,” Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.

⁴ “Jewish Americans in 2020.”

is described in the Bible.⁵ Within the Jewish community, similar numbers were described in that same Pew Report. Three-quarters of American Jews reported that they believed in God or some spiritual force in the universe. Yet, twice as many reported believing in a spiritual force outside of the God in the Torah. Of the Jewish Nones, 66% reported that they believe in a higher power.⁶

These numbers tell an interesting story about Jewish American society and religion. The research shared by the Pew Research Center illustrates a Jewish world in which Jews are proud to be Jewish and feel connected to Jewish communities in a multitude of ways. At the same time, fewer and fewer are connecting to Judaism through religion though the number of believers in a higher power remains high. These shifts lead to what renowned theology scholar and Presbyterian minister Linda Mercadante and other scholars call the rise of the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR).⁷ In her research, she plainly states that most people look for meaning in their life, and they also try to make sense of faith and hope. The belief in something greater than oneself, desire to connect with a larger reality, promotion of rituals and practices, and behavioral expectations are all components of spirituality and religion that, Mercadante sees, people are constantly seeking.⁸ Social science studies report that people who are connected to religious beliefs report positive relationships with health, happiness, and the ability to face life’s stressors.⁹

⁵ “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?,” Pew Research Center, April 25, 2018, www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/ in Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 17.

⁶ “Jewish Identity and Belief,” Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/>.

⁷ Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

⁸ Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 5-7.

⁹ Adam B. Cohen, Azim F. Shariff, and Peter C. Hill, “The Accessibility of Religious Belief,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 42 (2008) 1408-17 in Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 10.

However, Mercadante wrote that movement to spirituality outside of organized religion “is a way to get out from under the external constraints of authorities, traditions, or institutional bonds, and personalize one’s spiritual quest.”¹⁰ This movement, she believes, is sparking a new level of spiritual interest among Americans.¹¹

Harvard Divinity scholars Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston call this phenomenon the unbundling of religious identities. In today’s Internet defined generation, people are more willing to mix and match religious ideas and practices than ever before which can lead to an internally “mixed” identity.¹² The “Religiously Remixed,” as Burton calls them, might get their sense of community from one place, their sense of meaning from another, practice wellness culture rituals unrelated to traditional faith communities, and see their life’s purpose as political.¹³ She calls many of the Religiously Remixed practices “intuitional” religions, that is, the practices reject institutional hierarchies and physical doctrines.¹⁴ She argues that these “new religions” share “the grand narrative that oppressive societies and unfairly narrow expectations stymie natural—and sometimes even divine—human potential.”¹⁵ Burton describes the Remixed as demanding agency and creative ownership of their spiritual lives as well as being suspicious of moral truth claims not rooted in their own experience. They value authenticity and one’s emotional experience as key indicators for interpreting the meaning and purpose a practice might offer.¹⁶

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Tara Isabella Burton, “What a ‘Spiritual’ Beauty Subscription Box Says About Religion Today,” Vox, November 13, 2018, www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/11/13/17977758/moonbox-religious-unbundling-spiritual-subscription-box-witches in Burton, *Strange Rites*, 23.

¹³ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

With this mindset, the Remixed are ripe for fulfilling their spiritual needs in a multitude of untraditional areas. From an intense fandom for a sports team or the Marvel Cinematic Universe or *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* or Taylor Swift songs to social justice activism, from astrology to wellness fads, the spiritual marketplace as described by Burton is overflowing with opportunities. One of the most popular outlets for the Remixed, currently a \$4.2 trillion dollar industry in the US,¹⁷ is health and wellness culture.

The History of Fitness Spirituality

In the late 1960s, Americans began to view daily exercise as a good idea. According to Montell, the 1968 fitness book *Aerobics* convinced both men and women to begin to take working out more seriously. The 1970s and 1980s was the era of Jazzercise, a dance aerobic workout that combined dance aerobics and popular music; Montell identifies it as the first fitness activity that created a sense of community alongside the health and wellness benefits.¹⁸ The 1980s and 1990s brought a further professionalization of fitness with the rise of big box gyms and health clubs like 24-Hour Fitness. Two key developments came out of this fitness evolution that led to the spiritual side of the wellness culture we see today. Toward the end of the 20th century, the Hindu practice of yoga became a part of American culture. Dating back 2500 years and part of Hindu spiritual practice, the popularized yoga Americans practiced emphasized meditation, stillness, and a series of postures and movement to build mindfulness and

¹⁷ Ibid., 240.

¹⁸ Montell, *Cultish*, 210.

discipline.¹⁹ As traditional yoga morphed into a way to strengthen the body and increase inflexibility, yoga practices “planted the seed that fitness studios could be more than just places to change your body; they could be intimate temples of emotional well-being, even spiritual enlightenment.”²⁰

Simultaneously, the year 2000 brought the rise of what Montell calls “cult fitness.” Boutique fitness studios that focused on one activity sprouted up and offered clients the opportunity to do specialized workouts in a studio. With the promise of inspirational mantras and communities of new friends, these fitness brands began to take the spirituality mindset from yoga and apply it to their respective exercise offerings. Clients and participants projected meaning on to their studios, implicitly and explicitly, and leaders of different companies preached a “potent ideology” of a “deeply personal experience.”²¹ Montell describes the use of a religiously infused vocabulary with what she called “biblical undertones” of cleanse, detox, purity, discipline, and perfection; said the repetition of such language in each class helped to convince listeners to believe they were on a path to the “perfect” life.²²

According to Montell, it was not a coincidence that a spiritual, boutique fitness movement exploded in popularity when it did. In the early 2010s, the noticeable decline in religious participation coincided with a decline in trust by American millennials with their healthcare experience. A 2018 study conducted by the Multiple Chronic Conditions Resource Center illustrated this trend, with 81% of millennials reporting that they were unsatisfied with everything

¹⁹ Montell, *Cultish*, 210-211.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 213.

²² Ibid., 236.

from insurance costs to race and gender bias²³ (one would imagine this problem has only worsened after the COVID-19 pandemic). Montell saw these factors as the perfect storm for an explosion of the Remixed finding their spirituality in wellness culture. She likens exercise to a new type of worship: “Like church, fitness brands became both a social identity and a code by which to lead your life.”²⁴ Montell illustrates this point by describing workouts as a place for community building, customs and rituals, and the sense that the workout study was in some way holy. Adding into the desire for meaning making, the rise of reported loneliness and the development of social media personalities who attempted to influence others (with aspirational body standards) created a more opportunities for Remixed to view the entire wellness industry as “godlike.”²⁵

SoulCycle and CrossFit as Test Cases

“Take your journey, Change your body, Find your SOUL.”

These words greet riders upon an entrance to SoulCycle. Founded in 2006 with one small studio on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, SoulCycle is an indoor cycling boutique fitness studio that revolutionized the fitness industry with its style of workout, emphasis on community building, and spiritually focused brand. Founders Julie Rice and Elizabeth Cutler set out to create a workout class they wanted to go that was both physically demanding and spiritually fulfilling. A class like this did not exist at the time in New York City according to Rice,

²³ Ibid., 214.

²⁴ Ibid., 216.

²⁵ Ibid., 216-217.

and SoulCycle set out to exercise the mind, body, and soul.²⁶ SoulCycle changed the industry through its pay-per-class model, charging between \$30-36 dollars per class.²⁷ SoulCycle saw their instructors not just fitness coaches but also as spiritual guides. To find the right talent for this role, in an unusual step for a fitness company, the founders created a professional training program, offered a substantial benefit package, and encouraged a sort of spiritual preaching by instructors. By 2020, SoulCycle had expanded to 99 studios across the US, Canada, and UK, established a clothing line, founded a Sirius XM radio station, and curated an at-home cycling experience with a stationary bike and virtual classes. Exact ridership numbers are hard to establish; SoulCycle claimed they had 10,378 riders per day in 2015 and almost a million purchased rides that year.²⁸ Their social media presence is currently robust with 385K followers on Instagram. It is hard to tell whether the ridership numbers remain the same after the COVID-19 pandemic; SoulCycle has since downsized to 83 studios.²⁹

A general SoulCycle class is 45 minutes on a spin bike in a candle-lit room. The instructor rides a stationary bike on a well-lit podium in the center of the room as serves as the fitness coach and spiritual leader as they guide the riders through a class based on SoulCycle's

²⁶ Tim Ferriss, host, "Julie Rice — Co-Founding SoulCycle, Taming Anxiety, and Mastering Difficult Conversations (#372)," The Tim Ferriss Show (podcast), May 30, 2019, accessed January 18, 2023, <https://tim.blog/2019/05/30/julie-rice/>

²⁷ Jessica Hichs, "A brief history of SoulCycle: How a cycling company sparked hate and hype for an entire industry," *B2*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.businessofbusiness.com/articles/history-of-soulcycle-biking-fitness-classes/>

²⁸ Adele Chapin, "10 Incredible SoulCycle Facts Revealed In Its IPO Filing," *Racked*, June 30, 2015, <https://www.racked.com/2015/7/30/9075191/soulcycle-ipo-revenue>

²⁹ Meredith Clark, "SoulCycle sparks debate after bribing Peloton riders to turn in their bikes in exchange for free classes," *yahoo finance*, July 27, 2022, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/soulcycle-sparks-debate-bribing-peloton-205004565.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAA-GNAZcokK91mo8tQOILmo2C9eZ7xE197RjggA0D30uWY8VjiVvNgAaAb9mpiPbFcgesby-bOB6FACgjEM_xtV6QJQIXZsSCMG2iU08FQx1LMmu8V5PwjG5wdzZbsLWGy7LqQKXAbvtqRT0-D5OWKHnj6CKJ_-vmbp4Ok7eAoepel

“freedom with a framework” model.³⁰ The model allows for the charismatic instructor to curate a workout, music, and spirituality that is authentic to themselves. Music is another big element of each workout, and every action in a SoulCycle class fits with the beat of the music. As ter Kuile and Thurston describe, “Every SoulCycle ‘journey’ has a similar arc, which peaks during a hill ballad when riders turn up the resistance dial on their stationary bike and climb uphill in the dark.”³¹

While SoulCycle is a challenging, calorie burning physical workout, many riders agree with Senior Director of Brand Experience, Master Instructor from the beginning, Melanie Griffith that SoulCycle is “bigger than a workout.”³² In a private conversation, Rice described the creation of this magic and transformational experience as a moving meditation; she said the body aligns with the music and surrounding riders to create a connected feeling. She remembered that the development of the formula for the class experience was crucial to the brand’s experience and success: “[The experience] became tribal...the music was amazing and an instructor is telling you that you could be more than you thought you could be.”³³

Within this SoulCycle experience and community lie playful and serious comparisons to religion. The brand plays with and uses New Age religious language like calling the studio a sanctuary. Scholar of religion Dr. Cody Musselman wrote in an article about SoulCycle that “The spirituality of SoulCycle is a pluralist (and at time appropriative) embrace of all religions,

³⁰ Ferriss, host, “Julie Rice — Co-Founding SoulCycle”

³¹ Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston, “How We Gather (Part 2): SoulCycle as Soul Sanctuary,” *On Being*, July 9, 2016, <https://onbeing.org/blog/how-we-gather-part-2-soulcycle-as-soul-sanctuary/>

³² Melanie Griffith, interview by author, June 14, 2022.

³³ Ferriss, host, “Julie Rice — Co-Founding SoulCycle”

distilled to their essence: energy.”³⁴ Energy is the “spiritual currency,”³⁵ Musselman writes, and instructors use New Age concepts to inform what that energy is. Instructor Griffith described the beginning of a SoulCycle class as follows: “Everyone’s coming in here with different energy...we use the energy from each of you and mix it together in here to lift each other up.”³⁶ Musselman believes SoulCycle’s principles around energy is successful from its roots in the New Thought movement. An originally 19th century movement created to harness powers of the mind to impact the material world, New Thought blends liberal Christianity with Eastern Meditative practices with transcendentalism. According to Musselman, the modern New Thought is seen throughout wellness culture. Its philosophy allows one to be self-centered and do what they want in life, yet one can also manifest “a life of health and riches.”³⁷ Musselman suggests SoulCycle is a byproduct of New Thought through its use of energy, manifesting positivity, and its play on meditation. I will take up the connection of New Thought and SoulCycle more specifically in the second chapter.

As a rider at SoulCycle since January 2013, SoulCycle is a special place for me. The SoulSanctuary, the name for the spin studio, has held me through times of joy (birthday rides, my bachelor party, a groom ride with my husband in honor of our wedding) and through many tears (heartbreak over lost love, anxiety, and the day Donald Trump was elected president). After 540 rides at studios in New York City, Miami, Los Angeles, and Washington DC, even as a

³⁴ Cody Musselman, "The Politics of Charisma and the Cohesion of SoulCycle's #SoulFam Tribe," *American Examples, Vol. 2*, eds. Mike Altman, Prea Persaud, and Samah Choudhury (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2022) 5.

³⁵ Musselman, "The Politics of Charisma," 5.

³⁶ Melanie Griffith, SoulCycle class attended by author (SoulCycle TriBeCa, New York, NY, June 10, 2022).

³⁷ Musselman, "The Politics of Charisma," 6.

rabbinical student, I consider SoulCycle to consistently be my spiritual home for the past 9 years. As one of the many riders who speak of spirituality in a class, I believe this brand calls for a closer examination of what religious and/or spiritual elements are working for SoulCycle.

CrossFit: “In WOD We Trust”

As the motto for a CrossFit box in Connecticut, the Workout of the Day (WOD), or ultimate CrossFit challenge of each class, plays with the wording of this famous American tag line. Like SoulCycle, CrossFit is a spiritual or even religious experience.³⁸ Founding the company in the year 2000, Greg Glassman and his then wife Lauren started CrossFit as a combined workout that brought together the close attention of a personal trainer with a sense of building community. As a former gymnast and personal trainer, Glassman set out to create a fitness program that combined strength training and cardio into short exercise combinations that early adopters described as challenging but efficient. When he started posting his WOD exercises online in 2001, CrossFit.com was born. According to Musselman, he never imagined this would be the beginning of an international spiritual community.³⁹

The WOD was built around functional fitness, or movements that mimic everyday tasks, and most of them can be done with little or no equipment. Because of this intentionality, the workout became noticed by military personnel, particularly those without a lot of workout

³⁸ Ragan Sutterfield, “The Cult of CrossFit: How the Workout Can Bring Out the Best (and Worst) of Faith,” *Washington Post*, March 24, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/03/24/the-cult-of-crossfit-how-the-workout-can-bring-out-the-best-and-worst-of-faith/>

³⁹ Cody Musselman, “‘Be More Human’: CrossFit, Reebok, and Sporting Consumerism,” *Religion and Sport in North America*, eds. Jeffrey Scholes and Randall Balmer. (New York: Routledge, 2022) 7.

equipment. As Glassman built the virtual discussion boards on CrossFit.com, users began to post about their workouts. What started as specific details about the weight lifted or repetitions completed transitioned into encouragement or “light smack-talk” between users.⁴⁰ Once the discussion board activity and community grew, an insider language started forming online alongside Glassman’s in-person studio.⁴¹ Glassman began writing content on Crossfit.com, and his writing on his philosophy of fitness, guide to eating, and wellness tips became more widely known, read, and popular. When Glassman created a common purpose in the training by calling the workout to be in anticipation of the “the unknown and the unknowable,” according to Musselman, the spirituality of CrossFit was born.⁴²

In 2002, a devotee asked Glassman to open a gym with the same name and methodology, and the CrossFit expansion began to take form. CrossFit studios, known as “Boxes,” grew from 50 in 2004 to 5,000 by 2012. By 2018, a CrossFit centered news outlet reported 15,000 Boxes worldwide.⁴³ This explosive growth led to a massive and extremely dedicated following, complete with a shared language around the WOD, a charismatic leader in Glassman, and even shared dietary practices the site would put out. As the pride in the brand grew, comparisons to organized religion began to pop up. A CrossFit blog reported that “CrossFit comes into our lives and for most, makes a huge impact. That’s right, it changes our lives.”⁴⁴ While the religious talk

⁴⁰ Musselman, “Be More Human”, 7.

⁴¹ J.C. Herz, *Learning to Breathe Fire: The Rise of CrossFit and the Primal Future of Fitness* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2014) in Musselman, “Be More Human”, 8.

⁴² Musselman, “Be More Human”, 8.

⁴³ Scott Henderson, “CrossFit’s Explosive Affiliate Growth by the Numbers,” *Morning Chalk Up*, October 23, 2018, <https://morningchalkup.com/2018/10/23/crossfits-explosive-affilaite-growth-by-the-numbers/>. In *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁴ CrossFit Valdosta, “CrossFit Is a Cult,” *CrossFit Valdosta* (blog), June 9, 2017, <https://crossfitvaldosta.com/crossfit-is-a-cult/>. In *Ibid.*, 10.

around CrossFit grew, unintentionally CrossFit found an audience with Evangelical Christians. Some of the leaders in the CrossFit movement were Evangelical Christians, and Musselman noticed a series of CrossFit prayer groups or communities connected to churches sprouted up.⁴⁵

While SoulCycle's spirituality is connected to an alignment of energy and movement, CrossFit's spirituality is about finding a state of being that seems natural. In a CrossFit video, Glassman said CrossFit strives to "collectively advance the art and science of optimizing human performance" by returning humans to our natural state.⁴⁶ In CrossFit's philosophy, the processed food, sedentary lifestyle of modern life, and loneliness plaguing society are unnatural, and CrossFit helps guide followers back to the natural state of humanity. That natural state includes eating meat and vegetables and strengthening the body in ways the body is meant to be strengthened. Musselman describes this philosophy as the path CrossFit takes to promote the natural state of human body in the present so that human bodies will be more able to face the unknown of the future.⁴⁷

My primary experience with CrossFit was at the Jerusalem Box during my year-in-Israel with the rabbinical program of Hebrew Union College. CrossFit became a source of stress relief, community building, and fitness outlet throughout the year. The spirituality for me came in moments when my body surprised me with sheer strength to complete a WOD in a way I never imagined. That raw, brute strength produced a spiritual high that I found to be a powerful reminder of all I could accomplish. I also found the community building aspect to be meaningful,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶ CrossFit®, *Greg Glassman: The World's Most Vexing Problem*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPujtrae_WM&feature=youtu.be. In Ibid., 12.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 12.

and I built relationships across religious denominational lines and ethnic backgrounds. One of the most powerful conversations I have ever had with an Arab-Israeli occurred when we were weightlifting partners at the Box. Helping each other find our true, untapped strength, we opened up to each other about our lives and stories in a beautiful way. Although I am not active at CrossFit now, I have fond memories of that Box.

Definitions of Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality is a word I use often throughout this thesis. While spirituality can mean different things to different people and is not easily defined, two scholars shaped my idea how spirituality relates to the health and wellness world. In his book *Spiritual but not Religious*, author and scholar of religion Robert Fuller wrote, "Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the greater cosmic scheme of things.... An idea or practice is 'spiritual' when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life."⁴⁸ Fuller goes on to argue that spirituality can be found in various places or moments throughout one's life, both within and outside of traditional religious institutions. This sentiment pervades this research, and I believe it is a core element to understanding how fitness can be spiritual.

Burton builds a definition of religion that allows me to deploy it as a way of encompassing contemporary spiritual seekers. Renowned Jewish and French sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote about collective celebration, what he calls "collective effervescence." According to Burton, this

⁴⁸ Robert Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8-9.

idea is a “shared intoxication participants experience when they join together in a symbolically significant, socially cohesive action.”⁴⁹ Whether it be a rave dance party or social justice activism or a workout class, Burton sees collective effervescence as a core element of the new religious practices many people seek today. Based on emotional intuition, self-creation and improvement, and an aestheticized experience,⁵⁰ these new practices greatly informed the impetus for this research.

Using SoulCycle and CrossFit as the primary examples, I set out in this paper to illustrate how the Remixed might be using health and wellness culture to fulfill their quest to be spiritual but not religious. Inspired by the writing by Harvard Divinity scholar Casper ter Kuile and his book *The Power of Ritual*, I will use the following definition of spirituality to serve as a framework for finding the connection between Judaism and SoulCycle and CrossFit. Ter Kuile wrote that spirituality is, “a feeling of Connectedness to something greater than oneself, experience through cultivating a relationship with oneself, one’s community, one’s environment, and one’s perception of the transcendent.”⁵¹ Based on the central role of the rabbi in Jewish tradition, I added connection to the *rav*, a dynamic spiritual leader, as another category of comparison alongside connection to transcendence and connection to one’s community. These categories guide the search for Judaism in fitness companies in today’s America, and it helps us consider what this means for the organized Jewish community going forward. It is my hope that readers

⁴⁹ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 27.

⁵⁰ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 2.

⁵¹ Ter Kuile quotes Sarah E. Koss and Mark D. Holder as saying this quote, although there is no citation listed. Casper ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 23.

will wrestle with how elements of these companies can be infused into our Jewish life today to continue to adapt Judaism to be relevant, dynamic, and meaningful for today's Jewish seekers.

Chapter 1- Connection to Transcendence

“ [Power] is not outside of you, it is all there within, an endless fount, and endless capacity, infinite and endless since it is part of God; you have only to recognize it as such and realize its outward expression.”⁵² In a blind guessing game, these words might seem to belong to a SoulCycle instructor or CrossFit coach. Yet, these words belong Tehilla Lichtenstein, longtime spiritual leader of the Society of Jewish Science. Alongside her husband Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, a major figure in the Jewish Science movement, the Lichtensteins created a platform in the mid-20th century for Jewish New Thought.⁵³

This chapter, surveys modern Jewish thought to draw parallels between the transcendence Jewish thinkers seek and the transcendence created in SoulCycle and CrossFit classes. SoulCycle and CrossFit are filled with references to the divine residing within those who participate in their respective exercise experiences. If God or a higher power can be centered by a person through individual experience, SoulCycle, CrossFit, and Judaism all have different notions about how to access that divine energy and what to do with it once it has been discovered. The ancient Jewish and secular practice of religion as a vehicle to elevate a seeker to an altered spiritual state of being is a major element of health and wellness culture, and this chapter seeks to explore those parallels.

⁵² Tehilla Lichtenstein, “How to Release Your Power” in *Jewish Science Interpreter*, (1961), 19, quoted in Ellen M. Umansky, *From Christian Science to Jewish Science* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 186.

⁵³ Umansky, *From Christian Science*, 63.

“God Within” From the Jewish Science Perspective

As a Reform rabbinical student in the American South in the early 20th century, Morris Lichtenstein became interested in Christian Science during his time at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. He moved to New York City in December of 1921 to assume the leadership of the Jewish New Thought Center (which later became the Society for Jewish Science). This role gave him a platform to speak and teach about Jewish Science, and his beliefs around one’s connection with the self began to proliferate. Writing in the *Jewish Science Observer*, Rabbi Lichtenstein identified two key elements of Jewish Science that prefigure the kinds of connections to transcendence that contemporary health and wellness culture fosters. First, he saw positive thinking as the method to maintain trust in God. Second, he believed that one best expresses the perception of God within oneself through one’s exhibition of health, calmness, peace, and power.⁵⁴

Though a member of the CCAR, Lichtenstein’s Jewish Science theology was radical for the Reform movement and throughout the Jewish world at the time. At a Society of Jewish Science meeting in 1927, Lichtenstein presented the idea that “[God] is the soul of everything that exists, and also, therefore, the very soul of man.”⁵⁵ This description shifted the sense of God promoted by traditional monotheism from a God that was providential, transcendent, and omnipotent to an immanent notion of God. Lichtenstein’s ideas contrasted with many of those of his Reform colleagues who saw God’s will as best expressed through fulfilling the justice-oriented writings

⁵⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁵ Minutes, Annual members meeting of Society of Jewish Science (1927), quoted in Ellen M. Umansky, *From Christian Science to Jewish Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 94.

of the prophets. His idea of divinity promoted that actions would allow Jews to reveal happiness and good health within themselves.⁵⁶

Lichtenstein also had a nontraditional Jewish idea about where and how to pray. In the *Jewish Science Observer*, he wrote,

God's presence within man is manifested by the very life that is in him, by the presence of thought, feeling, emotions. For while it is ours to utilize those powers within us, it is not we who have brought them into existence. Their existence is due to the divine within us. It is the divine in us that we call on to express itself in perfection when we offer these prayers or affirmations. And these prayers are always answered.⁵⁷

This radical mode of connection attempted to change the framework of prayer to a method to get in touch with one's inner divine energy. Lichtenstein argued that conceiving of God within the individual expresses God-self through health and happiness, and God is the "Giver of life and healing."⁵⁸ By harnessing this divine energy through prayer and other spiritual means, the individual can attain courage, strength, joy, and other positivity.⁵⁹

When Morris Lichtenstein died in 1938, Tehilla Lichtenstein succeeded her husband and served as the spiritual leader of the Society of Jewish Science for almost 35 years. She became the first American Jewish woman to serve as a leader of an ongoing Jewish congregation although she was not ordained a rabbi. She wrote more than 500 sermons, essays, and lectures, offered

⁵⁶ Umansky, *From Christian Science*, 98.

⁵⁷ Morris Lichtenstein, *Jewish Science Interpreter I*, (1923), 6, quoted in Ellen M. Umansky, *From Christian Science to Jewish Science* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.

⁵⁸ Morris Lichtenstein, *Jewish Science and Health* (New York: Jewish Science Publishing Co, 1955), 107.

⁵⁹ Umansky, *From Christian Science*, 71.

radio broadcasts and founded the *Jewish Science Interpreter*.⁶⁰ Receiving awards and public accolades from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir, Lichtenstein gained prominence in her own right for her leadership and unique views on God within Judaism. Like her husband, she viewed God's presence and God's goodness as residing within each person.⁶¹ She called Jewish Science a personal religion. To her, Jewish Science was comprised of sacred text, ritual, and ethics alongside wisdom from classic and modern literature, New Thought and Christian Science.⁶²

In her sermons, Lichtenstein spoke often about how God was located within each person. In an essay titled "What do you wish for most?" Lichtenstein wrote, "Jewish Science teaches us that not only is God with us at all times, but that He is within us; that His essence resides in us, and expresses itself through us, through all of us, if we but permit it expression."⁶³ In sermons, she described how each person could access the divine within oneself. Lichtenstein wrote that humans are instruments for God's expression, and she called it one's "sacred duty" to express God's goodness into one's life and the world.⁶⁴ "God's residence" within an individual means that everything a person needs and desires is already present. Joy, peace, serenity, spiritual strength, Lichtenstein preached, is within every individual.⁶⁵ It is therefore on the individual to realize the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 143.

⁶¹ Tehilla Lichtenstein, "Recapitulation", unpublished essay in Tehillah Lichtenstein Papers, American Jewish Archives, n.d. quoted in Umansky, *From Christian Science*, 164.

⁶² Umansky, *From Christian Science*, 168-169.

⁶³ Tehilla Lichtenstein, *Applied Judaism* (New York: Jewish Science Publishing Co, 1989), 56.

⁶⁴ Lichtenstein, *Applied Judaism*, 115.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 239.

possibilities by recognizing the “possibilities for achievement, and therefore also for the tasting of life to the fullest.”⁶⁶

A Paradigm Shift

The New Thought philosophy of the early 19th century in the United States that impacted both the Jewish Science movement and health and wellness culture also influenced Renewal Judaism created by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in the 1970s. This movement was based in New Age religion’s paradigm shift ideology. Schachter-Shalomi taught that Jewish Renewal as a movement was a maturation of Judaism and a response to the contemporary era in human history; Jewish Renewal was a move toward the wider world (rather than away from the world as some Orthodox theologies promoted).⁶⁷ He came to this idea through his own journey in Jewish religious practice and thought. Schachter-Shalomi began his rabbinic career in the Chabad-Lubavitch Movement and was an early emissary of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.⁶⁸ As a man who interacted with multiple Jewish denominations (he received a doctorate from HUC in 1968), he went on to help found the Havurah movement in 1968 and, later, the Jewish Renewal Movement (and its rabbinical school ALEPH).⁶⁹ Schachter-Shalomi taught a theological shift in Judaism that was influenced by New Age thought, metaphysics, and Eastern religious traditions. He taught humans are “nothing but different and developing

⁶⁶ Ibid., 443.

⁶⁷ Shaul Magid, *American Post-Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 126.

⁶⁸ Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 50.

⁶⁹ “Our Founder,” Aleph, accessed January 5, 2023, <https://aleph.org/reb-zalman/>

dimensions of God, informing God about God.”⁷⁰ The way to relate to God is through one’s relationship to the divine within one’s own soul. In an essay entitled “God Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown—Variations on a Kabbalistic Theme [Part 2],” Schachter-Shalomi wrote, “God has become so immanent, so indwelling, that the way to God was no longer via prayer directed ‘upward’ but by going to the core of the core, inside of us.”⁷¹ He emphasized that the path to accessing the divine is located within each person, and the role of prayer is to help each individual of us access that God within oneself.

Theologian and rabbi Arthur Green also teaches a similar idea of divinity as Schachter-Shalomi did. In his book *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition* (2010), Green argues that the religious person of today is not commanded but rather called to God. That call comes from within each person and helps humans create holiness in the world today.⁷² He writes, “Inwardness means that the One is to be found within all beings. We find God by turning in to ourselves.”⁷³ Even more explicit than Schachter-Shalomi, Green suggests finding God by searching within and he uses kabbalistic and eastern religious influences on his teachings. He continues to influence the Jewish Renewal Movement and contemporary Judaism through the rabbis he trains at Hebrew College.

⁷⁰ Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 94.

⁷¹ Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, “God Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown-Variations on a Kabbalistic Theme [part 2],” in *Spectrum 2*, nos. 1 and 2 (2006), 8, quoted in Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 94.

⁷² Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 99.

⁷³ Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), 13, quoted in Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 99-100.

Where is God in SoulCycle?

In the early 21st century in the United States, SoulCycle operates as one of those modalities to discover the divine residing within oneself. “Felt god in soulcycle tonight,” a female in her 20s posted on Twitter; it was a sentiment that was reshared by Soulcycle on Instagram to 2,829 likes.⁷⁴ While occasionally one might say the divine is present in the SoulCycle studio, the more explicit message of the brand teaches that it is possible for a person to access a certain divine energy through the act of the spin ride.

Founder and former co-CEO of SoulCycle Julie Rice created the experience of a SoulCycle class. She is a practicing Reform Jew. Rice talked with me about the Jewish theological connection between a God within and the transcendence to which SoulCycle aims to connect riders on the bike. “Where I’ve worshipped, it’s always been that God believes in you and want you to be the best version of yourself,” Rice said in a Zoom interview. She calls the work of a prayer service at her synagogue, Central Synagogue in New York City, to be an act of self-realization with other people. This self-realization is what Rice believes makes SoulCycle “wildly powerful.” The connection to transcendence is that SoulCycle is “a place to be a part of something bigger than oneself.”⁷⁵

Alex Douglas, a SoulCycle teacher for the past seven years and also a Reform Jew, discussed SoulCycle as having the capacity to connect to something greater than oneself. As a deep believer in the Jewish tradition and God, Douglas said, “You practice religion and faith to

⁷⁴ SoulCycle (@soulcycle), *Instagram*, April 24, 2022. Accessed January 5, 2023.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccvio7dJK6g/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>.

⁷⁵ Julie Rice, interview by author, September 9, 2022.

honor the people that came before you. To trust in yourself, in God.” With her idea of prayer as “connecting and trusting in something greater than you,” Douglas consciously and subconsciously uses these declarations of faith as a backdrop for how she teaches her SoulCycle classes. “SoulCycle helps you explore your own conscience.... SoulCycle was the first time maybe ever where I could be honest with myself.”⁷⁶

In her book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, Tara Isabella Burton roots this theology in modern representations of New Thought which made wellness, personal self-improvement, and self-care into religious experiences.⁷⁷ The theological makeup of the contemporary wellness movement pits the self, both body and soul, against society, specifically rules, expectations, and temptations. As Burton articulates, the attraction of experiences like SoulCycle help contemporary believers to find purpose in life:

We are born good, but we are tricked, by Big Pharma, by processed food, by civilization itself, into living something that falls short of our best life. Our sins, if they exist at all, lie in the insufficient self-attention or self-care: false modesty, undeserved humilities, refusing to shine bright. We have not merely the inalienable right but the moral responsibility to take care of ourselves first before directing any attention to others. We have to listen to ourselves, to behave authentically, in tune with what our intuition dictates...If our bodies were once temples, to use a popular diet mantra, now they’re miniature gods. Our ontological purpose, as human beings, is to live our best life: to shake off the demands of society....⁷⁸

This sort of theological reasoning is clearly present in SoulCycle. The mantras of the instructors almost always relate to what it means to live as one’s best self. I experienced that challenge personally. During the second to last song in a class in June, 2022, Senior Instructor Melanie

⁷⁶ Alex Douglas, interview by author, August 22, 2022.

⁷⁷ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 94.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Griffith challenged riders to remember a time when they looked into the flame of the candles that surround the instructor's podium and needed it as hope of a better day. The placement of such a message near the end of a ride is designed to curate a specific response; called the "Soulful Song," the second to last musical selection explicitly imparts the spiritual message of the class. That day in June, she invited riders to reflect on the light they have found in their journeys and spread that light to others."⁷⁹ Her charge implored riders to see their own strength both how far they have come on their own and to radiate that strength out in order to improve the world. This messaging is shared around 35 minutes into the class, when riders are simultaneously reflecting on the physical journey of their ride. I believe the spiritual effectiveness of SoulCycle lies at the intersection between fitness journey and the spiritual teaching. As Zan Romanoff explains in an article entitled *The Consumerist Church of Fitness Classes*, "The explicit promise that exercise has a spiritual component seems to elevate it to a higher purpose: Instead of focusing solely on the health and attractiveness of the body, it suggests that fitness is a gateway to a much larger and more lasting state of happiness and fulfillment, much like religious practice."⁸⁰

Different instructors have different methods for communicating such a message. Speaking to Romanoff, popular former Los Angeles instructor Angela Davis emphasized the idea of self-construction as a core to the SoulCycle spirituality. She described her goals for her students: "Your thoughts become your words; your words become your actions; your actions

⁷⁹ Attended class taught by Melanie Griffith, June 12, 2022.

⁸⁰ Zan Romanoff, "The Consumerist Church of Fitness Classes," *The Atlantic*, Dec 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/12/my-body-is-a-temple/547346/>

become your habits; your habits become your character; your character becomes your destiny; your destiny becomes your legacy. But it all starts with *who do you think you are.*”⁸¹ This beginning question is a popular New Thought concept, with some scholars believing it originates with Mahatma Ghandi or Margaret Thatcher, and it also drives the SoulCycle theology. Davis describes faith in oneself, through holding out hope of the unseen, as the belief that the Soul Sanctuary exudes.⁸²

Another former master instructor, Olivia Ward, shared in a personal conversation her understanding of the spirituality within the classes she teaches. “I feel like it is really important to use broad brush strokes of truth in SoulCycle. Truth transcends every religion. ...I believe truth is truth and that is the foundation of God. You can broad with big ideas, I’ve talked about really hard things in there, but always keeping the truth as the center.”⁸³ When asked what these truths are, Ward shared that all of her inspiration are truths that are authentic to her based on what is on her mind, what she is feeling that day, or what she is reading about. Ward illustrates a key element of this spirituality in that it is subjective to each instructor and rider, yet also broad enough to relate to many.

SoulCycle riders report powerful experiences on the bike inspired by these teachings. Longtime SoulCycle rider Rabbi Sari Laufer of Stephen Wise Temple in Los Angeles, CA, said she experienced the top spiritual moments of her life at SoulCycle.⁸⁴ Longtime rider Dalton James in Brooklyn, NY, reported that SoulCycle “makes me feel more heightened and free.” He explained

⁸¹ Romanoff, “Consumerist Church.”

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Olivia Ward, interview by author, June 15, 2022.

⁸⁴ Sari Laufer, interview by author, August 3, 2022.

that SoulCycle teaches him that nothing can stop him in life because of the power he finds within himself in class.⁸⁵ Comments on social media repeat such experiences; SoulCycle posts daily about the power of that day's class to help transform the way people can approach the day.

While SoulCycle's spirituality might share its core precepts with those of New Thought, it can appear broad and flimsy to critical eyes. In a 2014 article on SoulCycle in *The Atlantic*, Emma Green calls SoulCycle "...Spirituality Lite—enough to satisfy those who want to feel a vague sense of well-being, but not so much as to alienate anyone of any particular faith."⁸⁶ Yet, this vague and broad language is what makes SoulCycle's teaching so resonant to so many people. The lack of a clear, consistent theology allows the flexibility for each rider to connect to whatever theological belief a person needs that day for self-wellness. As Burton discusses in *Strange Rites*, contemporary spiritual seekers reject clear-cut religion or institutions and place the authority for truth in people's "gut instinct." By and large, Burton found many people claimed they would rather valorize their own idea of religion or believe in whatever works for them over adhering to doctrines and moral codes widely accepted by previous generations of seekers. Burton makes it clear that for them, "The freedom is revelatory."⁸⁷

This feeling of liberation feeds into SoulCycle's simple messaging and mirrors the freedom of the actual workout. While many of the drills in SoulCycle are done as a class, the choice to strengthen or loosen the resistance knob on the stationary bike itself is personal. If

⁸⁵ Dalton James, Instagram message to the author, October 6, 2022.

⁸⁶ Emma Green, "The Stationary Bike of Soul," *The Atlantic*, August 24, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/08/the-stationary-bike-of-the-soul/378868/>

⁸⁷ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 33-34.

how one rides one's bike is how one also lives one's life (a popular SoulCycle refrain), then the rider has control over how to ride, how to live, and what to believe in response to the spiritual "truths" shared during every class. The freedom of belief ends up being a benefit of a SoulCycle practice for many riders, as it contains less of the baggage or frustration many have with organized religion.⁸⁸ Many of these religious concepts are informed by other religious traditions; the SoulCycle instructor Ward, a practicing non-denominational Christian, admitted that it is hard for her to filter what is ingrained in her. Yet, SoulCycle asks their instructors to avoid talking explicitly about a religious tradition or figures. Ward explains, "You can talk about broad, big ideas...but always keeping the truth as the center. I think there's enough overlap, and truth overlaps a lot. That's what's most helpful for people."⁸⁹ The common SoulCycle "truths" generally include ideas about body wellness and are similar to those in New Thought. Popular sayings include "You can live with the best days of your life ahead of you" and "even when it's challenging, we always get up and keep walking forward" and "You have the power to be the person you want to be in this world." Situated alongside New Thought and contemporary wellness culture, SoulCycle's theology creates that "apex of spiritual individualism"⁹⁰ that resonates with so many.

SoulCycle's current marketing campaign on postcards and social media uses the following text, "Let's be real. We have no idea what tomorrow holds. But for now? F*** it, let's

⁸⁸ Tara Isabella Burton, "Crossfit is my church," *Vox*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/9/10/17801164/crossfit-soulcycle-religion-church-millennials-casper-ter-kuile>

⁸⁹ Olivia Ward, interview by author, June 15, 2022.

⁹⁰ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 112.

ride.” Like other religious traditions, here SoulCycle proffers a system of self-discovery that helps combat an uncertainty about the future.

God In A Barbell: The Divine Within A CrossFit Box

Co-founder of CrossFit Greg Glassman often says CrossFit is built around shared suffering and laughter.⁹¹ When I walk into a new CrossFit box for the first time, before I can notice anything about the space, I am greeted by fellow classmates. They want to get to know me and sure I feel comfortable in the space. There is a camaraderie about CrossFit participants that always strikes me in a new box, and participants work hard to make CrossFit feel like a family. CrossFit, like SoulCycle, aims to help participants on a path of self-discovery and transcendence through physical fitness. Box owners, Lauren and Michael Plank in Upstate New York, said they see their CrossFit as a means for people to learn how to take care of themselves, bond in a community, and become part of something bigger than themselves. At CrossFit, the ultimate physical challenge is key to the spirituality. “This kind of fitness tests your body, for sure. But it’s a huge physiological challenge. And because you’re doing it around a bunch of other people, all the walls come down,” they said.⁹²

There is a strong connection between this sort of thinking and the theology of the Lichtensteins. In an article detailing the connection between CrossFit and religion, Alexander Darius Ornella suggests that part of the mythology of CrossFit relates to its claims to authenticity and honesty. These ideals are made manifest through the simplicity, minimalism,

⁹¹ ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 102.

⁹² Ibid., 103.

and rawness of CrossFit Boxes. Ornella argues that CrossFit intends to improve participants' lives by helping them to return to a natural, authentic way in which human beings were intended to live.⁹³ Author and scholar Casper Ter Kuile, who has written extensively on CrossFit, adds that the physical space is key to the connection in these experiences. He writes, "in CrossFit, they often adopt an ugly, parking lot kind of background. It allows pretense to be stripped away — it's just you and the barbell."⁹⁴ While this concept could be taken from a page of the *Machzor* of the high holy days on *teshuva*, or returning to oneself, it hearkens back to the idea that each person needs to discover the divine nature within oneself by peeling back the layers. Participants are working toward something greater than themselves in classes, which arguably is what made the workout so popular and why it fulfills a spiritual itch for many seekers today.

Creating Holy Space in Jewish thought

Another element of Jewish Science and neo-Hasidism that runs through wellness culture is the state one needs to be in to have a transcendent connection. This sentiment is not new to these movements. Moses Maimonides (RaMBaM) wrote in the *Mishneh Torah* about the specific state of mind in which a person saying prayers should be. Rambam wrote that one's mind should be calm and one should meditate one hour before prayer and one hour after.⁹⁵

⁹³ Alexander Darius Ornella, "'Jesus Saves' and 'Clothed in Christ': Athletic Religious Apparel in the Christian CrossFit Community," *Sport in Society*, 22:2: (2019) 269, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2017.1360580.

⁹⁴ Burton, "CrossFit is my Church."

⁹⁵ Moses Maimonides, "Mishneh Torah," *A Maimonides Reader* ed. and trans. I Twersky (New York: Behrman House, 1972). 90-91.

Some Hasidic traditions take this recommendation further; Rebbe Nachman of Breslov wrote about *hitbodedut*, often translated as solitude or self-introspection, as the true service or worship of God. He wrote in *Likutei Moharan* that practice draws one closer to God and described it as the way to authentically speak to God.⁹⁶ While this teaching may initially appear as if the person praying approaches an external idea of God, crucial to the practice is the reflexive nature of the verb which leads one to the belief that the way to approach God is by turning within oneself. Taking this concept of *hitbodedut* into a modern framework, 20th century Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, known as the Pieczner Rebbe, also wrote about in the practice of being in complete service of God through *hitbodedut*. In his work *Bnei Machshava Tova (Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work)* the Pieczner Rebbe instructed his followers to teach themselves to search for God through *hitbodedut* as God will be found within and in everything around oneself. With the perfection of *hitbodedut*, he wrote, “You develop the ability to work with a higher state of mind, which allows you to directly experience holiness, spirituality, and the glory of God filling the universe.”⁹⁷ In the description of the evolution of the proper state to experience God, the Pieczner Rebbe’s teachings closely approach New Age Thought understanding of how a person can access God within oneself.

Jewish New Science contains many teachings on this concept as well. Morris Lichtenstein also believed a person needed to be in the right space for accessing the divine, and

⁹⁶ Nachman of Breslov, “Likutei Moharan,” trans. by Moshe Mykoff, Sefaria, Accessed January 18, 2023, https://www.sefaria.org/Likutei_Moharan%2C_Part_II.25.1.1?lang=bi&lookup=%D7%94%D6%B4%D7%AA%D6%B0%D7%91%D6%BC%D7%95%D6%B9%D7%93%D6%B0%D7%93%D7%95%D6%BC%D7%AA&with=Lexicon&lang2=en.

⁹⁷ Yiscah Smith, “Entry 11- Observations and Feelings,” based on *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work*, trans. Andrea Cohen-Keiner, (Jason Aronson Inc, 2022).

include a combination of affirmations, meditation, and quieting the mind. Jewish Science is full of meditative affirmations to help practitioners access the divine within oneself. One such affirmation, which he encourages one repeat until it “engrave[s] itself in one’s consciousness” is: “The God consciousness in me expresses itself in health, in calmness, in peace, in power, and in happiness.”⁹⁸ The repetition of mantras is a primary means of connection to transcendence for Jewish Science. In a sermon about realizing one’s possibilities, Tehilla Lichtenstein wrote that repetition is the key to enlarge capacities of appreciation and understanding of the divine presence.⁹⁹ In addition to writing mantras, both Lichtensteins took affirmations and proof texts from Psalms. For example, the Psalmist writes: הִרְפוּ וְדַעוּ כִּי־אֲנִי אֱלֹהִים. (Psalm 46:11). Tehilla Lichtenstein translated this sentence as “Be still and know that I am God.” Using Psalm 46:11 as a proof text, she wrote in a sermon entitled “God in the Silence” that one’s silence can be used as a power for self-knowledge, self-fulfillment, and feeling the divine presence.¹⁰⁰

Where Can This Spiritual State Be Found Today?

This idea of being in the right place to pray, while ancient, has taken a new importance and form in today’s wellness culture. Most explicitly, a company called the Big Quiet harnesses the idea of meditation and silence with others as a means of connecting to transcendence. Starting in 2014 as a monthly meditation group, Big Quiet is a national phenomenon around meditation founded by Jesse Israel. Touring around the country, the Big Quiet creates giant

⁹⁸ Umansky, *From Christian Science*, 71.

⁹⁹ Tehilla Lichtenstein, “Realizing Your Possibilities”, *Applied Judaism*, ed. Doris Friedman (New York: Society of Jewish Science), 443-444.

¹⁰⁰ Lichtenstein, “Realizing Your Possibilities”, *Applied Judaism*, 87-88.

meditation sessions in places like Times Square, Madison Square Garden, Chicago Public Library, and the Wisdome in Los Angeles; hundreds and hundreds of people show up to each gathering. The Big Quiet bills itself as an experience to help people “feel alive.”¹⁰¹ A journalist in Atlanta wrote that the experience taught her to explore the depths of her consciousness and let in “humility, clarity, and consciousness.”¹⁰²

SoulCycle and CrossFit are not quiet, and they do not use silence as a tool for connection to transcendence. Yet, both companies use an embodied concept that meditation can offer to connect participants to something greater than themselves. Music is a key part of this idea at SoulCycle, as all physical movement is synchronized to the beat as a method for the embodiment silence offers. “It’s beyond language,” said tur Kuile in an interview online, and it allows the participant to have an embodied experience without the mind questioning the faith. As he makes clear, “When we’re in our bodies, it feels like the most direct line to our spiritual experience.”¹⁰³

Spiritual Focus While Dancing On A Bike

In my Jewish practice, I try to lay *t’fillin* and pray every morning. When I perform these rituals, I find the movement of *shuckling* (swaying back and forth) allows me to self-regulate and connect more deeply to my prayer by connecting me to my full body. However, there are

¹⁰¹ The Big Quiet, Accessed January 18, 2023. <https://www.thebigquiet.com/>.

¹⁰² Asif Lakhani, “The Big Quiet brought strangers together to meditate under the Fernbank’s dinosaurs,” *Atlanta Magazine*, October 9, 2019. www.atlantamagazine.com/health/the-big-quiet-brought-strangers-together-to-meditate-under-the-fernbanks-dinosaurs/.

¹⁰³ Burton, “CrossFit is my Church.”

mornings when I desire a more embodied experience than I get with my *t'fillin* and movement. On those days, I go to SoulCycle. When my entire body moves in rhythm, synced with music, and my mind is fully present in where I am, I feel a connection to transcendence. This connected feeling carries me to a place where I am open to hearing messaging differently, and sometimes, I cry. In these moments, I feel fully present in the world. While it is not quiet in that SoulSanctuary with music blasting, I feel quiet inside. As someone tuned into Jewish prayer, I occasionally recite *Sh'ma* and offer personal, supplications (sprinkling in phrases of the traditional Amidah). One morning, we approached the Soulful Song, and I still had not recited any petitionary prayers. The song was "Gypsy," by Lady Gaga:

And I don't wanna be alone forever
But I can be tonight
I don't wanna be alone forever
But I love gypsy life
I don't wanna be alone forever
Maybe we can see world together
I don't wanna be alone forever
But I can be tonight, tonight¹⁰⁴

This song transported me back to my early days on a SoulCycle bike, 10 years ago. I was feeling lonely, sad about my future, and lost. I used this song as an anthem to truly love myself as I tried to navigate this tough period. As I listened to the beat and pushed myself into vulnerable territory on the bike that morning, the reprise of this song 10 years later triggered an emotional reaction. Feeling happy and fulfilled in that moment in time, I felt so much gratitude for God that helped bring me to this moment. The state of being SoulCycle transported me and allowed

¹⁰⁴ Lady Gaga. "Gypsy". Record Plant, 2013, Accessed January 19, 2023.
[https://ladygaga.fandom.com/wiki/Gypsy_\(song\)](https://ladygaga.fandom.com/wiki/Gypsy_(song))

for this connection to blossom. In addition to the music, however, the ritual of the movement on the bike is reminiscent of the repetition that Jewish Science teaches as a means for spirituality.

In ter Kuile's *Power of Ritual*, he redefines ritual for the 21st century. "Ritual is so much about intention and attention and repetition.... Ritual is this really helpful way of making people think of something greater. It's a connective tissue tool. I think it also is something you can submit to in a certain way. It de-centers the individual and centers the collective in a way that I think is healthy."¹⁰⁵ The primary element of ritual at SoulCycle is the way each ride is structured. In our interview, co-founder Julie Rice explained that the class is in five stages: warm up, pop the party, break people down, a soulful moment, and then a "go home" song to send riders home like heroes: "And there's something about that emotional arc and that physical arc with music matching and all that I think really provides people with a lot of what they need to get today in the world."¹⁰⁶

After taking a few classes, riders can usually anticipate what type of choreography or speed will go along with each song during the sequence of a session. For example, the first song is always a warmup to set the tone of the day. Halfway through the song, riding out of the saddle, riders almost always drop their arms in unison in a bowing-like motion. This moment of synchronicity by riders is a signal that one has arrived, and it is time to fully embody this space. This is just one choreographed ritual of many. Ending with a "go home" song also implies it is the moment to arrive fully home, possibly in your body, for the most powerful, embodied

¹⁰⁵ Burton, "CrossFit is my Church."

¹⁰⁶ Ferriss, host, "Julie Rice — Co-Founding SoulCycle"

spiritual connection. In creating the experience, Rice explained, “Once you’ve been to SoulCycle many times, there’s an emotional muscle memory that builds and an openness.... When you do break people down, you’re sweaty, you’re drenched, we hit you with a message at a moment when you’ve can’t put the fences up.”¹⁰⁷

Yet, there are other elements of ritual as well that create a space of holiness in the sanctuary. All studios have the same white-tile appearance. The scent when one walks into any studio in the world is a Jonathan Adler grapefruit scent candle. Pre-COVID, Extra mint gum was offered to riders to take on the way out. Inside the room, there are four candles around the instructor’s podium. Throughout the class, the candles are moved around the room to spread the light. They are blown out during the Soulful Song, and often the person chosen to blow out the candle is honored. “Got to blow out the candle during my @soulcycle class so yeah you could say today was amazing,” tweeted Jacqueline Borrelli in the summer of 2021.¹⁰⁸ All of these elements add to the holy space that ritual creates.

The ritual of SoulCycle is noticed by riders and instructors alike. Ward described the ritualistic quality to the classes, particularly around the placement of the arms workout, the soul moment, the intention setting in the beginning, and “go home” song. She calls it “the liturgical flow of the service.” Ward also believes the act of showing up every week at specified times, seeing the same people, is a practice reminiscent of religious community building.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Julie Rice, interview by author, September 9, 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Jacqueline Borrelli (@j_borrelli), *Twitter*, 2021. Accessed October 15, 2023. https://twitter.com/j__borrelli/status/1415813953771511809.

¹⁰⁹ Olivia Ward, interview by author, June 15, 2022.

While Jewish thinkers throughout the ages have written about the proper state or attention and intention for prayer, science also supports why a specific state of mind is so crucial to a spiritual connection. Exercise releases endorphins, which often creates a feeling of a “high” after an aerobic workout. Researchers working at Harvard Medical School reinforce this claim and describe the release of endorphins as responsible for feelings of euphoria or a general state of well-being.¹¹⁰ Instructor Griffith adds that the endorphin release creates an openness to receive new messages and grow within each rider: “From that state of cardiovascular endurance and chemical activity, the thematic coaching and messaging comes through because you’re just more open to it. As you’re facing challenges, you’re being told you’re amazing.”¹¹¹ Along this line of thinking, Ward said, “The bike is the messenger. It happens to be the modality to be receptive. You’re way more vulnerable when you’re physically tired, to receive and to let go.”¹¹² In SoulCycle, the embodied practice is the key to the connection to transcendence.

Mindfulness Through Peak Physical Strength

CrossFit also uses ritual and repetition to help participants reach a certain mental state. Rabbi Adir Yolkut of Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY, trained to become a CrossFit coach after six years in the rabbinate to fulfill parts of himself that were not being fulfilled by

¹¹⁰ J.C. Froehlich, Opioid peptides. *Alcohol Health Res. World* **1997**, 21, 132–136 in Alexander Pilozzi, Caitlin Carro, and Xudong Huang. 2021. “Roles of β -Endorphin in Stress, Behavior, Neuroinflammation, and Brain Energy Metabolism” *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* 22, no. 1: 338. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms22010338>

¹¹¹ Melanie Griffith, interview by author, June 14, 2022.

¹¹² Olivia Ward, interview by author, June 15, 2022.

his work as a pulpit rabbi. In a Zoom interview, he drew clear similarities between the way a rabbi builds and leads a prayer service to the way a coach builds and leads a CrossFit workout. There is a shared language in CrossFit across all boxes, yet the coach gets to put their own rhythm and intention into the workout. “CrossFit starts with a warmup exercise, which I see as similar to *P’sukei d’Zimra*,” he explained. Then there is a question of the day, which Rabbi Yolkut said makes the class about something bigger than a workout and feels like a *kavannah* or intention setting offered during a service. “Then there’s the central strength exercise, or the *Sh’ma*...the central tenet of what thing we’re working on that day.” Following strength work, there’s the Workout Of the Day (WOD) or thing we’re working up to. It’s like the *Amidah*...it’s [the] heart of things.” Finally, there is a cool down that R’ Yolkut compared to the *Aleinu* or *Adon Olam*. “The analogue feels obvious to me now,” he said.¹¹³ Similar to SoulCycle, the ritualized design of the workout creates a state of being for the participant that has the power to offer a spiritual experience.

While discovery of the divine within oneself is more overt in SoulCycle, CrossFit accomplishes its connection to transcendence through perseverance while strength building. CrossFit workouts often include a task that is incredibly grueling, such as lifting a dumbbell bar from the ground over one’s head with the heaviest weight possible that one can lift. This sort of workout pushes the edges of one’s physical limits, yet CrossFit emphasizes that this sort of exercise is key to strength building. CrossFit takes the uncertainty of the future as a key element of its ideology alongside strength building, and scholarship around CrossFit highlights

¹¹³ Adir Yolkut, interview by author, October 6, 2022.

the Christian undertones within the company. While a primary element of CrossFit is preparedness for anything, scholar of contemporary religions Cody Musselman calls this idea “evangelical temporality” and aligns CrossFit with religion. According to Musselman, this evangelical temporality term describes a “way of being in time that reflects dynamics of evangelical premillennialism, such as the firm conviction that time is running and the desire to spread the news.... It is the anticipation of rupture and change that necessitates a state of constant preparedness.”¹¹⁴ Musselman’s theory takes from CrossFit’s motto “Unknown and Unknowable” that the workout prepares all participants to face the future by using elements of American militarism and evangelical Christianity. CrossFit claims their methodology prepares minds, bodies, and spirits.¹¹⁵ Musselman claims that many Evangelical communities have incorporated CrossFit in their work, in part due to the approach to the workout that is reminiscent of the way Evangelicals are encouraged to spiritually prepare for the Rapture.¹¹⁶ For non-Evangelical participants, Musselman explains, CrossFit helps its members not to be passive in awaiting death, destruction or salvation. Rather, CrossFit prepares for a future rife with challenge that can be “saved by fitness.”¹¹⁷ For many participants, CrossFit is not just a fitness methodology but “a way of being in time.”¹¹⁸ Coach of a Christian CrossFit group in Texas, Andrew Thompson, said that CrossFit paired with faith “can culminate in a state of spiritual preparedness for eternal life’s inevitable bliss.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Cody Musselman, “Training for the ‘Unknown and Unknowable’: CrossFit and Evangelical Temporality,” *Religions* 10, no. 11: (August 2019): 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10110624>.

¹¹⁵ Musselman, “Training for ‘Unknown and Unknowable,’” 5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-9.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

Even outside of religious circles, the challenging nature of the workout both releases endorphins and creates a feel of inner strength and power that resembles a connection to transcendence. In my personal experience with CrossFit, I have seen the spiritual high from accomplishing a physical challenge that felt far beyond my reach. The focus, dedication, and pure strength needed to get through a workout creates a state of being that, like SoulCycle, feels transcendent. Using the lens of Christianity, Ornella suggests that the strength challenge is a sort of suffering within a CrossFit workout that appears to foster a connection with Christ's suffering.¹²⁰ Embodying Christ's suffering as a spiritual practice is welcomed rhetoric in certain Christian circles and explicitly mentioned at Christian boxes.¹²¹

While it might be a bit of a stretch to find the same desire to exert one's entire physical strength to approach God in Jewish circles, there are a few places in Jewish text where the suffering of CrossFit might find a home. In *Mussar* thought, the concept of *yisurim*, based on the root *yod-somach-reish*, can be translated as a form of suffering, discipline, or chastisement¹²² though it does not carry the same theological connotation in the tradition as the Passion does in Christianity. Yolkut explained,

I don't think much about God when I'm doing my CrossFit work. But in similar ways that I preach and teach about fighting through adversity and sweat through something hard in your life... I will say if I can get through this workout, I can get through anything...some of these larger human themes that I address from the pulpit, I will address at CrossFit.... Normally in life we're trying to avoid situations of being in pain, with suffering, with dealing with *yesurin*. There is a benefit at CrossFit to put yourself

¹²⁰ Alexander Darius Ornella, "Suffering in, for, and with Christ: Faithful CrossFit Bodies." *Corps, Religion Et Diversité*. 2019: 199.

¹²¹ Ornella, "Suffering in, for, and with Christ," 206.

¹²² Barbara Binder Kadden, "Acceptance of Suffering - Middah Kabbalat HaYisurin," Reform Judaism, Accessed January 18, 2023, <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/sacred-texts/learn-about-middot/acceptance-suffering-middah-kabbalat-hayisurin>.

through the ringer to come out with self-awareness that you can get through hard things.¹²⁴

Both SoulCycle and CrossFit incorporate a connection to transcendence in their workouts through implicit or explicit theology about God and the state of being to reach God or find spirituality. Outside of the Christian-owned CrossFit boxes, the instructors and students might not explicitly make the tie with organized religion. However, the examination of the spiritual experiences both work to create parallels the mentioned Jewish thought about transcendence. Transcendence in these activities can also be found in the connection to other participants that each company works to foster.

¹²⁴ Adir Yolkut, interview by author, October 6, 2022.

Chapter 2- Connection to Community

In Harvard University's Study of Adult Development, which has spanned 80 years, 700 subjects were studied to understand what brings health and happiness to one's life.¹²⁵ The research showed that the quality of relationships with friends, families, and partners mattered most. Casper ter Kuile quotes Robert Waldinger, clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and leader of this research for a period, as saying that social connections are good for humans because they combat loneliness and positively impact mental and physical health.¹²⁶ Connection to others is not just a healthy practice, but it's an everlasting core concept of religion that dates back centuries.

In Jewish tradition, Jews existed as a nation or people long before any concept of Judaism as a religious practice. Genesis 12:2 relates that God told Avram וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל ("and I will make of you a great nation").¹²⁷ Biblical and rabbinic sources regularly mention the collectivity of the Jewish people. Talmudic voices write שְׁכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֶרְבִים זֶה בָּזֶה ("the entire Jewish people are considered guarantors for one another").¹²⁸ While these are two brief but central examples of a Jewish approach to connection to others, Jewish tribalism is arguably a major reason the Jewish people survived the migration, traumas, and challenges of the past 2000 years.

In her book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, author and theology scholar Tara Isabella Burton discusses the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917),

¹²⁵ ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 81-82.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ The Contemporary Torah, JPS.

¹²⁸ b. Shebu 39a, William Davidson Talmud)

whom she calls the founder of the field of sociology of religion.¹²⁹ Durkheim argues that religion is about social cohesion over content. In his 1911 book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim wrote about what bonds people together through religion; he argued that religion is a “unified system of beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community....”¹³⁰ Durkheim surmised that one element of this social cohesion is a common sense of purpose and ritual behavior. Burton adds that a sense of purpose and ritual give a community a wider meaning.¹³¹

In addition to this sense of purpose, language plays a major role in creating a sense of inclusion and cohesion, and insider vocabularies are often developed among members. In her book *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, author and linguistics scholar Amanda Montell explores cults and cult-like activity to investigate the power of language in social cohesion. She describes the process by which language becomes a form of social glue: “From the crafty redefinition of existing words (and the invention of new ones) to powerful euphemisms, secret codes, renaming, buzzwords, chants, and mantras, “speaking in tongues,” forced silence, even hashtags, language is the key means by which all degrees of cultlike influence occur.”¹³² While Montell explores dangerous cults throughout American history, she also uncovers what cults can teach us about social cohesion and the human need for belonging and purpose. Shared language, therefore, creates camaraderie, feels fun and sacred, and builds intrigue from people

¹²⁹ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 16.

¹³⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 208 in Burton, *Strange Rites*, 27.

¹³¹ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 32.

¹³² Montell, *Cultish*, 12.

on the outside. Montell also wrote that shared language becomes a barrier to entry for those who do not know it thereby establishing insiders and outsiders. Shared vocabularies help establish who is fully onboard with the ideology based on how they embrace the language.¹³³

In contemporary American society, more and more Americans are religiously unaffiliated.¹³⁴ They also report they are lonely: data shows that one out of five Americans indicate in surveys that they are lonely.¹³⁵ Such statistics lead some people to ask the question of how to facilitate meaningful connection to others through a religious or spiritual framework. American Jewish thought leaders in the second half of the 20th century addressed this challenge through the concept of Jewish peoplehood. Peoplehood became a framework for Jewish organizations, the *Havurah* movement, and summer camps to fill in spaces where Jewish leaders feared Jewish social cohesion was waning in America.

The Wellness industry also responded to concerns about social connections. Over the past 25 years, SoulCycle and CrossFit have been recognized by industry watchers and participants for the social cohesion their respective workout experiences create. This chapter seeks to understand approaches to building meaningful connection to others. I will examine attempts by American Jewish communities to push the idea of people over the last 100 years and what that means for the organized Jewish community today as well as look at how communities from in SoulCycle studios and CrossFit Boxes.

¹³³ Montell, *Cultish*, 79.

¹³⁴ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 16.

¹³⁵ Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 82.

American Concepts of Jewish Peoplehood

After the Great Wave of Jewish immigration to the United States that lasted from roughly 1880 to 1920, Jewish immigrants faced unique community building challenges.¹³⁶ Because of the continued pressure of assimilation, tension between American born Jews and their immigrant parents, the rise of denominations and gaps in the way American Jews practiced, and the growing cultural differences among Jews in the United States, community building among Jews was elevated by Jewish communal leaders to remind Jews of the reasons to be in community together. One way this attempt played out was by highlighting shared characteristics and collective goals in Jewish social service organizations that were founded to assist Jews in the U.S. and around the world.¹³⁷ During this time, a vast array of Jewish organizations formed to accomplish these goals, such as the Anti-Defamation League to fight antisemitism, American Jewish Committee to advocate for Jews in the political arena, the Central Conference of American Rabbis to professionalize the American Reform rabbinate, and the Workman's Circle as a mutual aid society. These were created alongside synagogues, Jewish hospitals, labor unions, newspapers, charitable associations, and cultural activities. Historian Hasia Diner wrote in her book *The Jews of the United States: 1654-2000* that these organizations were founded in response to the many voluntary ways of being Jewish in

¹³⁶ Eric Goldstein, "The Great Wave: Eastern European Jewish Immigration to the United States, 1880-1924" from *The Communal History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed Marc L. Raphael (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008), 85.

¹³⁷ Noam Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 14-15.

America.¹³⁸ Not only did these organizations work to build community, but they also helped newly arriving Jews figure out what it meant to be Jewish in America.

To unify American Jews against the pressures of assimilation, Jewish Peoplehood became a prominent concept in American Jewish thought starting in the 1930s. American Jewish historian Noam Pianko argues that the concept of Jewish peoplehood developed in response to competing claims of Americanism and Zionism, European antisemitism, and the atrocities of the Holocaust. In his book *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Invention*, he writes, “Peoplehood chiefly functioned as a way to clarify the status of American Jews as a group vis-à-vis both the United States and other Jews around the world; for others, it served to emphasize the content, history, and mission that binds together Jews as a nation.”¹³⁹ The notion of Jewish peoplehood helped American Jews form their identity as part of a “collective Jewish conscious” while still fully integrating into American society and becoming American.¹⁴⁰ From a secular perspective, a sense of peoplehood provided a homogenous group the ability to remain connected and share commonalities in a contemporary-nation state.¹⁴¹ Amidst the backdrop of the changing Jewish world in the 1930s and 1940s, American Jews felt particularly torn about how to help the Jews of Europe in the face of the Holocaust while remaining loyal to the United States. A debate broke out about among Jewish thought leaders about whether Jews should

¹³⁸ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States: 1654-2000* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 113-114.

¹³⁹ Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood*, 8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

define themselves as a religion or as a people.¹⁴² Pianko claims that this tension sparked the creation of the concept of Jewish peoplehood.

He further suggests that American Jewish leaders latched onto peoplehood to help shape a collective response and help Judaism stay relevant for Jewish communities. Well-known Reform rabbi and political activist Stephen S. Wise used his national platform as chairman of the American Jewish Congress to champion peoplehood to encourage a collective Jewish response against Europe's antisemitism. Wise wrote, spoke, and sermonized about the "shared sense of obligation and connection" that Jews had for one another through a shared "brotherhood."¹⁴³ Pianko identifies Mordechai Kaplan, rabbi, educator, and dean of Teacher's College at the Jewish Theological Seminary of Americas as the leader who popularized the term "peoplehood" and made it central to Jewish identity. Kaplan promoted Judaism as a "civilization," a term he understood as encompassing a broader worldview and global self-understanding than religion. Though long committed to Conservative Judaism, Kaplan's work later inspired the formation of the Reconstructionist movement (now Reconstructing Judaism), a movement of Judaism that emphasizes the social and cultural elements of Judaism and a constant evolution of its practices. Pianko notes that Jewish solidarity and unity were crucial components of his movement,¹⁴⁴ and that Kaplan worked for a "unified cultural and ethical voice" across American Jewry.¹⁴⁵ For Kaplan, "peoplehood provided an accessible and politically

¹⁴² Ibid., 34.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 42.

neutral concept that would allow him to continue putting forth his existing theory of Jews as a national group.”¹⁴⁶

Diner calls 1948-1967 a golden age for American Jews due in part to an optimism about the unfolding opportunities for Jews in America. Diner argues that as Jews moved in the post-WWII era to the suburbs, they balanced their “middle class comforts, social activism, and Jewish commitments.”¹⁴⁷ Religious affiliation thrived as suburban synagogues were built and the new founded State of Israel became a unifying source of community pride. “Being Jewish carried few liabilities in society,” Diner describes, and outside forces had little impact on how they constructed their Jewish identities.¹⁴⁸

Diner notes that from 1967 until the present, American Jewish life experienced many contradictions. On one hand, many American Jews shared commonalities of social class, levels of educational achievement, and even impact on cultural, political, and business spheres. However, American Jews also became more divided in Jewish practice and belief. Diner identifies the discrepancies around what it means to be a Jew and what parts of Judaism matter in one’s daily life. In the later half of the 20th century, Diner argues, Jewishness became the organizing principle by which Jews knew with whom they wanted to socialize.¹⁴⁹ Two exceptions to these contradictions came in unifying moments of peoplehood, such as to lobby world Jewry to support Israel during its wars and to release Soviet Jewry from the USSR in the 1980s. Students, Jewish civil servants, rabbis, and congregations came together to support the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴⁷ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 259-260.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 261.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 305-306.

causes.¹⁵⁰ Outside of these movements, issues of assimilation, intermarriage, continued support for Israel, and denominationalism are some of the issues that continue to divide American Jews. In a 2014 Pew Research Study, a sense of belonging to the Jewish people eclipsed religion as a core piece of an American Jew's identity.¹⁵¹ With a nod to Judaism as a vehicle to connect to others, the lack of commonalities among American Jews asks questions about what can connect Jews to one another. Two areas where American Jewish leaders have succeeded in building deep communal connections are prayer experimentation and Jewish summer camps.

Praying for Community Connection

Jewish organizational leaders worked to create an American Judaism that fostered connection to one another, that sense of peoplehood, as a top priority. Synagogue decorum became one way to foster the feeling of group camaraderie. In both the Reform and Conservative Movements, the prayer style itself communicated a message to the congregants about who they were as Jews. In her careful study of the Havurah Movement *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism*, Jewish studies scholar Riv-Ellen Prell wrote that the synagogue "served as a bridge between worlds and a medium for formulated identity in part through decorum."¹⁵² According to Prell, the synagogue was where many American Jews went to enable their identification with Judaism because it seemed like the only place where

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 343-344.

¹⁵¹ Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood*, 1.

¹⁵² Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 61.

they participated in Jewish life. In that way, the synagogue helped American Jews understand how to hold the dual identities of being both Americans and Jews; the synagogue arguably still functions in this role today. Even though many Jews only attended a few times a year on the high holy days, Prell argued that many remained synagogue members throughout the 20th century to reinforce their own senses of belonging to the Jewish people.¹⁵³

However, American affiliation to groups began to decline steadily in the 1960s. Small, intentional, typically very liberal cohorts of Jews with similar commitments called *havurot* (singular, *havurah*) were founded first in the northeastern part of the United States and then all over the country. The first community began in Somerville, MA in 1968. Members in *havurot* sought to maintain traditional elements of Judaism while experimenting with ritual and Jewish practice. They believed that the denominational structure of American Judaism failed to meet their desires for an inclusive, egalitarian, embodied and enriching religious and spiritual experience and they felt constrained by the bounds of synagogue life as they understood them.¹⁵⁴ Jews engaged with *Havurah* Judaism sought to feel a deeper connection to the Jewish people over a specific movement. In describing the attraction Jews had to *havurot*, Prell argued, “Their claim to uniqueness in America rested more on their place among the Jewish people, an historical and mythical entity transcending space and time, than on their own *havurah*.”¹⁵⁵

This connection manifested itself primarily through the prayer experiences *havurot* fostered. Prell explains that *Havurah* Judaism’s prayer was a non-discursive, liturgical means to

¹⁵³ Prell, *Prayer and Community*, 61.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

connect members to the Jewish people of past and present. God was not often considered at the center of this sort of prayer, even if the language of specific prayers invoked God . Rather, the people praying together in community centered the liturgy and participants' experience.¹⁵⁶

Havurah Judaism emphasized the personal choice each Jew makes when one employs traditional prayer, yet each participant uses that prayer for one's own meaning. This practice of personalizing prayer fosters an equality among community members and highlights the individual choices each pray-er makes in one's life choices.

By choosing to connect with other Jewish people, Jews involved in *havurot* took part in the counter cultural rejection of assimilation and the ways previous generations had altered Judaism to fit American life (as many of them felt liberal movements sought to do).¹⁵⁷ While the large synagogues that came to characterize American Jewry made personalization or intimacy challenging, *Havurah* Judaism's focus on a *minyan*, or quorum of 10 members, emphasized community in an arguably deeper way than other American Jewish movements. Members reported feeling their own presence was more meaningful than in a large synagogue environment. In a *havurah*, many voices came to the consensus decisions each *minyan* made about prayer and their interpretation of Jewish law. Ultimately, the format of the *minyan* as a root of Jewish practice continually emphasized connection to Jewish peoplehood as a central tenet of how to express meaningful Judaism in America. In her book, Prell points out how *Havurah* Judaism's prayer practice facilitated deep and meaningful connections between members. She writes:

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 160-161.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 99.

What was relevant about its [prayer's] contemporary use was that it embodied the reality of the continuing covenantal relationship between God and humans, as well as between all Jews in space and time...Each form expressed and transmitted covenantal meanings, joining members to these relationships. The link made to others through prayer recreated commitment to the Jewish people and the maintenance of Judaism. Community, maintenance of tradition through prayer, and the integration of the self communicated nothing so powerfully as the capacity for prayer and therefore covenant. Community prayer created and preserved that covenant.¹⁵⁸

As Prell articulates here, at its best, *Havurah* Judaism brought connection to others as a core element of what it meant to be Jewish. This approach resonated deeply with the majority of American Jews, many of whom who struggled with the balance within their identity and how to make Judaism meaningful to them. The notion of peoplehood and the central role it played in the way American Jews navigated their concurrent senses of belonging to multiple groups grew in popularity and usefulness to influence other areas of Jewish life.

Take Me Home (To Camp)

As another tool of community building, Jewish summer camps rose in popularity in the 1930s and 1940s as a way for Jewish children living in urban centers to escape city life and have a fully immersive experience that fostered positive Jewish identity. Camp became known as a magical place for Jewish kids, filled with charismatic people, intense identification with Judaism, and filled with ritual. One element that made—and continues to make—camp so magical is the feeling of belonging and connectivity it fostered. Campers experience both a feeling of connection to others at camp, emphasized through camp wide programming and the pedagogy of Shabbat experiences, that can feel transcendent. The feelings of belonging and connection at

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 188-189.

camp can be so rich for a child that many adults who went regularly to summer camp as children report feeling truly at home when they were at camp. Ritual is another way to foster that deep connection, through song sessions, Shabbat experiences, and unique camp-specific rituals. Campers often long for their camp experiences and rituals years later which illustrates the power of this collective experience. “Camp magic and Jewish majesty become one,” wrote Jewish education scholar Michael Zeldin, arguing that campers feel deeply connected to each other in that process.¹⁵⁹ The feeling of connectivity, or peoplehood, became a core part of the Jewish camping experience, and transferred its power into the Jewish identity of many American Jews.

Belonging to the SoulCycle Tribe

The health and wellness community in America often uses phrases like “Be your best self” or “change your body, change your mind, change your life.” This language, Montell writes, creates environments that feel like a religion. By integrating devotion, transformation, and submission into speech, language is used as a tool to create a sense of purpose and connection to other participants.¹⁶⁰ This connectivity becomes clearer in SoulCycle co-founder Julie Rice’s vision for the SoulCycle experience. She calls SoulCycle “a place to be a part of something bigger than yourself.”¹⁶¹ Against the backdrop of the Jewish world described above, clear lines develop between the Jewish environment in which Rice was raised and the feeling of

¹⁵⁹ Michael Zeldin, “Making the Magic in Reform Jewish Summer Camps,” in *A Place of Our Own: The Rise of Reform Jewish Camping*, ed. Editor Michael L. and Gary Z (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 90-91.

¹⁶⁰ Montell, *Cultish*, 235.

¹⁶¹ Julie Rice, interview by author, September 9, 2022.

connectivity she sought to build in SoulCycle. Growing up in a Reform Jewish household in the suburbs of New York City, Rice described her Judaism as less about religion and more deeply connected to Yiddish, singing, and a sort of Bohemian, spiritual, communal experience that took place outside the synagogue. She described her Judaism as being about belonging and a freedom from judgement, “a place where people can remake themselves and have a fresh start,” and where God believes one can be the best version of oneself.¹⁶² Rice admitted that her Judaism is clearly a part of the SoulSanctuary, and it is seemingly not a coincidence that Rice began to engage more deeply with Central Synagogue and a weekly Shabbat practice when she designed and led SoulCycle. As she described more directly: “I do think there’s something about when you self-realize with other people...in those moments (at synagogue), because we are all Jewish, and because we’re all self-realizing together.... We’re the best parts of each other in those moments, and somehow being a part of that is wildly powerful.”¹⁶³

Rice’s emphasis on peoplehood is clear from the moment one walks into a SoulCycle studio. Upon entering any SoulCycle studio across the globe, riders are greeted by a neon sign that reads: “pack, tribe, crew, posse, cult, gang, community, soul.” These are all buzz words used in classes and marketing materials to signal to SoulCycle riders about the unity of being a SoulCycle rider. SoulCycle builds this sense of community through branding, merchandise, clothing, and literature as well; the company creates an insider culture that help identify participants to one another and to themselves. SoulCycle releases a new clothing line monthly that is sold exclusively in studios and online. Many of the riders wear their SoulCycle clothes to

¹⁶² Julie Rice, interview by author, September 9, 2022.

¹⁶³ Julie Rice, interview by author, September 9, 2022.

the classes they take. As with other kinds of uniforms and branding, the clothes add an element of connection to other riders in the class.

In her article about SoulCycle in *The Atlantic*, Emma Green identifies the powerful sense of belonging that comes with wearing the brand while participating in a class: “Pouring out gallons of sweat while wearing this muscle tank signals that you’re part of the SoulCycle circle and value certain things, like toughness, discipline, and self-control.”¹⁶⁴ People are often seen wearing these clothes outside of the studios as well (though there is no way to know whether they are wearing it for prestige or out of participatory pride). I can personally attest that there have been many moments where someone engaged in conversation with me, or I engaged with someone else, on the streets of New York and Europe, over our place in the SoulCycle tribe. “You’re a rider?” one might ask, entering a conversation about which teachers one follows and how long one has been a part of the community. Former Ministry Innovation Fellows at Harvard Divinity School, Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston, described the sentiment in a report entitled “How We Gather,” “As one rider describes, the merchandise reifies the community, offering a way to show allegiance.”¹⁶⁵

There is also a stronger connection built in the SoulSanctuary that has a powerful resonance of what it means to be connected to other people. Deliberately, the co-founders created a workout that was not about competition or statistics. Rather, SoulCycle is about the community above all else. Rice commented on how when she and her co-founders were

¹⁶⁴ Emma Green, “The Stationary Bike of the Soul.”

¹⁶⁵ Kuile and Thurston, “How We Gather (Part 2): SoulCycle as Soul Sanctuary.”

designing SoulCycle, they placed the bikes close together because of a lack of space in the original studio:

What actually happened was, the lights were dark, and people could all feel the music at the same time, and you could almost feel somebody breathing next to you. Your foot was on the same beat as their foot was on, and suddenly it became connected, and it became tribal...Somehow, the room is moving together in a way that you don't often feel connected to people like that, even when you're having deep conversation. There's something about a moving meditation with other people that are rooting for you, that are holding space for you, that aren't there to compete with you, that are there to elevate you so that they can be elevated as well. And when we created an experience like that, it was magic. I mean, it was really magic. It was a really transformational thing for people¹⁶⁶

Through its moving synchronized meditation, SoulCycle sessions offer a unique sense of connectivity that is hard to find elsewhere. This connectivity has riders moving together in sync with music and seeming strangers, working through different drills, sprints, and the famous SoulCycle choreography. This choreography creates an electric feeling in the room. For me, I particularly remember riding in New York City. After leaving the sidewalk, being around thousands of people every day with no real connection or eye contact, I immediately felt spiritually elevated by locking into the same foot and beat with a room full of SoulCycle riders.

Master Instructor Olivia Ward also agrees with the magic of this communal ride, but has seen deeper relationships form from this sort of moving meditation outside of the merchandise. As she relayed in an interview, "SoulCycle is people who [sic] hold you accountable, communicate in different sorts of ways, different output in giving and receiving that's very parallel to religious practice.... That has nothing to do with Lululemon pants or the bike. It's that sense of belonging somewhere and feels powerful. It's about what I can give and

¹⁶⁶ Julie Rice, interview by author, September 9, 2022.

what I can receive.”¹⁶⁷ Her rhetoric echoes that feeling of belonging and feeling like this community is for anyone, that is, who pays the \$27-37 entrance fee. During Ward’s last class in New York City before moving to Atlanta to open SoulCycle there in 2018, her Soulful song was “Army” by Ellie Golding. As Ward and a packed room of 60+ riders fought back tears, Ward talked about how SoulCycle people are “your army that walk alongside you through any hardship you might face.” The boppy, pop-song’s lyric “When I’m with you I’m standing with an army” plays in the background while and the people move in unison as the beat drops for the final chorus. Often snapping a class photo at the end of class to be shared on social media pages, riders share with their networks how powerful this SoulCycle peoplehood can be. Ward remarked, “I see so many people and friendships form and people meet each other in class and get married.”¹⁶⁸ Whether they met in SoulCycle or not, as previously mentioned, riders come to SoulCycle to mark lifecycle events, both celebrations and sadness, and walk with “their people” through the event. There is something magical about the SoulCycle tribe that people feel is transcendent.

Using the Jewish conception of peoplehood, Rabbi Sari Laufer argues SoulCycle creates community better than denominational Jewish life. She described SoulCycle in the early days of its existence as “cultish.” It had the feel that each person matters, as Rice told me SoulCycle aspires to, and instructors noticed when one’s presence was missing. Similar to a full synagogue sanctuary *minyan*, SoulCycle works when the studio is full of people and energy. However, Laufer described the power in being in a community while she experienced a personal spiritual

¹⁶⁷ Olivia Ward, interview by author, June 15, 2022.

¹⁶⁸ Olivia Ward, interview by author, June 15, 2022.

moment. “I do think the language of: we are all in this together, match the person next to you, we’re going up the hill together. It creates this sense that I’m in here going through my own thing. But at the same time there is this sense that I can’t do it without the person next to me. We are all experiencing this together. It feels really communal.”¹⁶⁹ Laufer admitted that she feels that SoulCycle creates camaraderie better than the synagogues she encounters today (which, admittedly, are mostly liberal) and she lamented how it appears to her that riders flock to weekend classes instead of religious services.

Come For a Workout, Leave With a CrossFit Community

CrossFit also holds its peoplehood and community at the center of its brand experience. CrossFit workouts are intense and, in order to insure that participants stay safe and avoid potential injuries, many workouts are done in pairs, which are reminiscent of a *chavruta* model of studying Jewish texts. Pairs “spot” each other while lifting heavy weights to ensure one each lifter can hold the weight. Each partner watches the other’s form, offers feedback, and cheers the other one. In addition, CrossFit boxes often highlight members’ accomplishments publicly for the rest of the Box, not as a completion but as a source of celebration amidst the CrossFit Box family. These experiences, alongside the challenge of the workout, lead to many CrossFit participants raving about the deep communal bonds they form. Community at CrossFit is also

¹⁶⁹ Sari Laufer, interview by author, August 3, 2022.

lived through the deep relationships formed in a Box, and it often leads to meals together, nights out, and other activities where participants spend time together outside the Box.¹⁷⁰

The sense of peoplehood in CrossFit is magnified through the WOD (Workout of the Day). Released daily by the brand, every person doing CrossFit anywhere in the world completes the same workout each day which creates—like a Jewish prayer service—a unifying experience across distance and time zones. This connectivity binds the workouts together, and it makes participants feel as if they are a part of a wider network. Many people who regularly attend CrossFit studios love to visit other Boxes, and there is an expectation of the same language and type of workout across all CrossFit branded Boxes. There is a shared language, a CrossFit vocabulary, which includes words like “MetCons” (metabolic conditioning), “AMRAPs” (as many rounds as possible), and “HSPUs” (handstand push-ups) which build a broader sense of community among CrossFitters around the globe.¹⁷¹ An online forum is available through the brand’s Website, which allows participants to discuss with one another, compare statistics, and support each other. As the brand grew, divinity scholar Cody Musselman saw other points of connection: “Outsiders began to call CrossFit a cult, and, all combined, CrossFitters’ insider language, their common commitment to elective suffering...and their shared dietary practices of eating ‘meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch and no sugar,’ did little to contradict the observation that they were, at the very least, cult-like.”¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Alexander Darius Ornella, “‘Jesus Saves’ and ‘Clothed in Christ’: athletic religious apparel in the Christian CrossFit community,” 268.

¹⁷¹ Cody Musselman, “‘Be More Human’: CrossFit, Reebok, and Sporting Consumerism,” 9.

¹⁷² CrossFit®, *The Foundation Is Nutrition*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcL86Lv_jsQ. in “‘Be More Human’: CrossFit, Reebok, and Sporting Consumerism,” 9.

Another element of this “cultish” behavior is a common dress or uniform worn by participants. Like SoulCycle, CrossFit merchandise is worn as a uniform of sorts by participants. Religion scholar Alexander Darius Ornella calls the matching clothing “religious athletic garments,” and he sees them as a symbol to communicate to other participants an invisible reality of connection.¹⁷³ All of these elements contributed to the connective tissue CrossFit fostered.

Like Laufer described with SoulCycle, Rabbi Adir Yolkut notes the attraction that CrossFit poses for some participants over expressions of organized or institutional Judaism. He thinks the communal aspect of the workout and the shared language of the experience is a key component to that pull. “The bonds develop organically and more quickly than any physical setting. There’s a shared framework.”¹⁷⁴

The potential for peoplehood as an effective spiritual tool is apparent through prayer, camp, and the *Havurah* movement, as well as a core element of successful wellness brands today. While polarization might stress the fabric of Jewish peoplehood, Pianko envisions a world where Jews reinvent the concept to focus on religion and ritual as the connective tool.¹⁷⁵ The rise of the concept of Jewish peoplehood created a desire among American Jews to feel a connection with each other through Judaism’s framework. There is, however, much to learn from fitness brands like SoulCycle and CrossFit that appear to be effectively filling that void for many Millennials. Pianko describes American religion in contemporary society as an individual’s

¹⁷³ Ornella, “‘Jesus Saves’ and ‘Clothed in Christ,’ 272.

¹⁷⁴ Adir Yolkut, interview by author, October 6, 2022.

¹⁷⁵ Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood*, 123.

search for spirituality,¹⁷⁶ and much of that spiritual feeling is achieved through connection to others.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 122.

Chapter 3: Connection to the Rav

At the end of November 2022, beloved SoulCycle instructor Ross Ramone left the company after eight years of teaching. After teaching his last class, a Jewish female rider in her mid 40s wrote a tribute to him on her Instagram page. She cited a familiar Mishnaic quote that promotes *hevruta* (partner) Torah study: “Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:6). In her post, the rider used the verse to describe her relationship with Ramone: “A great teacher makes you feel capable of things you never thought possible...you taught me my heart is capable of tremendous courage.”¹⁷⁷ Quoting also the Talmudic passage that if one saves a life, one saves the whole world (Bav. Sanhedrin 37a), the rider confessed, “I was lost when I found you. You gave me hope.”¹⁷⁸

This chapter looks at the ways in which a SoulCycle instructor like Ramone can take on the role of spiritual leader despite not being ordained or working in a synagogal environment. In many ways, similarities can be found between contemporary spiritual fitness instructor and rabbinic figures from the 20th century. Some fitness leaders have become spiritual gurus well outside the fields in which they are trained, and they often use language about self-fulfillment and finding one’s purpose from within one’s self. These spiritual figures lead with a sense of authenticity, direct connection, and intimacy with their disciples (whether mediated through a screen or in person), and they inspire a process of self-discovery. Drawn to the charisma of the leader, followers aspire to be nearer to the leader alongside their journey of self-growth and

¹⁷⁷ Abby Fifer Mandell (@abbyfifermantell). 2022. " "Make for yourself a teacher." Instagram, November 25, 2022 posted. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIZf0a8S6YDX40HJ-z0Ofd1HZwL59JNvXYHeVM0/>.

¹⁷⁸ Abby Fifer Mandell (@abbyfifermantell). 2022. " "Make for yourself a teacher." Instagram, November 25, 2022 posted. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIZf0a8S6YDX40HJ-z0Ofd1HZwL59JNvXYHeVM0/>.

spiritual empowerment. Placing fitness instructors alongside major Jewish spiritual leaders of the last century, this chapter seeks to discover what qualities draws in followers.

The Changing Role of the Professional Rabbi

Jewish tradition has long venerated rabbis and sages. *Pirkei Avot* has many dicta related to the honor on which one should bestow one's teacher. Yosei ben Yoezer of Zeredah adjures the reader to "let thy house be a house of meeting for the Sages and sit in the very dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:4). This verse captures Judaism's practice of elevating intellectual and spiritual leaders and encourages people to soak up all the knowledge and wisdom they can from them. Since the Talmudic age, a rabbi's stature came from his knowledge and skill in interpreting Torah; his acumen and the respect he commanded held political power in the community network.¹⁷⁹ Modernity brought the professionalization of the rabbinate and newly defined duties. Congregational rabbis often stood elevated on a *bimah*, delivered sermons, taught Torah, and served as a pastoral counselor. Outside of Jewish Orthodoxy, the job of a rabbi became less about *halakhic* interpretation and more a combination of a spiritual leader and executive director of the organization.¹⁸⁰ In the wake of the Holocaust and across the denominational spectrum, new rabbinical leaders gained popularity in American Jewish circles. One such rabbi, the seventh leader of the Chabad-

¹⁷⁹ Daniel J. Elazar, and Rela Geffen Monson, "The Evolving Roles of American Congregational Rabbis." *Modern Judaism* 2, no. 1 (1982): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396130>. 73.

¹⁸⁰ Elazar and Monson, "The Evolving Roles of American Congregational Rabbis," 73.

Lubavitch sect of Chasidic Jewry, radically transformed what it meant to be an American rabbi in the 20th century.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson, The *Rebbe*

Inspired by the Baal Shem Tov in the 18th century in Ukraine, Hasidism elevated spiritual leaders, called *rebbe*s, as the organizing force of regionally based groups of adherents. Hasidic Jews sought the advice of their *rebbe* on all aspects of their lives, which intensified their relationship. Followers consulted their *rebbe* on many issues outside of religious issues, including business, marriages, personal health, whether to have children, and significant upcoming decisions in life. Joseph Telushkin described the power dynamic of a formed dynastic in his work *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson*:

Hasidim trust a *Rebbe*'s advice on such a variety of issues because they feel a *Rebbe*, in addition to having wisdom, has achieved a spiritual level of *bittul ha-yesh*, a nullification of his personal will. Such a person, one who can negate his own ego before God, and who can negate his own ego in the presence of others, becomes a pure vessel for transmitting God's wisdom.¹⁸¹

One rabbi who reached this spiritual place led to what Telushkin referred to as a *rebbe* for the New World: Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) of Chabad-Lubavitch.

In 1951, Schneerson succeeded his father-in-law as the leader of Chabad-Lubavitch, which had replanted itself in post-WWII Brooklyn, New York. The sixth Chabad leader, Rabbi

¹⁸¹ Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, The most influential rabbi in modern history* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 25.

Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950) known also as the Frierdiker Rebbe (Yiddish for “Previous”) was the first Chabad *rebbe* not to have any male children to succeed him; only two of his three married children survived the Holocaust. While his son-in-law Schneerson was not directly appointed, there appeared to be a preference from the Frierdiker Rebbe and many other followers for him to assume the leadership post.¹⁸² As Schneerson began to assume the leadership role after his father in law’s death, he quickly gained acclaim for his campaign to love every Jew, regardless of his/her Jewish practice.¹⁸³ In part, this goal was achieved through the continuation of the Frierdiker’s outreach efforts and through his own *U’faratzta* campaign, which set out to spread Judaism to every corner, regardless of how remote, of the Jewish world. In this campaign, he sent emissaries to permanently live all over the world to encourage Jews to lead more active Jewish lives.¹⁸⁴ This “army” of *shluchim* (ambassadors) made Schneerson’s power evident by influencing hundreds of newly married couples to move to locations all over the world, without Jewish support networks present, to spread Lubavitch ideas of Jewish practice. With pictures of him hung in each Chabad house, and the successful launch of other outreach programs, Schneerson’s effort made him arguably the most well-known rabbi in the Jewish world.¹⁸⁵

While Schneerson’s influence and reach grew, his great spiritual influence on the Chabad movement came from another unique element of his spiritual leadership: *yechidusen* (private meetings). Visitors would seek a meeting with Schneerson to talk about financial,

¹⁸² Telushkin, *Rebbe*, 16-17.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

health or family issues, request blessings, or seek advice. Telushkin reports that for most of the *Rebbe's* career, the *Rebbe* had meetings three nights a week from 8 pm until early in the morning, with appointments made weeks in advance. Special preparation was required for Lubavitch Chasidim, who went to the mikveh, spent the day in prayer and study before the meeting, and wore new clothes to it.¹⁸⁶ The meetings took place at the Chabad-Lubavitch main headquarters on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. Visitors often describe major transformations in their lives after the encounters; they held onto the *Rebbe's* advice and often returned for follow-up meetings. Non-Jews came for these meetings as well, with documentation of meetings by Senators Robert Kennedy and Cory Booker during their respective campaigns.

In addition to giving advice, the *Rebbe* offered his connections and assistance for tangible results. My father-in-law escaped Russian oppression in the 1970s for Canada after a cousin first consulted with the *Rebbe* on how to leave Russia. The *Rebbe* helped them connect with the Prime Minister of Canada at the time, who ultimately negotiated for the family's release. From love advice to immigration, the *Rebbe* became a spiritual leader and guide who ultimately transformed how many people in the American Jewish community could view a religious leader. When the Schneerson died in 1994, a group within Chabad Lubavitch claimed he was the messiah. While this complicated interpretation is no longer generally held today among Chasidim, Schneerson's legacy and presence is clearly felt through the photos, billboards, and stickers of him that appear all over Jewish neighborhoods worldwide and the many Chabad owned restaurants and centers around the world.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 43.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi: Charisma, Dynamism, Egalitarianism

Schneerson's legacy as a guru inspired the next wave of charismatic religious leaders in the U.S.. Rabbi Schlomo Carlebach¹⁸⁷ and Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi were both deeply influenced by Chabad-Lubavitch movement and served as *schluchim*; later, each man went on to become Jewish spiritual leaders in their own right. One difference was that Schachter-Shalomi described himself as a *rebbe* of function, by which he meant he limited the role a rabbi could serve on behalf of another individual's spirituality in favor of emboldening the actual individual to act for oneself. As Shaul Magid explains in his book on neo-Hasidism, "It retains the mythic notion of a personal God who can temporarily be embedded (via charisma) in numerous persons to give the seeker, as disciple, the experience of self-realization."¹⁸⁸ The seeker also has to buy into this "performative myth," as Jewish studies scholar Magid refers to it, to empower the *rebbe* to fulfill the function the seeker desires. In Schachter-Shalomi's idea of *rebbe*, the seat of authority and channel of spiritual connection within a community can rotate based on a particular talent or perspective.¹⁸⁹ Schachter-Shalomi calls this point of connection to the divine the *neschama kelalit* (collective soul) and through it a *rebbe* can connect to that notion of divinity.¹⁹⁰ Similar to his theology of self-realization that was described in Chapter 1, Schachter Shalomi's *rebbe* functions as a vehicle of self-realization by

¹⁸⁷ Carlebach later went on to be accused of multiple instances of sexual misconduct. While I do not want to diminish his contribution to Jewish life in America, I will be primarily focusing on Schachter-Shalomi's impact.

¹⁸⁸ Magid, *American Post-Judaism*, 182.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

helping one's followers be their best, most authentic, fully formed selves in the world. Instead of the *rebbe* serving as the source of wisdom and spiritual connection, Schachter-Shalomi's rabbinic vision directs followers to discover that wisdom on their own through their own spiritual journey. By integrating *Hasidic* ideas and a different spirit of music into American Jewish prayer practice, Schachter-Shalomi brought new spiritual concepts to the scene to help make prayer more about the individual pray-er.

Soul Cycle: The Secular *Rebbe*

At first glance, one could argue that Ramone and other SoulCycle instructors built their popularity by using the rise in celebrity culture and the influence of social media platforms. Sociology scholar Joshua Gamson calls the monumental growth in celebrity culture in the last two decades "the decisive turn toward the ordinary."¹⁹¹ According to Gamson, both the Internet and reality TV have created a culture that decentralizes a celebrity "class" and makes room for virtually anyone to become famous.¹⁹² Using a common marketing strategy of making the celebrity accessible on social media offers a sense of intimacy with the person not possible before.¹⁹³ Most successful fitness instructors today build their brand and buttress their spiritual influence through the use of social media platforms. Examples include founding instructor Stacey Griffith who counts 62,1000 followers on Instagram and New York instructor Noa Shaw who has 18,300 followers. These large followings often lead to advertisement and influencer

¹⁹¹ Joshua Gamson, "The Unwatched Life Is Not Worth Living: The Elevation of the Ordinary in Celebrity Culture." *PMLA* 126, no. 4 (2011): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41414175>. 1061.

¹⁹² Gamson, "The Unwatched Life Is Not Worth Living," 1062.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 1063.

deals; for example, Los Angeles instructor Cassidy Rhodes advertised for the women's clothing line Free People on her Instagram in April 2022. Large followings can also lead to the creation of solo lines, like Akin Akman in New York City (83,400 Instagram followers), who broke away from SoulCycle to create his own workout brand, AArmy, in 2019.. This social media curated intimacy gives the instructors a tremendous power to connect with so many followers. Former master instructor Olivia Ward calls SoulCycle her ministry.¹⁹⁴ Many, if not most, instructors utilize their social media accounts to continue the spiritual messaging they share in the SoulSanctuary. Social media becomes an arm of the preaching; connecting online allow riders to communicate directly with instructors in ways that build intimacy, loyalty, and emotional bonds.

The ambience of the SoulSanctuary also creates a certain aura around the instructor. They ride their bikes in class on an elevated podium with multiple spotlights. The push toward inspiring self-realization among riders allows SoulCycle instructors to serve in a similar role to the type of *rebbe* role described by Schachter-Shalomi. That elevated stature is made evident by the way riders engage their SoulCycle teachers as much more than "just" fitness instructors. Religious studies scholar Casper Ter Kuile found that many people view their instructors as serving in a pastoral or therapeutic role, and they ask them for advice about major life decisions such as whether to get a divorce.¹⁹⁵ Instructors have officiated weddings for riders, and many serve as unofficial spiritual advisors for them.

The notice on SoulCycle's Website seeking instructors discussed above indicated the company was "seeking magnetic souls with great energy" to be the "charismatic instructors

¹⁹⁴ Olivia Ward, interview by author, June 15, 2022.

¹⁹⁵ Burton, "Crossfit is my church."

who support and push us to feel like our best selves.”¹⁹⁶ That description is both constructive and reflective. The way riders refer to instructors makes clear they see the teachers as more than riding instructors; they are spiritual coaches, cheerleaders, and teammates. An example of the respect riders have for their riding role models came in August 2022 when SoulCycle announced the first downsizing in company history. In response to the release of popular NYC instructor Nicholas Wagner, @alissafleck tweeted on August 12 that she thought he was “a literal god.” She felt that his elevated status as instructor came with the kind of wisdom that was spiritual in quality. Indeed, many instructors have a way of making riders feel as if they personally see and care each rider for who they are as well as acknowledge their unique emotional journeys. On Wagner’s Instagram post about the end of his job, comments included: “I would not be who I am today without those Sunday (classes)”;

“Don’t let anything or anyone steal your own light...it is more powerful and bright than you know”;

“You as a person are magic”;

“Nick you literally changed my life”;

and “Our lives are better because of the world you created in that room and energy you shared with us day after day.”¹⁹⁷ Although Wagner spoke to hundreds of riders, his followers shared the experience that they felt he spoke directly to each one individually about their own journey of self-acceptance and love.

Other riders expressed a similar sentiment when Ramone left voluntarily from an Los Angeles studio. On Instagram, a rider who frequently took Ramone’s classes and who is a social media influencer with an emphasis on wellness wrote:

¹⁹⁶ Musselman, "The Politics of Charisma," 9. This citation reflects the SoulCycle Website in 2019. The Website has since changed.

¹⁹⁷ Nicholas Wagner (@nwagner). 2022. " "This is it ya'll!" Instagram, August 29, 2022 posted. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ch17PO9ubNJ/>.

Seasoned [#RossRiders](#) referred to class as church because it was spiritual, thoughtful, and artful. RR, you said in during your last survivor in Pasadena that class saved your life in a lot of ways.

You saved mine.

You showed me how to be present.

You created a community full of love and acceptance.

You provided a safe space when the world felt too heavy.

Thank you.¹⁹⁸

Social media surrounding the instructors are filled with similar sentiments of gratitude and the acknowledgement of the outsized importance SoulCycle instructors played in a rider's life. The language related to "salvation" (feeling or being "saved") is most notable because it highlights the lifesaving roles of messages of self-acceptance and love, safety, and presence preached during classes. These examples illustrate the monumental role an instructor can play in one's life through their teachings.

When riders discuss attending a SoulCycle class in a given week, the shared language of SoulCycle conflates the instructor's name with the experience itself, for example, "I'm taking Dacoda on Tuesday, and then Lisa on Wednesday, and then Logan on Sunday." In other words, the instructor's name becomes synonymous with the class and performs as a sort of insider code for what music, advice, and experience riders can and should expect. The dynamic, charismatic instructor at SoulCycle curates and remains central to the rider's experience. The

¹⁹⁸ Jeanna (@jeanajuce). 2022. "I know this is not goodbye..." Instagram, November 29, 2022 posted. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CljtOIUy4LE/>

instructor has the freedom to create the experience themselves within SoulCycle's "freedom with a framework"; they select the music, arrange the choreography, and choose the inspiration of the day. Ter Kuile notes that in SoulCycle culture, the front row riders are seen by other riders as the unofficial leaders of the class. As a form of validation by way of visibility, this front-row status feeds into the allure of having a close relationship to and with the instructor.¹⁹⁹ Instructors will engage with riders in the front, call them by their name and mention things about their life. Another moment of intimacy occurs when instructors offer certain riders the honor of blowing out the candles at the front of the room. These are examples of the ritual culture breeding a type of *rebbe*/disciple relationship. Like relationships with a *rebbe*, ritual relationships in SoulCycle create both an equality among riders in a class, while also fostering an explicit favoritism for those who work to become closer to performing the instructors ideal.

SoulCycle's Website articulates that confidence, practice, trust, and vulnerability are all one needs to become an instructor.²⁰⁰ While arguably looks and body type are a part of this equation, too, SoulCycle claims to recruit people who know how to move an audience and are relational; from the company privilege a background in performance over a fitness background.²⁰¹ Divinity scholar Cody Musselman, however, believes the charisma of instructors helps spiritualize the SoulCycle brand. She calls charisma a "mystifying and inexplicable

¹⁹⁹ ter Kuile and Thurston, "How We Gather (Part 2)."

²⁰⁰ Kellen Townsend, "4 Things It Takes to Be a SoulCycle Instructor," Soulcycle, <https://www.soul-cycle.com/soulconnected/4-things-it-takes-to-be-a-soulcycle-instructor-according-to-kellen-townsend/>.

²⁰¹ Burton, "Crossfit is my church."

attribute”²⁰² and “a personal magic of leadership arousing special popular loyalty or enthusiasm.”²⁰³ These definitions of charisma, combined with the capitalism of SoulCycle and other similar brands, are the work of religion, she claims. She argues that “[t]he SoulCycle instructor serves as your spirit’s medium---drawing you in, essentializing you to your Soul, distilling that Soul into energy, and then working with the energy of the room.”²⁰⁴ Musselman describes here her take on the spirituality of this instructor/rider connection. If a spiritual experience is to happen in a SoulCycle class, the instructor’s guidance is the vehicle to take each individual and the collective to experience an inexplainable feeling. There is an x factor about instructors to whom people are drawn and with whom to engage spirituality. Charisma is the key element to following this individual, and it is part of the attraction for so many thousands of riders toward these instructors.

SoulCycle’s instructor training program brings out the authentic charisma in each Instructor but does not offer a specific mechanism for that instructor to create spirituality from. Instructors hired by SoulCycle go through rigorous training to learn how to be fitness instructors, DJs, and “spiritual and emotional leaders.”²⁰⁵ However, given the role it plays in the total experience of the studio and each session, the spirituality element of training is surprisingly light. Senior Master Instructor Melanie Griffith leads the training program and reported, “We do share inspiration, work, poetry, for some people scripture on Soul Day”²⁰⁶

²⁰² Musselman, "The Politics of Charisma, 4.

²⁰³ Merriam Webster, s.v. "Charisma," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charisma>.

²⁰⁴ Musselman, "The Politics of Charisma, 17.

²⁰⁵ Ferriss, "Julie Rice — Co-Founding SoulCycle,"

²⁰⁶ Griffith spoke about one day during the 8 week training program dedicated specifically to spirituality. Otherwise, all other spirituality from the instructors is driven by them and their belief system.

(during training).²⁰⁷ Yet, despite being driven by spirituality and flirting with so many elements of religion, there is no common text or standard for how and what spirituality to teach. Those decisions lie completely with each instructor, and that independence encourages instructors to drive both the rider's spiritual and emotional journeys and their own brand.

In a 2020 article, Musselman illustrated how the charismatic power of SoulCycle instructors created a situation that potentially doomed the brand. Articulating the theory of Max Weber, Musselman first explains how the word “charisma”—used by Greek speaking Christians to connote God's bestowal of “divine gifts”—is transformed into a secular word that denotes “a certain quality of an individual personality” that is extraordinary and even seemingly supernatural from an average person.²⁰⁸ Describing how charismatic people and corporations often have a codependency in American economics, Musselman draws parallels between SoulCycle instructors and figures like Sam Walton and Oprah Winfrey. She argues that such brands use the charisma of a particular figure to attract customers and, in effect, develop the brand as something special and unique because of that charisma.²⁰⁹ Charisma is a crucial asset to corporations and Jewish communities alike.

SoulCycle's instructor charisma was put to the test in the fall of 2019 when the chairman of the Related Companies, the real estate firm of which SoulCycle is a subsidiary, hosted a fundraiser for former president Donald Trump. Due to the liberal beliefs and worldviews of many SoulCycle riders and patrons, and the deep antagonism many urban voters had against

²⁰⁷ Melanie Griffith, interview by author, June 14, 2022.

²⁰⁸ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012), 358. In Musselman, “The Politics of Charisma,” 2.

²⁰⁹ Musselman, “The Politics of Charisma,” 3.

Trump, a public relations nightmare ensued for SoulCycle; many patrons called to boycott the company.²¹⁰ While SoulCycle is not explicitly political, this overt show of support for a divisive political figure seemed to contradict the values of being a place where every person can become one's best self. SoulCycle had just launched a Pride campaign that situated the SoulSanctuary as acting both as a religious sanctuary and as a safe-haven sanctuary equivalent to Queer bars. "All souls are welcome," the campaign proclaimed, a message that appeared to be a consistent marketing effort to indicate that SoulCycle was inclusive of all. News of this Republican fundraiser, therefore, felt like a betrayal to riders.²¹¹ Though SoulCycle crafted a public relations plan to distance themselves from the incident, Musselman exposes that it was the SoulCycle instructors themselves who coached the riders through this political dissonance and brand identity crisis.²¹² Instructor Julie Scherr Dermer in New York City took a spiritual approach in addressing the aftermath; she wrote on Instagram, "I want SOUL to be about your SOUL and nothing else. I've come to even more greatly appreciate that our space is sacred, let's keep it that way. Our time together transcends the noise, transcends even the passion we feel about the causes we're fighting for. It's about our physical and spiritual well-being...that's it! #untouchablesoul."²¹³ She tried to make SoulCycle exist in a sphere outside of political and societal reality by asking riders to stay in a figurative, ethereal, and isolationist space with her.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

²¹¹ Ibid., 6-8.

²¹² Ibid., 15.

²¹³ Julie Dermer [@juliedsoul]. I want SOUL to be about your SOUL. *Instagram*, August 10, 2019. Accessed January 30, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B0_0mNYnqTz/ in Musselman, "The Politics of Charisma, 11.

Other instructors used the opportunity to formulate a charge to riders on how they should act in the world. Instructor Trammel Logan went live on Instagram TV to talk directly to his riders to decry what he considers “liberal virtue signaling” that a boycott would send. Logan spoke about feeling unsafe as a Black man in SoulCycle spaces and how he did not see or experience true allyship and antiracism from the mainly White clientele. “We are not saying don’t boycott... We are saying that you have to dig deeper into what the solution for change is actually going to be. And a lot of you are not willing to do that, and you’ve proven that time and time and time again.”²¹⁴ Based on the comment section, riders praised him for his vulnerability and call to change. Like a religious sermon, Logan’s speech had clear calls to action for how to move forward as a community while staying true to the values of the company.

Though the instructors guided the company through that difficult time, I cannot help but wonder if it was coincidental that SoulCycle worked to cleanse their spaces of this issue by burning crystals and sage during the month of September (around the time of the Jewish New Year). CEO Evelyn Whelan wrote on the company’s Instagram account: “September is a time for new beginnings and we’re big believers in the power of energy.... As we turn the corner into fall, today we cleansed all of our studios across the country and set our intentions for a season of renewal, positivity, connection, and gratitude.”²¹⁵ The whole issue seemed to be resolved with an overt turn toward to SoulCycle’s spiritual roots, with company leaders consciously and

²¹⁴ Trammell Logan [@trammell_logan]. “Pt. 2 (SoulCycle/Stephen Ross/Trump).” *Instagram*. August 8, 2019. Accessed December 12, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/tv/B06g0gcHMbE/> in Musselman, “The Politics of Charisma, 13.

²¹⁵ Melanie Whelan [@melanieanya]. “September is a time for new beginnings.” *Instagram*, September 5, 2019. Accessed September 6, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2C6MviHbRT/> in Musselman, “The Politics of Charisma, 17.

openly using the tropes of energy and religion to remain competitive in a capitalist exercise market.

The Power of the CrossFit and Peloton Coach

CrossFit also elevates its instructors to *rebbe* status for the sake of the brand. This empowerment is most evident through religious figures who are also CrossFit instructors. Rabbi Yolkut described the CrossFit coach as part prayer leader, part teacher, and part spiritual guide. He connects the messages he preaches from the pulpit and messages he delivers in CrossFit sessions, such as fighting through adversity and sweating through something hard in one's life. However, he is truly able to harness his spiritual sensibilities with the question of the day he offers to frame the work he leads in the Box. As a question designed to get people to put a spiritual intention to the workout, the idea Yolkut poses is "about ice breaking and letting your guard down a little bit. And it's breaking you down and letting people know you who are."²¹⁶ This sort of language elevates the coach to a more spiritual figure. However, CrossFit coaches present themselves as on the same playing field as participants, often completing the workout and struggling in the same way the participant is. Their role as a coach is more about pushing and guiding an individual and less about the individual trying to come up to their "level." Many CrossFit Boxes are tied to Christianity and utilize ministers in the coach role. Yet, I found it challenging to find CrossFit utilizing their instructors in the same physical way as SoulCycle does. One reason for this could be that CrossFit's spirituality is less explicit than SoulCycle's;

²¹⁶ Adir Yolkut, interview by author, October 6, 2022.

there is more of an emphasis placed on the individual experience than an instructor's class or words. Also, CrossFit workouts of the day are the same across the Boxes, so there is less room for the creative flexibility of the instructor.

Another popular fitness chain that elevates instructors to a status like that of Schachter-Shalomi's *rebbe* is Peloton. Founded in 2012, Peloton revolutionized the fitness industry by offering a workout class experience from the privacy of one's own home. Using on a stationary bike with a mounted screen that connects to the Peloton network, riders sign in to classes with other riders in places around the globe during live class sessions or prerecorded class at their own convenience. With a home studio in New York City that standardizes the production value of workout recordings, Peloton's brand ballooned during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it experienced some financial trouble after the worst of the pandemic passed at its peak, Peloton hit a market value of \$50 billion and 4.29 million fitness subscribers in 2021.²¹⁷ The company expanded from offering a menu of a stationary bicycle-based ride workouts to making available multiple kinds of fitness and wellness classes (yoga, Pilates, running, weight lifting, muscle toning, etc.) and a range of fitness equipment, including a treadmill, a rowing machine, and an interactive high tech full length mirror. Because of a heavy reliance on recorded exercise routines and workouts and an in-house messaging system that serves as an internal social media platform, Peloton operates as a para-social activity. This solitary nature of the activity distinguishes it from the other brands discussed in this paper that

²¹⁷ Lauren Thomas, "Peloton To Halt Production of Its Bikes, Treadmills As Demand Wanes," *CNBC*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/20/peloton-to-pause-production-of-its-bikes-treadmills-as-demand-wanes.html>.

rely solely on face-to-face exercise sessions. Knowing the risks of alienation and isolation, Peloton instructors intentionally deploy strategies and communication techniques to overcome the physical distance they have from their riders through the use of a “Leaderboard.” The Leaderboard allows riders to engage with other riders, use personalized usernames and profiles to create teams and like-minded groups, view one’s own and others’ physical activity statistics, and potentially earn the attention of an instructor in a call out of one’s name amidst the thousands of riders participating in each class. Instructors ground their work in fitness and, like SoulCycle and CrossFit instructors, they toggle back and forth between instruction and urging riders to reflect on their purpose in life or make references to forces bigger than themselves.²¹⁸ Peloton succeeds in making the status of the instructor key to the brand and to the experience of users.

In a Facebook group called PeloCLERGY for rabbis who “have found Peloton as a refuge for our minds,” Ohio Reform rabbi Benjy Bar-Lev wrote about how leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* services made him feel as if he is a “worship service Peloton instructor.”²¹⁹ That comparison takes seriously the suggestion that some instructors are elevated to *rebbe* status at the company. Instructors have become synonymous with their own brands, making extra money from advertising deals and outside work. For example, the most popular instructor on the platform, Cody Rigsby, has 1.2 million followers on Instagram, and he built his brand on the

²¹⁸ Michelle Boorstein, “Peloton Makes Toning Your Glutes Feel Spiritual. But Should Jesus Be Part of the Experience?,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/road-to-recovery/2021/02/05/peloton-ally-love-robin-christianity-covid/>.

²¹⁹ “PeloCLERGY.” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/874565319550014>.

assertion that his instructor persona is his authentic, true self.²²⁰ With his tangents on pop nostalgia and relating childhood memories, Rigsby offers his own life story as a way to connect more deeply with his riders; in doing so, he offers solace and guidance and wisdom like other Wellness *rebbe*s. Rigsby helped many Peloton users through the challenges of the pandemic lockdowns. In a 2021 *Washington Post* article, Michelle Boorstein wrote, “Rigsby rode into that chasm of misery with defiant, emphatic positivity.... Influencer-instructor-stars such as Rigsby exist at that surreal intersection of fame and friendship. Though you don’t actually know them, the most successful reach that status because they make you feel as if you do. Even through a screen and from a distance, they can have a very real effect on your life.”²²¹ This connection mirrors the accounts of the *rebbe* and how he made each person with whom he spoke feel like they mattered. Even mediated through a screen, Rigsby and Peloton look right into the eyes of their riders and inspire them to be their best selves. How is it that a spiritual leader can make each individual feel as if one matters, whether one is in person or not?

One method Peloton uses may be their deployment of spiritual language and vocabulary. Former theology student and now popular Peloton instructor Ally Love has found a way to infuse secular spirituality into her incredibly popular brand and occupies the same kind of *rebbe* status as SoulCycle instructors and her colleague Rigsby. Echoing a Sunday worship service, Love created a weekly Sunday class called “Sundays with Love.” In a Peloton produced

²²⁰ Eliana Dockterman, “Peloton Instructors Are Building Empires-and Making Money,” *Time Magazine*, June 16, 2022, <https://time.com/6187968/peloton-instructors-money-famous/>.

²²¹ Boorstein, “Peloton makes toning your glutes feel spiritual.”

video about the series, Love proclaimed "It's time to reclaim Sundays."²²² In the advertisement for this weekly series, Love sits on a bike in a purple robe, a crucifixion color Christians would recognize as connected to the Lenten season among all Christian denominations.²²³ Her eyes gaze up, and she stretches her hand toward the viewer. This sort of signaling resonates with those who grew up in Christian households who would recognize it as evoking church, even for those who choose not to ride synchronously with Love when she offers the series on Sunday morning. Though she uses secular language, Love speaks to the thousands of Peloton riders, regardless of religious affiliation, who opt for secular activities like riding a Peloton at a time associated with church services. Widely recognized as deploying Christian themes without articulating a Christ-based theology, Love's Sunday morning ride offers empowerment based on a secular spirituality. As she noted, her "prime priority is to hold and create spaces for people to show up as themselves"²²⁴ with authenticity and pride. She peppers the narrative she accompanies the ride with the sharing of personal dogmas which she teaches by way of analogies, stories of inspiration, edicts of hard work, an emphasis on finding one own path, and the need to enjoy each day. She includes liturgical phrases like "moment of grace" and "surrender yourself."²²⁵ As BuzzFeed writer Stephanie McNeal reports, Love preaches as she rides. McNeal quotes Love directly: "'Sometimes I say 'higher love' is up here,' she said, gesturing above. 'But I gotta reframe that. Higher love is in here,' she placed her hand on her

²²² Ally Love. Twitter Post. October 15, 2021, 11:24 AM. Tweet.
<https://twitter.com/allymisslove/status/1449078642894462979>

²²³ Boorstein, "Peloton makes toning your glutes feel spiritual."

²²⁴ Stephanie McNeal, "The Gospel Of Peloton's Ally Love," *Buzzfeed News*, March 24, 2022,
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/stephaniemcneal/ally-love-squad-peloton>.

²²⁵ Boorstein, "Peloton makes toning your glutes feel spiritual."

heart.”²²⁶ Similarly to the theology discussed in in the first chapter of this work, Love is empowering others to connect with a higher power in a personal way. This personalization of a broad message is another way Peloton instructors illustrate how their followers understand them as *rebbes*. Messages of inclusion and self-worth solidify the large goal of empowerment. Love ends class with the same phrase meant to carry her riders through their days and weeks: “I leave you with this. ... May you always do everything with peace and do it with love, because I am Ally Love and you are love.”²²⁷

In similar ways to SoulCycle cyclists and CrossFit Box users, Peloton riders find a new form of spirituality in a Peloton class. One rider made this connection explicitly: “When my son passed away seven years ago, I couldn't bring myself to go back to a church. It just didn't feel right. But that, her virtues, our Peloton community? That is my church. I come off that Bike stronger mentally than I got on, feeling connected, ready, knowing my purpose.”²²⁸ The popularity of Love’s classes is evident; Love can get up to 75,000 people worldwide taking the class with her on Sundays. She has also created the Lovesquad, a brand dedicated to enlightenment and self-improvement.

While it might appear challenging to understand how riders feel a deep connection with an instructor on the screen, for Peloton riders there is an intimacy in the riding experience. Some report feeling that the instructor is speaking directly to them. I can attest to this

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ McNeal, “The Gospel Of Peloton’s Ally Love.”

²²⁸ Dana Meltzer Zupeda, “How Sundays With Love Helps Members Be Their Best Selves Ally Love’s Series on the Bike Has Inspired and Uplifted the Peloton Community,” *Peloton: The Output*. <https://blog.onepeloton.com/sundays-with-love-season-2/#:~:text=Sundays%20With%20Love%20is%20more,with%20Peloton%20instructor%20Ally%20Love.>

experience, after taking some classes myself, I developed a clear sense that the Peloton teacher is looking right at the rider. The instructor takes up most of the frame of the screen, and the screen is large and close to the rider's face when one rides. There are riders in person during the filming of the class, but instructors look directly into the camera to speak. Though I do not love working out on a screen, I felt that the sense that the teacher was talking directly to me in ways not felt in an in-person class.

Also, I felt like the themes of "Sundays with Love" spoke to me directly as a rider and were easy to personalize. First, it struck me that Love acknowledged in class that she was not a pastor, and this space was not a church. And yet, she continued by saying she was there to empower her audience.²²⁹ Love used the pronoun "you" repeatedly, which gave the impression she spoke directly to her listener as an individual. The repetition of the second person pronoun in this way made it clear to me why so many riders feel like they are having an intimate interaction with the instructor. I imagine there is something about being alone while riding that contributes to the connection a participant feels with an instructor. Though Peloton riders can be in near constant communication with other riders (even when taking the class asynchronously), the instructor remains the main connection a rider has during a challenging activity. That connection to the person inspiring the kind of physical exertion necessary to complete a ride is fostered by the feeling that the instructor seems to witness the activity and share in that experience by talking directly to the rider. For example, while teaching, Love continually used the phrase "understand, unlock, and unleash." To me, those words felt like of

²²⁹ I interpreted Love's message as a cover for the company to eschew criticisms of pretension toward institutional religion, while the instructor worked explicitly to create the same feelings and inspiration that a church might.

the repetition of a prayer experience. In prayer, there is an effort to understand what one needs and to ask the divine to get one to that spiritual space. Love's repetition of those words summarized that effort to me. I think Love taps into a religious sensibility that feels personal as she looks at each person individually from the screen.²³⁰

Similarly to a SoulCycle experience, the most powerful part of the class for me came at the end, during the cool down, when Love crystallized the whole experience of the ride by explaining that riding a Peloton can help make a person whole so one can give back to the world. She said, "All it takes is one person to change the world."²³¹ Echoing the Talmud verse cited by a SoulCycle rider, Love knowingly and unknowingly alludes to sacred text to reach and engage her community. Other Peloton instructors have similar sign off their classes with their own affirmative signature sayings. As evident by these words from the instructors and the sentiments echoed by riders, the spiritual *rebbe*s of fitness serve as powerful forces in the lives of their many followers and should not be ignored by the organized religious community.

²³⁰ Ally Love, Sunday's with Love class, Peloton app, November 21, 2021.

²³¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

While many Americans in 2023 are living better than in any previous moment in national history, the challenges we face are great. From the largest wealth disparities in American history to the rise of the Internet and consumer capitalism to an epidemic of loneliness and mental health crises, Americans still seek greater connectivity to something larger than themselves. As the Pew Research Study indicates, old answers, rituals and structures do not resonate in the same ways, and many are unbundling or recreating ritual practices to help connect.²³² Scholar Tara Isabella Burton wrote that while the rise of Protestantism was deeply rooted in the invention of the printing press, the Internet is a key driver in the anti-institutional, intuitional self-divinization that we see driving religious practices today.²³³ SoulCycle and CrossFit are two clear examples of companies that are reinventing the meaning of spirituality and religion.

It is my hope that the organized Jewish community pays attention to these trends and turns to communities created by SoulCycle and CrossFit to understand how to draw the Remixed in. Since many Millennials are remixing their religious meaning, focusing on only one area of a religious experience minimizes the possibilities of future engagement. These techniques should elevate the texts in our tradition that promote the idea of finding the divine within oneself as a way of appealing to Jews who are searching for ways to find self-meaning and self-worth in their daily activities. Liberal Jewish communities need to build in cohesive practices and language to forge connection among other liberal Jews and the Jewish people at

²³² ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual*, 186.

²³³ Burton, *Strange Rites*, 242.

large. By employing language that feels relevant, intimate, and meaningful to all generations, our spiritual leaders can strengthen multi-generational communities and appeal to Jews who long for connectivity and the thrill of being recognized as a unique person. While many Jewish organizations excel in many ways, I believe these suggestions and others sparked by this research are key to creating a Jewish community that meets the needs of contemporary and future spiritual seekers. The elements of health and wellness culture that are resonant today, I believe, can be adapted in Judaism to deepen the meaning of Jewish experience and broaden its appeal. It was only when I paired my SoulCycle and CrossFit practices alongside Jewish prayer and my own theology that the meaning of both systems became greater in my life. It is my hope this research will inspire the same sort of thinking in others.

Health and wellness culture is only one area where religious practices and spirituality can be found today. This field of research has been growing in recent years, and as the number of Remixed grows in America, the world of nontraditional spirituality will only increase. Scholar of religion Robert Fuller wrote that these “unchurched systems teach us that it is our spiritual responsibility to promote the full expression of life here on earth.”²³⁴ May these systems continue to enrich, evolve, and shape American Judaism into its next chapter for generations to come.

²³⁴ Fuller, *Spiritual but not Religious*, 156.

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