





# According to whose will

The entanglements of gender & religion in the lives  
of transgender Jews with an Orthodox background

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### **Abstract**

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This study, the first in its scope on transgender religiosity, is based on in-depth biographical interviews with 13 transgender participants with a Jewish Orthodox background (currently and formerly Orthodox). The primary aim of the study has been to elucidate the entanglements of gender and religion in three periods of the participants' lives: pre-transition, transition and post-transition. One of the main topics investigated have been the ways participants negotiated gendered religious practices in those three periods. A secondary aim of this study has been to co-theorize, in dialogue with the participants, different possible paths for religious change; that is, the ways in which the larger Orthodox community might respond to the presence of openly transgender members in its midst.

Concerning the findings, in the course of this study I have developed the themes of *dislocations* and *reversal stories* to explain how the participants negotiated the entanglements of gender and religion particularly in the transitional and post-transitional periods. The latter theme—*reversal stories*—has been of special relevance to explain how gendered religious practices, which were generally detrimental to the acceptance of the participants' gender identities during the pre-transitional period, had the potential to become a powerful source for gender affirmation after transition. In this study I argue that this possibility and its related mode of agency are not contained within the binary resistance/subordination that feminist scholars have developed to account for the agency of women in traditionalist religions. In order to better conceptualize the notion of agency and explore the nature of the mutual entanglements of gender and religion, I deploy the body of theoretical work developed by Karen Barad known as agential realism. Lastly, I conclude by examining my initial commitments to social constructionism (in Peter Berger's definition). In the final chapter, I describe how in the course of my study I have encountered three unexpected sites of resistance to social constructionism that have led me to reconsider my previous epistemological commitments and embrace posthumanism as a more satisfactory alternative.

**Keywords:** agential realism, entanglement, feminism, FTM, gender, intra-action, Jewish, Judaism, LGBTQ, MTF, non-binary, Orthodox, posthumanism, queer, religion, religiosity, religious change, religious practice, social constructionism, transgender

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*for Jakob*

*Father in heaven, who did miracles for our ancestors  
with fire and water,  
You changed the fire of Chaldees so it would not burn hot,  
You changed Dina in the womb of her mother to a girl,  
You changed the staff to a snake before a million eyes,  
You changed [Moses'] hand to [leprous] white  
and the sea to dry land.  
In the desert you turned rock to water,  
hard flint to a fountain.  
Who would then turn me from a man to woman? \**

Kalonymus ben Kalonymus, 1286- after 1328

---

\* Translation by R. Steve Greenberg.

# Contents

Preface .....	11
1. Introduction.....	13
1.1 Background and purpose of this study .....	13
1.2 Presentation of the study and research questions .....	16
1.3 Previous research.....	18
1.4 Theoretical understandings prior to entering the field .....	21
1.5 The concept of religion in this study .....	23
2. Research design and methods .....	26
2.1 Introduction .....	26
2.2 Shifting the research focus .....	27
2.3 Adjusting the research expectations .....	29
2.4 The interviews .....	33
2.5 An abductive approach.....	35
2.6 The analysis and results: facing a methodological paradox .....	36
2.7 The role of participant .....	38
2.8 Brief summary .....	42
3. The research triangle: the field, the researcher, the participants.....	45
3.1 Introduction .....	45
3.2 The field .....	45
3.2.1 Israel .....	45
3.2.2 North America .....	50
3.3 The researcher .....	53
3.3.1 Passing in the sociological literature: Goffman and Garfinkel...54	
3.3.2 Passing as a Jew .....	56
3.4 The participants.....	57
3.4.1 A note on the language .....	58
3.4.2 The participants .....	60
Self-selection.....	60
Brief introductions .....	63
3.4.3 The Dina list & the ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer .....	67
4. Analysis and results .....	70

4.1 Introduction .....	70
4.2 The ambivalence towards Orthodoxy in transgender Jewish lives.....	72
4.2.1 Pre-transition: a difficult start .....	72
Gendered religious practices before transition.....	72
The morning blessings as a case.....	76
Other gendered religious practices .....	78
FTM participants and male religious practices.....	81
Closing remarks.....	82
God during childhood: a fraught relationship .....	83
The path towards self-recognition.....	83
Lacking concepts .....	84
Dissonance between Orthodox and transgender.....	85
Rabbis: seeking their counsel or staying away from them .....	86
Disembodiment and other strategies .....	87
4.2.2 Transition: the need for dislocation .....	91
Dislocation of place .....	92
Dislocation of authority .....	94
Dislocation of practice .....	97
Closing remarks .....	99
4.2.3 After transition: similar attempts and different outcomes .....	99
The search for a place in the Orthodox world.....	99
Exploring other streams of Judaism .....	102
Vulnerability.....	103
Asking a rabbi for a <i>psak</i> .....	105
Forming a family and social isolation .....	107
Gendered religious practices after transition.....	108
Learning and unlearning gendered religious practices .....	109
Reversal stories: gendered religious practices and God .....	110
Two qualifications: re-engaging on their own terms & grey areas.....	114
The Dina list.....	118
An opening in the <i>halakha</i> : the Tzitz Eliezer .....	120
Meaning of being Orthodox & transgender .....	120
4.3 Views and experiences of religious change.....	123
4.3.1 Views of religious change .....	123
Analysis of the current situation .....	123
Benefits and drawbacks of visibility .....	124
Role models.....	128
Models of change.....	129
The role of the rabbis: lack of leadership .....	131
4.3.2 Experiences of religious change .....	134
4.4 A non-binary perspective .....	137
4.4.1 A non-binary Orthodox Judaism?.....	137
4.4.2 A few things about Ben .....	138



4.4.3 A gender neutral conversion ceremony .....	139
4.4.4 A non-binary reading of Orthodox religious practices .....	141
Counting in the <i>minyan</i> as a case .....	141
4.4.5 A trans theology.....	144
4.4.6 Rabbis' responses: from flat to multi-leveled binarism.....	146
4.4.7 Closing remarks .....	148
5. Theoretical discussion of the results .....	150
5.1 Introduction: two questions .....	150
5.2 Question 1: rethinking agency.....	150
5.2.1 Deconstructing a taxonomy .....	152
5.2.2 Fasten your seatbelts: sociology meets quantum physics .....	158
Agential realism .....	159
Poststructuralist, feminist and queer theories .....	163
<i>Bestiarium Baradium</i> .....	165
The entanglements of gender and religion .....	167
Back to agency .....	170
Agency, intentionality, responsibility.....	171
Transitioning as disentanglement.....	173
Concluding remarks .....	175
5.3 Question 2: co-theorizing religious change .....	175
5.3.1 Previous research on religious change in Orthodox contexts ...	176
5.3.2 Participants' models of religious change .....	178
5.3.3 Ripple effects: an hypothesis for religious change .....	179
6. Conclusion .....	183
6.1 Introduction .....	183
6.2 The sociology of religion: an assessment.....	184
6.2.1 Two critiques .....	184
6.2.2 The sociology of religion: an exercise in liminality .....	187
6.2.3 This study in the previous discussion .....	189
6.3 From social constructionism to posthumanism: current debates and future perspectives .....	193
6.3.1 Three sites of resistance.....	193
6.3.2 From social constructionism to posthumanism .....	198
6.3.3 Epilogue: from posthumanism to (re)enchantment.....	201
Postscript.....	206
Glossary .....	207
Reference list .....	211

# Acronyms

ANT–Actor-Network Theory

FTM–Female-to-Male

MTF–Male-to-Female

NRM–New Religious Movements

QFT–Quantum Field Theory

LGBTQ–Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer<sup>1</sup>

SSK–Sociology of Scientific Knowledge

STS–Science and Technology Studies

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this study, I use queer as a shorthand for genderqueer. Other larger acronyms are also in existence. The most comprehensive one I found in the internet was LGBTQQIAAP (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Allies, Pansexual; retrieved from <https://decahedronofq.wordpress.com/>). As much as such comprehensive acronyms are laudable for their inclusivity, they are often impractical to use given their length. Lately the acronym LGBTQ+ (with the plus standing for all the missing groups, present and future) seems to have gained acceptance. As I explain (see section 1.3 below) such politics of naming are indicative of the tensions that emerge when different identities are conflated in one category. In the case of this study I use LGBTQ for the reason that transgender and, to a much lesser extent, queer, are the concepts I deploy in my analysis.

# Preface

This book is both about a very new and a very old story. It is a very new story because, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first study in its scope of transgender religiosity. At the same time, as the verses above by the medieval Jewish scholar and translator Kalonymus ben Kalonymus illustrate, this is a story that spans over centuries. It would be tempting to say that this is also a universal story, but I will do my best to steer away from that temptation. Too often in history have the stories of the few become first hostages and later victims of the push for universality. And yet, I still feel compelled to join that Roman slave-turn-playwright in saying *homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*.<sup>2</sup>

Paraphrasing a popular African proverb, writing a dissertation does not take a whole village, but almost. First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the 13 participants who made this study possible and who so generously took time off to share their life stories with me. In the course of these last few years I have felt inspired by your journeys and humbled by your courage. I would like to thank two participants in particular, Ben Baader and Yiscah Smith, for encouraging me to pursue this topic and for guiding me in my first steps. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Joy Ladin for providing crucial reassurance at the initial stages of this project and for staying in touch since then as a friend and mentor. I would also like to thank Eshel, and particularly Miryam Kabakov, R. Steve Greenberg and Steve Kay, for their support during the early days of this project, when my plan had been to write on the experiences of Orthodox lesbians and gays. For their help with *halakhic* questions and sources, I am also indebted to R. Jack Abramowitz and R. Jeffrey Fox. I owe my gratitude also to Barbara Spectre for opening the doors of the *beit midrash*, the Jewish house of study, to people like myself at the Paideia Institute in Stockholm.

Fieldwork both in Israel and North America has been an indispensable element of this project. I would like to thank Michele Rosenthal at Haifa University and Angela Zito at NYU's Center for Religion and Media for being my academic hosts during my extended periods of fieldwork. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Jaeger and Zion families for their hospitality.

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<sup>2</sup> "I am a human being, nothing human is alien to me" (my translation). The quote is from Terence.

My heartfelt thanks also to the foundations that generously funded my conference trips and periods of fieldwork: Anna Maria Lundins resestipendier, Berndt Gustafssons minnesfond, Helge Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse, Sederholm stipendier för utrikes resor, Stiftelsen Torsten Amundsons fond and STINT.

I am particularly indebted to my colleagues at the higher seminar of the sociology of religion, the Center for Religion and Society and the Impact Program—all of them based at Uppsala University—for their camaraderie and their review of excerpts from this study. I would also like to express my gratitude to Kristin Aune for her helpful comments on the manuscript, to Zanne Domoney-Lyttle for her assistance in polishing the text, and to Inbal Mizrach for the cover design. A word of thanks also for two fellow pilgrims on the winding road to the PhD, Pawel Odyniec and Peik Ingman, for the gift of their friendship and for the countless conversations that so much contributed to my thinking on the topics of this study. My warmest thanks also to my parents, my sister Elisabet, as well as Gregor and Matilda, for loving and feeding me during my visits to Barcelona in spite of not really knowing what the heck I was doing in my doctorate in faraway Uppsala.

Very few people have been part of this project from the very beginning, but my supervisors Mia Lövhelm and Lena Roos are two of them. As an immigrant who at that time did not speak Swedish, someone who you barely knew and whose academic background was not in the social sciences, I am immensely grateful that you made time for me and that you took your chances endorsing an unconventional application to the PhD program. The trust you put in me back then, and that you have renewed through the years, has been a powerful motivation to complete the task. Thank you also Lena for your close readings of my texts, for sharing with me your deep knowledge of Judaism and for your tireless encouragement. As my main supervisor, I would like to thank you Mia for striking the difficult balance between guidance and freedom, and for your wisdom in giving advice which is only matched by your ability to listen. To both of you, I could not have been in better hands.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my partner Jakob to whom this study is dedicated. In the last few years, Jakob and I have barely talked about my research. I knew that Jakob was curious and would have loved to know more, but he respected my wish to keep silent and I am grateful for that. One reason I did not discuss my research with Jakob was that it became important for me to keep a portion of my life free from my academic preoccupations. At the same time, to imagine you Jakob reading this book as it should be read, with a fresh pair of eyes, was a major incentive to pull this off.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background and purpose of this study

In *Strange rebels*, author Christian Caryl (2013) claims that 1979 marked a turning-point in the post-1945 *status quo*, not the least in regards to the role of religion in world affairs.<sup>3</sup> That was the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran but also of John Paul II's symbolic first visit to Poland as pope, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which would end in defeat at the hands of the *muja-hideen*. In the USA, 1979 was the year that Baptist minister Jerry Falwell founded the organization *Moral Majority*, which would become one of the most successful political vehicles of the Christian Right during the years of the Ronald Reagan administration (1981-1989).

The 1980s, the decade following the momentous events referred to above, witnessed the emergence of a debate among sociologists of religion (Furseth & Repstad, 2006, p. 87) concerning the merits of classical secularization theory as formulated by Bryan Wilson (1966) and the young Peter Berger (1967), to mention two of the most notable proponents. Until that time, the proposition that modernization would inevitably lead to secularization, aptly epitomized by David Lerner's disjunctive "Mecca or mechanization" (1958, p. 405), had gone relatively unchallenged. Reflecting on that period in retrospect, Grace Davie commented that one of the fundamental flaws of the theory had been that it "became axiomatic, theoretically necessary rather than empirically founded" (1999, p. 76).

The early 1990s saw the publication of *Tongues of fire: the explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* by David Martin (1990) who had previously made a significant contribution to secularization theory (1978). Martin's study on the rapid growth of Evangelicalism in Latin America represented an important shift towards non-western contexts that challenged the premises of the classical model. The most influential work of that period, though, was probably José Casanova's (1994) *Public religions in the modern world* which represented a major milestone in the deconstruction of classical secularization theory. On the one hand, Casanova refined the theory by disentangling three different strands in the notion of secularization as differentiation, privatization and decline of religious beliefs and practices (1994, p. 211). On the other hand,

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<sup>3</sup> I owe the idea to start this introduction with Caryl's *Strange Rebels* to the keynote lecture delivered by Grace Davie at the May 2013 Impact of Religion conference at Uppsala University, Sweden.

Casanova acknowledged the link between modernization and differentiation but questioned that the other two strands in the theory needed to follow by necessity. Furthermore, his case studies in Spain, Poland, Brazil and the USA pointed to an opposite trend, with religion becoming more rather than less present in the public sphere (de-privatization). Another much commented upon, though highly controversial work published in the 1990s, was Samuel Huntington's (1996) *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* which was an attempt to come to terms with the new geopolitical reality that had emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union (the regime that had famously embraced state atheism) by predicting that religious and cultural identities would become the new sources of global conflicts in detriment of political ideologies. In those years, Berger took a spectacular U-turn concerning his previous views on secularization (Berger, 1967) stating that "the world [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever" (1999, p. 2). The close of the century saw also the publication of another influential work, *Multiple modernities* (Eisenstadt, 2000), which provided the theoretical underpinnings for a decoupling of modernization and secularization. With the criticism of the secularization theory came also a shift in the understanding of secularization in western Europe. From being a model that the rest of the world would follow sooner or later, western Europe increasingly became the exception rather than the rule in the eyes of leading sociologists of religion (see Davie, 2002).

The 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington at the dawn of the new century, followed by the War on Terror and the rise of islamophobia, had a profound impact on society whose ripple effects also reached academia (see Torpey, 2010; Possamai, 2016). Religion was back on the research agenda across disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. A renewed interest on religion was apparent not least in the work of Jürgen Habermas (2006a; 2006b; 2008) who, in a much quoted essay (2006a), launched a new phase of the debate about the role of religion in the public sphere. From a different perspective, the work of the team of researchers headed by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in the Kendal project (Heelas, Woodhead, Seel, Szerszynski, & Tusting, 2005) documented the rise of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in the UK, thus offering empirical grounds to argue in favor of both secularizing and what they called sacralizing<sup>4</sup> trends. Moreover, the increasing religious pluralism (Green, 2010) as well as the heightened visibility of migrant

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<sup>4</sup> Different authors have used other concepts with different nuances but with a shared notion that they could identify social trends that challenged the classical secularization thesis in one way or another. Some of the terms used have been de-secularization (Berger, 1992), de-privatization (Casanova, 1994) and the resurgence of religion. Concerning the latter, the origin of the concept is unclear but as early as 1996 David Westerlund edited a volume with that title. For the purpose of this introduction, I borrow Heelas' *et al.* (2005) concept of sacralization/sacralizing trends as an umbrella term to describe a variety of phenomena that challenge classical secularization theory such as the rise of NRMs, the new visibility of religion, the increase in

communities in European debates about integration and multiculturalism eroded the normative secularity of European exceptionalism. Davie's warning to fellow sociologists of religion that "the presence of Islam is a crucial factor that we ignore at our peril" (2006, p. 258) has become even more pressing since the start of the refugee crisis in 2015. Rather than European exceptionalism, what we are witnessing might be better described as European idiosyncrasy; that is, how secularizing and sacralizing trends also present in other geographical and cultural contexts take on specifically European forms as they are shaped by local histories, mores and pressures.

The previous paragraphs were a brief and by no means comprehensive account of some of the historical events, scholars and works that have shaped the sociology of religion since the 1980s. A different commentator would have included other names and turning points, but the main argument would have probably been similar. Once heralded as the academic gold standard, classical secularization theory entered in crisis in the last few decades, clearing the field for a more nuanced and multifaceted account of religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although classical secularization still has its advocates (Voas & Bruce, 2007), the focus of much research, at least in the nordic<sup>5</sup> countries, has shifted towards studying the complexity of contemporary societies in which secularizing trends are punctuated by the resilience of religion and its ability to flourish in old and new spaces (Lövheim, 2011; Yip & Nynäs, 2012), under known and novel guises (Taira, 2011; Lassander, 2012), at the same time that religion has become more visible through media consumption (Lövheim, 2012; Winnell, 2016) and debates in the public sphere (Axner, 2013). Also particularly relevant is that the encounter of secularizing and sacralizing trends is taking place at a time in which globalization and migrant flows are challenging previously held views regarding the sovereignty and ethnic composition of European nation-states. In summary, whereas core aspects of secularization are not being rolled back, religion has not gone away either at the same time that it is becoming more diverse and visible (see Davie, 2013).

Both the new visibility of religion as well as the overlap of secularizing and sacralizing trends create opportunities for co-existence and eclecticism, but also contestation between secular and religious claims, values and narratives. In relation to the latter, this study takes its point of departure in the analysis that gender issues have become one of the main sites of contestation in post-secular societies (Korte, 2011, p. 11). The debates in Europe over same-gender

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religious pluralism through migration, the popularization of practices rooted in eastern traditions such as yoga and mindfulness meditation, etc.

<sup>5</sup> I choose not to capitalize nordic, in the same way that I do not capitalize eastern or western, except in the use of proper nouns such as 'Western Wall' or 'West Bank.' I intend that choice to be a gesture towards a certain postcolonial sensibility which seeks to question the validity and fixity of those categories. When quoting other authors, however, I reproduce the spelling of their choice.

marriage,<sup>6</sup> abortion, ordination of women priests or the banning of headscarves and other forms of women's Muslim dress are some of the most conspicuous examples (see section 5.2 for a discussion of the latter in light of a critique of liberal feminist theory). Following Yip & Nynäs I understand the post-secular here not as the opposite of secularization, but rather as a "relocation of boundaries and blurring of previously more clearly marked and differentiated 'secular' and 'religious' spheres" (2012, p. 4). At a time when boundaries are becoming blurred and religion more liquid (Taira, 2011), gender issues still have the ability to galvanize the polarizing narratives of secular and religious antagonism; what Yip & Nynäs call the "narrow focus on religion as an intrinsically restraining and constrictive force" (2012, p. 1). Furthermore, Woodhead (2008) has criticized secularization theory for its gender blindness which resulted in the unwitting enforcement of a masculinist perspective. The lack of a gender perspective has been particularly detrimental given the overrepresentation of women in religious settings as well as the uneven ways in which secularizing trends have affected women and men (Aune, Sharma, & Vincett, 2008).

If my analysis is correct and gender issues have not only become one of the main sites of contestation in post-secular societies, but have also been neglected by sociologists of religion until fairly recently, then it is particularly important that we better understand the intersections of gender and religion through case studies in a variety of religious settings and traditions. Moreover, if the intersections of gender and religion are particularly exposed to controversy and scrutiny, the chance that they become sites of religious negotiation and change greatly increases. Once the linearity of classical secularization theory has been left behind, the outcomes of such negotiations cannot be predicted in advance and demand both qualitative and quantitative approaches to their study. This dissertation, in summary, is devoted to a case study at the intersection of gender and religion and its purpose is to refine our understanding of that intersection as well as its potential for religious change.

## 1.2 Presentation of the study and research questions

Before there were research questions, there was both a deep-felt interest for the life stories of transgender Jews with an Orthodox background as well as a hunch that their insights and experiences were not only worth studying for their own sake, but also had much to contribute to the wider field of the soci-

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<sup>6</sup> I prefer 'same-gender' to the more common 'same-sex marriage' since I see the gender identity and expression of those being married more relevant than their genitalia. That view is reinforced by the case of female-to-male (FTM) men who are gay but have not undergone bottom surgery. Concerning the term 'bottom surgery' and other questions of language in this dissertation, see section 3.4.1.



ology of religion. In chapter 2, I explain how the process, from my initial proposal to the final research topic and design, grew organically through the first two years of the doctorate. In chapter 3 I also account for my own personal and academic background, as well as my relation to the topic. Both the process leading to this dissertation as well as my own background are the subtext to my topic and research questions, which I present here in a finalized form.

Among the six types of case studies identified by Alexander George & Andrew Bennett<sup>7</sup> (2005, pp. 75-76), this dissertation aligns closest with the heuristic case study characterized by its inductive elements and limited inferences aimed at exploring outcomes not typically considered by extant theories. In particular, this is a case study of the intersection of gender and religion as well as its potential for religious change among 13 transgender Jews with an Orthodox background (formerly or currently Orthodox). The study has been mostly based on face to face interviews, with observations and communication through electronic media fulfilling both a supplementing and correcting role. As such, this study falls within the category of qualitative research in the tradition of interpretative or hermeneutic sociology (Furseth & Repstad, 2006, p. 120). The research questions for this study are as follows:

- How did the participants negotiate the intersections of gender and religion?
- What are the participants' views and experiences of religious change or lack thereof in relation to transgender in the Orthodox community?

As the research questions suggest, this study takes its point of departure from the lived experiences of the participants, and in this sense aligns with the body of work in the sociology of religion known as lived religion (McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2005) or everyday religion (Ammerman, 2007). Following that body of scholarship, this study had a strong inductive element which in turn was offset by the theoretical understandings I had prior to entering the field (see section 1.4 below). As I explain in more detail in chapter 2, the fact that the research design was tilted towards an inductive approach responded to the lack of research on transgender religiosity (see section 1.3 below) as well as issues of representativity linked to my status as a double outsider (neither transgender nor Jewish). That this study is qualitative and abductive (tilting towards the inductive side; see section 2.5 for details) does not mean that it is not interested in discussing and generating theory. On the contrary, to refine and develop theory is one of its concerns but theory takes center stage *after* the results from the fieldwork have been presented.

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<sup>7</sup> 1) A theoretical/configurative ideographic, 2) Disciplined configurative, 3) Heuristic, 4) Theory testing, 5) Plausibility probes, 6) "Building Block" studies of particular types or subtypes.

## 1.3 Previous research

Social scientific research on transgender issues dates at least as far back as Harold Garfinkel's 1967 study of Agnes (see section 3.3.1 for a discussion of Garfinkel's work). Building on Garfinkel's ethnomethodological approach, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's (1978) study of how gender is socially constructed was also an important milestone in transgender research. However, it was not until the 1990s that the field of transgender studies started to get established in scholarly circles following the publication of Sandy Stone's (1992) manifesto<sup>8</sup> and the academic conferences organized in the second half of the decade (Stryker, 2008, p. 144). The research produced in those years by first-generation, openly transgender scholars such as Jay Prosser (1998) and Viviane Namaste (2000) was centered to a large extent in a criticism of queer theory, particularly Judith Butler's (1990) account of drag performativity and her reading (1993) of the murder of male-to-female (MTF) performer Venus Xtravaganza as portrayed in the 1990 documentary *Paris is burning*. A point of agreement between Prosser (1998) and Namaste (2000) was that Butler's conceptualization of gender performativity as something socially constructed, playful and fluid, was at odds with the lived experience of transgender people with a binary gender identity<sup>9</sup> who struggled to preserve a cohesive sense of gender in the face of rampant transphobia. Namaste's main criticism was that queer theory had used transgender as a rhetorical figure thus making invisible the social world and subjectivities of transgender lives (2000, p. 16).

Although transgender studies as an interdisciplinary field have been growing since their inception in terms of scope and scholarly production, religious perspectives continue to be marginal. It is rather telling that in the two large volumes comprising *The transgender studies reader* (Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Stryker & Aizura, 2013) contributions addressing contemporary transgender religiosity are conspicuously missing. Iconic authors such as Leslie Feinberg (1996) have discussed transgender religiosity in their works but through a historical or anthropological filter, that is, as a phenomenon either belonging to a distant past (e.g. Joan of Arc) or to colonized, non-western cultures (e.g. two-spirit people among Native Americans, *hijras* in the Indian subcontinent, etc.).

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<sup>8</sup> Stone's (1992) *The empire strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto* was a response to Janice Raymond's (1979) book *The transsexual empire: The making of the she-male* in which Raymond expressed a wide range of transphobic arguments under the guise of second wave feminism (Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> The politics of naming in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the period when the works by Prosser (1998) and Namaste (2000) were written, differed from those currently in use. Both authors refer in the context of this discussion to transsexuals but I use transgender in line with what I discuss in section 3.4.1 concerning terminology. I do make a distinction, though, between transgender with or without a binary gender identity.

On the occasions that transgender religiosity has been addressed, it has been in the framework of studies of religion among LGBTQ. In an overview of recent scholarly research on LGBTQI<sup>10</sup> religiosity and spirituality in the West, Andrew Yip (2010) identifies both the strengths and weaknesses of the field and suggests guidelines for a new research agenda. Yip points out that research on LGBTQI religiosity & spirituality has been overly focused on homosexuality (particularly male homosexuality; Yip, 2010, pp. 35-36, 45) and organized religion in Western contexts (particularly Christianity; Yip, 2010, p. 36, 45). As Yip cautions, “it is extremely important that we do not assume that the experiences of LGBTQI people of non-Christian religions will mirror that of LGBTQI Christians” (2010, p. 46). Consequently, Yip calls for the need to expand and diversify the research agenda (2010, p. 45). This study can be seen as a direct response to such a call, particularly if we agree that the question of whether one of the sites of fieldwork (i.e. Israel) should be considered ‘western’ is a matter of debate.<sup>11</sup> Yip (2010) also identifies three main themes that have emerged from the extant scholarship on LGBTQI religiosity & spirituality. The three themes are described as:

1. theological and scriptural research presenting LGBTQI-affirming views;
2. the tensions and possibilities opened by the convergence of religious and secular discourses on LGBTQI;
3. the lived experiences of religious & spiritual LGBTQI people.

Of those three themes, the third one is that which resonates most with the focus and topic of this study and for that reason I will elaborate on it. Concerning that third theme, Yip identifies three subthemes and some suggestions for further research (2010, pp. 45-49). The first one, which according to Yip has received most attention, refers to “diverse management strategies of homonegativity” (2010, pp. 45-46). As the wording indicates, it focuses on the experiences of lesbian and gay people and the different strategies they deploy to negotiate their sexual orientation and their religious/spiritual attachments. The second subtheme focuses on the beliefs and practices of LGBTQI people (Yip, 2010, p. 47). According to Yip, the second subtheme has been much less developed than the previous one and the little research that is available presents an almost exclusively Christian perspective. Again, there is a dearth of research that this study aims to alleviate through the particular interest taken in gendered religious practices (see chapter 4). Finally, the third subtheme called “intersection of identities” (Yip, 2010, p. 47), aims at embedding lived experiences in “LGBTQI people’s broader web of social relations” taking into

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<sup>10</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex. Here I reproduce the acronym used by Yip (2010). The same applies to the capitalization of ‘West.’

<sup>11</sup> The debate is not limited to Israel, its state and society, but also to what Yip (2010) means by “the West” and to what extent the categories of east and west are still helpful or result in more confusion than clarity.

account a variety of spheres of sociality (work, family, intimate partners) but also identity markers such as gender, class or age. Included in the third sub-theme are also the ways in which lesbian and gay adherents of minority religions, particularly Islam, need to manage both homophobia inside and outside their faith communities, as well as the racism and discrimination in the majority society. In terms of future research within the theme of lived experiences, Yip points out how previous research has focused on institutional settings and he welcomes research which looks for religion & spirituality in other places, such as bars and clubs, which are hubs for lesbian and gay sociality but have been left untapped by scholars of religion (2010, p. 48). Last but not least, Yip ends his overview by vindicating the importance of anecdotal narratives and personal biographies as an alternative to social scientific literature since personal accounts use a more accessible language and are therefore more effective in reaching a wider audience (2010, p. 48-49). Furthermore, Yip claims that biographical accounts can be engaging and inspiring in a way that academic works rarely are. I share Yip's (2010) appreciation for biographical accounts, particularly for their richness and depth, but I resist his suggestion that, to put it in stark terms, serious academic work has to be arcane and dull in comparison. This study is actually an attempt to develop scholarship on the basis of biographical accounts by harnessing the richness and expressivity of the participant's life stories to the task of sociological reflection and analysis.

As Yip's (2010) overview makes clear, previous research on LGBTQ religiosity has tended to conflate transgender issues with those of the other communities to the advantage of gays and lesbians, who are usually at the center of the research agenda. By diminishing the specificity of transgender subjectivities as well as the gap between sexuality and gender issues, LGBTQ analyses may have unwittingly contributed to perpetuate rather than counter transgender marginalization. Studies such as Mark Yarhouse and Trista Carrs' (2012) concerning the intersection of religion and transgender subjectivities (MTFs Christians in that case) are still rare. Interestingly, the lack of attention given to transgender religiosity by gender scholars and social scientists contrasts with the abundance of literature on Christian transgender theology (Mollenkott, 2001; Mollenkott & Sheridan, 2003; Shore-Goss, Bohache, Cheng, & West, 2013; Tanis, 2003).

In the study of transgender religiosity, the volume edited by Noach Dzmura (2010) *Balancing on the mechitza: transgender in Jewish community*<sup>12</sup> represented a major breakthrough. The book, written both by transgender and cisgender<sup>13</sup> authors and scholars, explored a large number of perspectives ranging

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<sup>12</sup> The *mechitza* ('partition' or 'division') is the barrier used in Orthodox synagogues to separate the women's from the men's section.

<sup>13</sup> According to the online English dictionary run by Oxford University Press, the definition of cisgender is "Denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex" (Cisgender, *adj.* (n.d.). *Oxforddictionaries.com*. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cisgender>).

from personal accounts, to *halakhic*<sup>14</sup> issues relevant to transgender, to religious texts and practices that were both empowering and problematic. It also included at least three chapters by two authors with an Orthodox background (Doherty 2010; Orens 2010a; 2010b) the last of which self-identified as *frum*.<sup>15</sup> In relation to this study, the importance of *Balancing on the mechitza* cannot be overstated. On the one hand, it made me aware of the existence of transgender Jews living in Orthodox communities. On the other hand, it introduced me to the ruling of R. Eliezer Waldenberg (see section 3.4.3), concerning the inclusion of post-operative MTF women in Jewish Orthodox communities. In this sense, *Balancing on the mechitza* was a taste of the challenges but also the openings that transgender were facing in Orthodox communities. From that reading, it became clear to me that more research was needed if we were to better understand Orthodox transgender religiosity.

## 1.4 Theoretical understandings prior to entering the field

Before I started conducting fieldwork, several theoretical perspectives contributed to shape the research at an early stage. One of the earliest influences was Saba Mahmood's (2004) study of a Muslim women's pietistic movement in Egypt and the related notion of "embedded agency" (Korteweg 2008); that is, how agency should be de-coupled from western progressive agendas and re-appraised from within the cultural and religious frame of reference of the participants (for a discussion, see section 5.2). In the early stages of this study, Mahmood's work was seminal for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it drew my attention to the intersection of religion and gender as a topic of research. On the other, it showed how doing research in traditionalist<sup>16</sup> religions was not only interesting for its own sake, but also provided a novel perspective from which to talk back to feminist theory in a constructive manner.

Looking back, I realize that intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) was an important subtext to Mahmood's (2004) work which influenced my own thinking not least in the phrasing of the first research question. Although indebted to black feminism in its origins, my use of the term 'intersection' presented both continuities and discontinuities within that body of scholarship. Rather than as a diagnosis of power to elucidate how oppression was differentially distributed according to gender, race and class—to mention three of the main categories of analysis—I was interested in using the concept of intersection as a lens or sensitizing concept. Power relations were still important, but as a double outsider I felt that they needed to be mapped through the accounts of

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<sup>14</sup> Pertaining to the Jewish law or *halakha*. To ease the reading of the text for those not familiar with Jewish terms, I provide a footnote with a quick explanation of each term the first time it appears plus a glossary with all the terms at the end.

<sup>15</sup> Yiddish for religiously observant.

<sup>16</sup> For the meaning of traditionalist, see section 5.2.

the participants rather than assumed from the start. A more direct influence from intersectional theory was the idea that categories of analysis are not independent of each other and that an additive approach to their study reifies exclusionary identities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). An intersectional approach demands instead that those categories are perceived as “enmeshed and constructed by each other” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 205) in differential ways. In that sense, I was interested in understanding the ways in which religion and gender are mutually productive and transformative.

As mentioned in section 1.3 above, one of the major influences in the formative stages of this study was the volume *Balancing on the mechitza* (Dzmura, 2010). Although the book was much more descriptive than theoretical, an attentive reader could easily tease the building blocks for my research questions out of it. In the first question, the concept of negotiation was indebted to the idea of *balancing* as is expressed in the book; that is, the need that transgender feel to reflectively engage with Orthodox gendered spaces and practices taking into account how their gender is inflected in terms of identity, expression and *halakhic* import. Concerning the second research question, the existence of the ruling by R. Waldenberg (see section 3.4.3 for a discussion) proved that the role of transgender in the Orthodox community was open to interpretations and that the resources to push towards greater inclusivity were available, even if the final outcome was uncertain. In other words, religious change within the framework of the *halakha*<sup>17</sup> was a possibility. That was particularly attractive for the research agenda of the sociology of religion since the study and theorization of religious change has been a central concern in the discipline.

Last but not least, my theoretical thinking at the early stages of the project was also influenced by Iris Parush’s theory of “the benefit of marginality” (2004, chap. 3). To put it succinctly, the idea put forward by Parush was that Jewish Ashkenazi<sup>18</sup> women in 19<sup>th</sup> century eastern Europe were excluded from the traditional education system in Hebrew run under rabbinical supervision. An unintended outcome of the women’s educational neglect was that they were left free to read books in Yiddish and other European languages expounding the ideas of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment. In this way, literate Jewish women became one of the main actors in the massive changes that came in the wake of the *Haskalah* and emancipation. The irony of using a theory about the rise of the *Haskalah* to think about transgender in Orthodox communities did not escape me. One of the reasons Parush’s theory influenced me is that it provided a compelling example from Jewish history in which the study of the intersection of gender and religion contributed to a richer understanding of widespread social and religious change. The main appeal of Parush’s theory, though, was that it challenged accounts of disempowerment and

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<sup>17</sup> Jewish law.

<sup>18</sup> Pertaining to the Jews whose families originate from central and eastern Europe; among the ultra-Orthodox, often Yiddish-speaking.

victimization by opening unexpected sites for agency from the margins. I realize that I was eager to see potential future participants in that light. The experience from fieldwork disabused me from that notion, not because the participants lacked agency or initiative, but because most of them saw little or no benefit in their situation. Ben's story and his notion of being trans as an "opening" or a "spiritual opportunity" (see section 4.4.5) did resonate with Parush's theory, but it was the exception rather than the rule.

## 1.5 The concept of religion in this study

Finding a universal definition of religion has been a holy grail of religious studies<sup>19</sup> and, as in the Arthurian literary cycle, the quest has proved elusive and filled with dangers. In that regard, I tend to agree with Talal Asad who already in 1993 stated that "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes" (p. 29).<sup>20</sup> Following Asad, substantive and/or functional definitions of religion flirt with the idea of universally valid abstractions and for that reason will inevitably fall short to the task. If that is the case, the only sound approach seems to be that suggested by Asad (1993) himself in the title of his book (*Genealogies of religion*) and recently more fully developed by Michael Bergunder (2014). According to Bergunder, a genealogical approach to religion, in the Foucauldian sense,<sup>21</sup> would solve the theoretical problems posed by other strategies to conceptualize religion (2014, p. 269).<sup>22</sup> That, in turn, would succeed in countering the voices that consider either that there is no need for religious studies to define its subject matter (Bergunder, 2014, pp. 252-253), or that religion should be thrown out the window as a category of analysis (Bergunder, 2014, pp. 253-255). A genealogical definition of religion is, actually, a way to deconstruct the very concept of definition as a universally valid statement able to fix the properties of its object of study once and for all. The genealogical approach advanced by Bergunder builds on insights developed by poststructuralist theory (mainly Jacques Derrida, Butler and Ernesto Laclau, as discussed in Bergunder, 2014, pp. 266-269) concerning the iterability of the name 'religion' which opens the possibility both for its resignification as well as its sedimentation:

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<sup>19</sup> I use the term religious studies in a broad sense, thus also including the sociology of religion.

<sup>20</sup> The reason why I do not wholeheartedly agree with Asad's definition is related to the fact that I do not consider discourse the product of other discourses only. See section 6.3 for a discussion.

<sup>21</sup> Which, in turn, is indebted to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche (1887/2013).

<sup>22</sup> Particularly the polythetic approach attempted by Benson Saler as discussed in Bergunder, 2014, pp. 249-250.

“Religion,” indeed, is always only comprehensible in a concrete articulation, which cannot be identical with any antecedent, but at the same time it is a sedimented name. Through the notion of sedimentation, a consistent historicising of [the name] “religion” is possible and necessary. (Bergunder, 2014, p. 269)

Bergunder is clear that a genealogical approach is not a historicizing of the *concept* with the purpose of finding an origin, a foundation (2014, p. 258). Rather, as the indented quote above illustrates, a genealogical definition of religion is first of all a history of the *name* ‘religion’ (Bergunder, 2014, p. 259). Following Michel Foucault, the genealogical approach proceeds backwards in time (from the present to the past) and takes the knowledge and circumstances of the researcher into account (as discussed in Bergunder, 2014, p. 270). In spite of its theoretical strengths, Bergunder acknowledges a level of precariousness in his genealogical project since it is empirically impossible to trace back all the repetitions of the name ‘religion’ (2014, p. 271). A genealogical approach, I would add, works by approximation. Particularly interesting for my purposes with this study is how Bergunder counters the claim that religion is a western, Christian or European invention:

If all articulations in a discourse refer to each other, in so far as they are “citations,” then, they are dependent on one another. From this, the claim can be derived that global history must be comprehended as “entangled histories,” since “the related entities are themselves in part a product of their entanglement” (Conrad & Randeria, 2002, p. 17). The emphasis, here, is that the West, through its “entanglement” with the colonies, did not experience an autonomous history, rather its identity formation was “entangled” with the colonised. The sedimentation of western knowledge is also dependent on the repetition of the colonised. Even if western knowledge held a hegemonic position, it was at the same time a product of “entanglement.” (Bergunder, 2014, p. 278)

Bergunder’s point is that, if we agree that the term religion went through a critical process of sedimentation during the colonial period, then we will have to acknowledge that it was entangled in the uses of both colonizers and colonized, thus refuting any claim to western exclusivity. I would argue that a similar point could be made about scholars of religion who, try as they may to sever themselves from purported folk categories (including religion) in the search of a pure academic language, will find themselves inextricably entangled with that which they are trying to negate. As we will see later in chapter 5, the claim that the term religion itself is a product of entanglement echoes a central theme of this dissertation.

In the course of this study I use religion as the subject matter of the sociology of religion, in various places but particularly in chapters 1, 5 and 6. A definition of religion in those cases would require a genealogical approach as the one advocated by Bergunder (2014), something that is clearly beyond the scope of this study. In other places, particularly in chapters 2, 3 and 4, I use religion often as a synonym for Judaism. This is by no means unproblematic.



Arguably, the conceptualization of Judaism as a religion in the wake of the Enlightenment and a comparable Jewish intellectual movement, the *Haskalah*, was a way to ease the assimilation of Jews into the European nation states. By reducing Judaism to a religion and detaching it from the notion of peoplehood, “Jews were convinced to become Frenchman [sic], Germans and Englishmen [sic] of the Hebrew or Mosaic persuasion and to slough off their national and ethnic loyalties and particularities” (Kosmin, 2010, p. 1). That project was fatally thwarted by the rise of anti-Semitism, but its traces remain among us as part of religion’s sedimentation, not to mention the long shadow of the World Religions paradigm. The problems I have just briefly mentioned beg the question whether a research project about transgender with a Jewish Orthodox background is suitable to the sociology of religion or rather, if it belongs to the field of Jewish studies. I am not particularly interested in discipline boundary wars, which often respond more to institutional arrangements and funding needs than to questions of substance. What I can say, though, is that as much as I sympathize with Bergunder’s (2014) call for a genealogical definition of religion, I disagree with him when he claims that the lack of a definition would completely undermine the rationale for religious studies (Bergunder, 2014, p. 247). If a genealogical definition can be fruitful in learning more about what religion has been in the constantly receding present, a lack of definition seems much more suitable as a theoretico-methodological approach to grasp religion in its becoming. In this study, the religion of the participants is less of a theoretical starting point than something that emerges as a fruit of the empirical work. It is in that sense that this research fully belongs to the sociology of religion, as a contestation of a certain way of understanding religion, as an opening towards that which resists objectification.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Compare my last point with James Beckford’s (2008) exposition of his research agenda as that in which he “seek[s] to analyse the processes whereby the meaning of the category religion is, in various situations, intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected substituted re-cast, and so on” (Beckford, 2008, p. 3) as well as his claim that “[r]eligion is not just a contested concept. [...] [r]eligion is also a particularly interesting ‘site’ where boundary disputes are endemic and where well-entrenched interest groups are prepared to defend their definition of religion against opponents” (Beckford, 2008, p. 13).

## 2. Research design and methods

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will present and discuss the methods I have applied to conduct my research. In doing so, the goal is not only to account for the role of the participants and the ways in which I have gathered the material and reached the results, but also to illuminate the methodological choices and dilemmas that I have faced in the process.

Before I start, though, I would like to give an overview of the fieldwork and certain elements of the methodology in numbers, since that information will provide a useful background to the discussion below. In what follows, I present a table with several columns. The first four columns refer to the periods of extended fieldwork in Israel (June–December 2014) and North America (February–June 2015; November 2015–February 2016). The first three columns are self-explanatory. Column four refers to the number of interviews with each participant. In that regard, I limited myself to distinguish between the participants whom I interviewed only once and those who were interviewed more than once. Column five refers to the participants with whom I also interacted outside the interviews, such as in synagogue services and *shabbat* meals for example. The last two columns are in relation to the results chapter in this study. Column six shows the number of participants from which I had confirmation that they received the results and the last column indicates how many of them got back to me with comments or suggested changes.

Table 1.

(1) Partici- pants	(2) Country in which the inter- views took place	(3) Duration of transcribed interviews (hh:mm)	(4) Number of inter- views (n)	(5) Interactions outside of interviews (excluding electronic media)	(6) Confir- mation on receiving the results	(7) Com- ments on the results
Amichai	Israel	2:13	n > 1	no	yes	no
Belinda	USA	3:35	n > 1	no	yes	yes
Ben	Canada	6:30	n > 1	yes	yes	yes
Beth	USA	4:22	n > 1	no	yes	yes
Dov	USA	4:28	n > 1	no	yes	yes

	Ethan	Israel	1:23	n = 1	no	yes	no
	James	Israel	2:14	n = 1	no	yes	no
	Loren	Israel	1:35	n = 1	no	no	no
	Moshe	USA	3:03	n > 1	yes	yes	no
	Noam	Israel	4:37	n > 1	yes	yes	no
	Yael	Israel	5:38	n > 1	no	yes	yes
	Yiscah	Israel	6:04	n > 1	yes	yes	no
	Yonatan	Israel	1:40	n = 1	no	yes	no
Totals	13 participants	Canada: 1 Israel: 8 USA: 4	47 hours 22 minutes of transcribed interviews	9 x (n > 1) 4 x (n = 1)	4 provided occasions for interaction outside the interviews	12 confirmed receiving the results	5 contacted me with comments on the results

Below, in this same chapter, I will explain the process that led me to find the participants, the different ways I approached them, etc.

## 2.2 Shifting the research focus

To a large extent, my choice of methods, as well as the research design on a more general level, followed from the research focus and topic. When I was accepted at the PhD program at Uppsala University in September 2012, my proposal did not include a single word about transgender. At that time, the focus of the research was on lesbian and gay Orthodox Jews. During a short preparatory trip to the USA in January 2014 I had the good fortune of getting to know Ben (one of the participants in this study) and Joy Ladin, whose memoir (Ladin, 2012) I had previously read. Although Joy is not and never has been Orthodox, her own transition while being professor at Yeshiva University<sup>24</sup> provided her with a great deal of insight concerning transgender in the Orthodox world. Meeting Joy and Ben was an eye-opening experience and, with their encouragement, I decided to broaden my research focus to include all the communities within the LGBTQ acronym.

At the beginning of my extended period of fieldwork in Israel in June 2014, I started to interview Jews with an Orthodox background who self-identified as lesbian, gay and transgender.<sup>25</sup> Although each of the communities within LGBTQ has its own specific issues and challenges, I felt that the first three communities (lesbian, gay and bisexual) gravitated towards matters of sexuality while the latter two (transgender and queer) gravitated towards gender

<sup>24</sup> Modern Orthodoxy's flagship institution for higher education in the USA.

<sup>25</sup> While in Israel, I was unable to find anyone with an Orthodox background who self-identified as either bisexual or queer.

issues.<sup>26</sup> Whereas treating each of the communities with the due level of detail and accuracy would have turned the dissertation into a mammoth project, the alternative of collapsing all differences and using LGBTQ as an overarching concept was even worse. My point is that I was aware that it would not be possible to write a dissertation about LGBTQ with an Orthodox background. The reason why I kept a broad focus at that early stage was that I was unsure about how many people in each of the communities would be willing to talk with me. By keeping a broad focus, I expected that participants would either self-select in case of a low response or that I would always be able to make a choice later on.

The decision to finally focus on transgender was precipitated by two events. The first one was a meeting with Eyal Zak, an Israeli PhD student in social work at Haifa University at that time, whose research was devoted to closeted gay Orthodox men who were married. Some of the men I had met and interviewed<sup>27</sup> fitted Eyal's profile and I realized that if I were to pursue that line of research there would be large overlaps between our projects, not to mention that several scholars (Ariel 2007; Halbertal & Koren 2007; Harari 2012; Koren 2003; Mark 2008) had already written about lesbian and gay Orthodox Jews although mostly from a psychology and mental health perspective.<sup>28</sup> Before meeting Eyal, I was aware that there was a dearth of research, on transgender and religion in general and transgender with an Orthodox background in particular. I was also more attracted to that topic for the reason that gender has an immediate and pervasive impact on social relations that sexuality arguably does not have in the same way. That is not to say that being lesbian or gay does not at times include a strong gender component, as the figures of 'butch' and 'femme' as well as 'queen' and 'bear' in lesbian and gay cultures suggest, but questions of sexuality rather than gender identity still seem to have greater salience. It also contributed to my interest the fact that growing up as a gay teenager in the 1990s I had my share of schooling in gay issues. As a result, doing research on transgender, while also more challenging, seemed to hold greater promise for personal and intellectual growth, as well

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<sup>26</sup> That is emphatically not to say that sexuality may not be a topic for transgender and queer, or that there are no gay, lesbian and bisexual transgender and queer people. As a matter of fact, several participants in this study were either lesbian or gay but their sexual inclinations will only be revealed in those cases and instances that are relevant.

<sup>27</sup> I got in contact with those men through a popular Israeli social media and dating site for gay men called Atraf. I created a profile which included a picture of myself and the following texts under the headings "About me" (1) and "Looking for" (2).

- (1) I am 36 y.o. gay guy from Barcelona doing a PhD in sociology of religion in Sweden. I am currently in Israel to do research on my project about LGBTQ people with an Orthodox background.
- (2) I would be happy to meet or chat with any gay man with an Orthodox background. I would be particularly interested in getting in touch with closeted men. If you would like to know more about myself or my research project, just send me a message. I always respond.

<sup>28</sup> Yaakov Ariel (2007) is the exception.

as for its possibilities in making a contribution to my scholarly field. Since my meeting with Ben and Joy, what had been holding me back from focusing exclusively on transgender was a concern that I would not be able to find enough people to talk with.

The second event that marked a turning point in the refinement of the research focus was a meeting with Yiscah. During that meeting I expressed both my wish to focus on transgender, as well as my doubts about if that avenue was feasible at all, given that I was an outsider with a limited amount of time and resources to complete the task. Until that point, the only transgender Jews with an Orthodox background that I had met were Ben and Yiscah, and if other people did not come forward, I would not be able to pursue that path. In relation to that, an important insight that I gained concerning the involvement of participants was that I, as the researcher, was not in control. To quote from Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A streetcar named desire*, "I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers" (Williams, 1947/2004, p. 178). The other side of the coin is that the granting of such kindness is the beginning of a relationship through which we cease to be strangers. Going back to that meeting with Yiscah, after listening to my concerns she did not only encourage me to focus on transgender, but she also volunteered to put me in touch with potential participants. After that conversation, I could say that we both took a leap of faith for this project; Yiscah vouching for me among her network of transgender & Orthodox contacts, and myself hoping that everything would work out.

## 2.3 Adjusting the research expectations

With Yiscah's help, I managed to get in touch with other potential participants,<sup>29</sup> but I also continued to explore other channels with renewed vigor. Among those were different organizations for LGBTQ and formerly ultra-Orthodox, as well as a popular Israeli internet forum with pages for the LGBTQ communities. The internet forum in question was <http://www.tapuz.co.il/forums>. I reproduce here a screenshot taken on April 2016 of my original message in Hebrew<sup>30</sup> (my English translation follows):

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<sup>29</sup> I consciously choose not to reveal how many people I contacted through Yiscah, so that confidentiality can be better preserved not only between the participants and the general public but also among participants themselves.

<sup>30</sup> A word of thanks goes to Guy Aloni for helping me with the Hebrew.

מאת: אוריול

היי

שמי אוריול ואני חוקר-דוקטורנט משוודיה ומשתייך לקהילת להטב"ק. מוקד מחקרי הוא טרנסג'נדרס עם רקע דתי, כלומר, אנשים שפעם היו דתיים (שגדלו במשפחה דתית למשל) או שעד היום דתיים.

אני מעוניין להקשיב לסיפורים על המסע לחיפוש הזהות העצמית שלך ואיך היחסים שלך עם הדת התפתחו לאורך זמן. כל מה שנאמר בינינו יהיה חסוי. בתור התחלה, רציתי להיפגש לשיחה בארבע עיניים ולראות מה קורה, ללא מחויבות כלשהי. אני לא שולט בעברית במאת האחוזים, ולכן אני מקווה שנוכל לשוחח באנגלית או בשילוב של אנגלית ועברית.

אני מקווה שתהיה לנו הזדמנות להיפגש. אם את/ה מעוניין/ת, תתקשר/י אליי ל-0584441479 או כתב/כתבי לי ב-[oriol.poveda@crs.uu.se](mailto:oriol.poveda@crs.uu.se) ונהיה בקשר.

Hey,

My name is Oriol and I am a PhD student from Sweden who belongs to the LGBTQ community. The focus of my research is transgender with a religious background, that is, people who were once religious (who grew up in a religious family, for instance) or who are still religious.

I am interested in listening to the stories about the journey to find your identity and how your relationship with religion developed over time. Everything said between us will be confidential. For starters, I would like to meet for a conversation face to face and see what happens, without any further commitment. I am not 100 percent fluent in Hebrew and for that reason I hope that we can talk in English or a combination of English and Hebrew.

I hope we will have a chance to meet. If you are interested, call me at (number) or write me at (email) and we will be in touch.

Ahead of my extended period of fieldwork in the USA, Yiscah's support was once more of great importance since she vouched for me in the Dina list,<sup>31</sup> where she posted a message on my behalf asking for participants. Early on in the research I decided that it was important to meet participants in person for two reasons: firstly, I thought that face to face meetings would greatly contribute to build trust and, given the sensitivity of the topic and my status as a double outsider, that seemed crucial for the overall success of the project. Secondly, I hoped that meeting in person would also open possibilities to spend time with the participants, and that out of those interactions there would come observations that could enrich the insights gained from the interviews. I did not want to push myself into the participants' lives, so I never asked directly, but given the highly social character of the Orthodox world, I was hoping that I would get some invitations for *shabbat* meals, holiday celebrations and synagogue services, to mention a few sites of Orthodox sociality. The fact that I was neither Jewish nor Orthodox may have reduced my eligibility for such socializing events. On the other hand, I felt that my status as an outsider had its own advantages since I was not a party in broader Orthodox and inter-

<sup>31</sup> See section 3.4.3 for a description of the Dina list.

Jewish debates concerning questions such as gender roles or the place of LGBTQ.<sup>32</sup>

While planning my fieldwork, my works of reference had been ethnographies in Orthodox and Jewish religious settings such as Lynn Davidman's (1991) and Moshe Shokeid's (1995). Davidman's work was centered on the outreach efforts directed at secular Jews in a Modern Orthodox synagogue and a *Chabad*<sup>33</sup> center for women. Shokeid's work was a study of a non-denominational synagogue for lesbian, gay and bisexual congregants (no mention of transgender at that time). A key element in those works, as well as in much of the ethnographic literature, had been the location of a site in which to conduct fieldwork (Falzon, 2009a, p. 1). As soon as I started to get in touch with potential participants, though, I realized that they were far apart from each other. As a result, there was no site in the ethnographic sense of the word, no single meeting space in which participants would gather and that I could repeatedly visit. That function, which was vital for the emergence of a community awareness, was actually fulfilled by an electronic mailing list for transgender Orthodox Jews called the Dina list (see section 3.4.3). Under such circumstances, one option would have been to conduct a netnography (Kozinets, 2015) but that path was barred to me for several reasons. First and foremost, to be transgender and currently or formerly Orthodox were membership requirements for the Dina list and I did not fulfill neither of them. Secondly, even if the list's administrator would have approved my membership request, I would still have needed to secure the consent of all other list members. Finally, I felt that there are spaces in which researchers do not belong and that the Dina list was probably one of them. As I mentioned before, I thought that meeting the participants in person (even if we had communication through electronic media before and/or after our meetings) might create possibilities to spend time together. I was hoping that those interactions would compensate for the fact that I was lacking a site, such as the synagogues studied by Davidman (1991) and Shokeid (1995). In the USA, another factor that limited the chances for interaction with the participants was that none of them lived in the same state, while Ben lived in a different country altogether (Canada). As a result, I spent a significant amount of time traveling to meet participants and whatever interactions would ensue had to occur in a condensed manner during the time of my visit. In Israel, the distances were considerably shorter and I did manage to interview a larger number of participants in spite of the fact that the first three months of fieldwork were mostly spent in brushing up my Hebrew skills, interviewing lesbians and gays with an Orthodox background, and figuring out the focus of the research project.

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<sup>32</sup> That I was not a party does not mean that I did not have an opinion on such matters. I made no secret that I was in favor of transgender inclusion, although I felt that it was not up to me to elaborate on the details of how that should look like in an Orthodox context.

<sup>33</sup> A *chasidic* organization known for its outreach efforts toward unaffiliated Jews.

At the end of my periods of extended fieldwork in Israel and North America, I had the chance to attend synagogue services with Ben, Moshe and Noam and to enjoy *shabbat* meals with Ben, Moshe and Yiscah. Each of those occasions was special, but in particular, the *shabbat* meal in the home of Ben's rabbi and his family, to which both Ben and I were invited. In hindsight, I realize that I had higher expectations for the role of observations in the research process. The results show that interviews formed the bulk of the material and observations, as well as communication through electronic media, which fulfilled a correcting and supplementing role. It is reasonable to think that the outcome might have been different if more participants had been open to these kind of interactions, and if we had had more time at our disposal to spend together. Anthropologists and social scientists facing similar problems have developed the concept of multi-sited ethnography (Falzon, 2009b) as a way to study social phenomena that have been exposed to the pressures of globalization, thus challenging the notion of the local as a self-contained cultural unit or the claim that one single site is enough to provide a satisfactory account. In the case of this study, although the ethos and methods of ethnography provided a major inspiration in the course of the fieldwork, the final outcome cannot be described as such, not even as a multi-sited ethnography, unless each participant is considered a site in themselves. Rather, this study is an attempt to answer the research questions on the basis of in-depth interviews supplemented by observations and the cultivation of a close cooperation with the participants. Furthermore, as I have pointed out in the previous paragraphs, the research design that I finally followed was the result of several intervening factors that informed my available options such as the lack of a site, the large distances between participants, the time limits related to travel and my commitment to a non-intrusive research methodology.

Through the use of different channels, mainly the snowball effect initiated by Yiscah, posts written on my behalf in the Dina list and my own efforts posting in other forums and contacting organizations for LGBTQ and former ultra-Orthodox, I managed to get in touch with 13 participants, as shown in the table at the beginning of this chapter. The criteria for participation was that participants self-identified with one or several of the terms under the umbrella concept 'transgender', and that they had an Orthodox background; that is, that they were formerly or currently Orthodox (see section 3.4.1 for a discussion of how the terms 'transgender' and 'Orthodox' are used in this study). I have no means to establish the demographics of those who would fit the profile for this study (see section 3.4.2 for a possible estimate) but in any case it is clear that the number of participants is too low to be representative. This study, therefore, does not attempt to offer a comprehensive account, but rather to illustrate the experiences of the participants in some depth looking for shared themes, as well as paying special attention to the differences and nuances that enrich their accounts and that make any attempt at constructing a totalizing narrative futile. This study does provide a preliminary cartography of themes,



but that first sketch should not be confused with the territory and it will be up to other researchers, if they so wish, to determine to what extent the accounts of the participants echo larger trends. In the spirit of much ethnographic work, this study is an open invitation to take a plunge in the lived experiences of the participants so that we can learn from our differences at the same time that we appreciate our shared humanity.

## 2.4 The interviews

As I mentioned in the previous section, the interviews with the participants became the main source of material for this study. When I started to think about how to approach the interviews, I realized that I needed to be sensitive to the fact that I was an epistemological outsider who knew very little about being transgender, or what it means to be part of an Orthodox community, and that the dearth of research on the larger topic of transgender and religion gave me very few tools to rely on. In such circumstances, to come to the first interview with each of the participants with a questionnaire would not only have been presumptuous but it would have also foreclosed the possibility for important issues to emerge. Taking that into account, I decided to start every interview with one single question: what is your story? By asking that question, I wanted to give participants the maximum freedom to shape their own narratives and to include whatever episodes in their lives they believed to be significant. I was hoping that this way of questioning would illuminate issues that concerned them in the first place, rather than the prior theoretical understandings of the researcher. In response to that question, some participants spoke for half an hour, some for one, two or more, but all of them except for Belinda seemed to understand the subtext of the question right away. In Belinda's case, the question confused her because it seemed too broad and unprecise, and indeed it was broad and unprecise but for the reasons mentioned above: namely, that I wanted participants to have maximum freedom in explaining their life journeys. Yiscah was another exception, since her story was already familiar to me through the reading of her memoir (Smith, 2014), but for all other participants, the question seemed to be in order.

I cannot be sure if what follows is an element shared by the transgender and gay communities, but in asking the first question I relied also on the experience of growing up in the 1990s when being gay was not as socially accepted as it currently is, at least in large parts of western Europe. At that time, asking someone in my gay circle 'what is your story?' had a clear subtext that being gay was part of a larger narrative that included realizing your sexuality, accepting oneself, coming out, eventually telling your parents, dealing with homophobia, etc. As lesbian and gay people become increasingly assimilated in the mainstream, it is likely that there won't be a gay story any more than there is a straight story, but given the resilience of the scourge of transphobia,

I suspected that there was still a transgender story. Except for Belinda and Yiscah, it seemed that my intuition was proved right since the question resonated among all other participants and elicited long and elaborate answers. In summary, as a rule of thumb, the first interview revolved around the first question (what is your story?) which was followed on occasion by short clarification questions. That first question was meant to operationalize the inductive element that I wanted to build into the project.

When time and circumstances allowed, a second interview would follow. In preparation for that second interview, I would transcribe the first interview and, on the basis of the transcript, prepare a script for a semi-structured interview (Longhurst, 2010). It was while preparing the script for the semi-structured interview that a more inductive element would kick in, taking input from the research questions and my prior theoretical understandings. As a matter of fact, the preparation of that second interview was already a preliminary analysis of the material in which the accounts of the participants were read against the grain of my research premises. That being said, the boundary between empirical material and theory was meant to be porous from the beginning. The research questions and my theoretical understanding could be likened to a bustling building site whose blueprint needed continuous readjustment. The semi-structured interviews were organized around two main goals. The first one was to narrow down the focus onto the episodes of the participants' lives in which there was an intersection of religion and gender, so that they could explain them in more detail. Once I had a few interviews, I also started to ask if a particular participant had gone through similar situations to those mentioned by previous participants. The second goal was to ask the participants concerning their views and experiences of religious change, that is, how they thought Orthodox Judaism would respond to transgender in its midst and what experiences they had of such responses. Those two goals provided a general framework for the semi-structured interviews, but in the actual interview situation with the participants, the questions asked were never exactly the same since the second round of questions took their biographical accounts as its point of departure and, anyhow, it is in the nature of semi-structured interviews to leave ample room for interviewees to take the conversation in directions not anticipated by the interviewer. Concerning the latter goal, that had often been part of the answer to the first question ('what is your story?'), but in the semi-structured interviews I asked them to focus on interactions with the Orthodox community in which they could see an unexpected response or something shifting in whichever way, not necessarily towards a more positive attitude.

The procedure accounted above, with an initial interview revolving around the question 'what is your story?' and a follow-up interview some time later, presents an ideal scenario. As shown in the table at the beginning of this chapter, in the cases of Ethan, James, Loren and Yonatan, I conducted only one interview with each. Concerning Ethan and Loren, they were less talkative than the other participants and after the first interview it seemed that we had

covered much of the issues that were relevant. The fact that both of them were among the youngest participants in the study might be of some relevance, since it is reasonable to think that older participants not only had more experience, but also had more time to reflect on it. An added element in Loren's case was that the first half of the interview was conducted in Hebrew, which made it easier for Loren to talk, but consciously or not, she might have lowered the range of her expressivity to make sure that I could follow. In the case of James, the fact that we had just one interview was due to his busy schedule and the fact that we lived in different towns in Israel. Finally, in the case of Yonatan, he was not able to meet me again in spite of repeated requests on my behalf. In relation to those but also all other participants, it is important to point out that I always let them choose the place and setting for our interviews to make sure that they would feel safe and comfortable. As a result, several of the interviews took place at the participants' homes or in public venues close to where they lived, which meant that I had to spend a significant amount of time and resources traveling to those places.

## 2.5 An abductive approach

Through the inductive and deductive elements built into the first question and the semi-structured interviews respectively, I developed an abductive approach (Shank, 1998) which attempted to walk a thin line between being open and sensitive to a novel topic while keeping also in mind relevant scholarly debates within the sociology of religion. That two-pronged approach was also closely related to the different audiences to which this study is addressed: (1) transgender and transgender allies with a Jewish, particularly Orthodox, background, and (2) scholars in the sociology of religion with a focus on gender. The fact that I was aiming to address two different, though not mutually exclusive, audiences persuaded me of the need to develop a language that was accessible to both readerships without becoming tedious. That was the reason that, instead of sprinkling the text with parenthetical remarks, I decided to use a wide range of emic terms drawn from the Orthodox world. To make the text accessible to readers not used to those terms, I decide to add an explicatory footnote the first time each term appeared and attach a glossary as appendix. The reason I made ample use of emic terms was not only a matter of style or audience awareness, but it also fulfilled a performative purpose. By invoking those terms, I wanted to draw the attention of the reader unfamiliar with them to the richness and vitality of the Jewish world that has created those sounds and concepts. Whereas the body of the text is an exercise in intelligibility, the use of emic terms is a mark of difference within the continuum of human experience, a reminder that translations—and this study can be conceived as such—can only take us thus far. I wanted readers unfamiliar with the Orthodox

world to be exposed to that difference and to use the emic terms as the visible tips of a cultural iceberg whose depths I have not fathomed.

The productive tension between inductive and deductive elements was at the heart of my attempt to address the two different audiences I have mentioned. Concerning the latter, I would have failed in my task if sociologists of religion reading this study were to look at it as of little or no relevance for those who are neither transgender nor Jewish. This is a point that needs some elaboration. Regardless of other factors, I consider that the participants' accounts are invaluable in and of themselves. On the other hand, it is precisely because they are specific that they can challenge 'universal' notions regarding the intersection of religion and gender, as well as reveal blind spots in naturalized instances of cultural situatedness. In relation to the discipline of the sociology of religion, I think they contribute to the ongoing efforts of other scholars to destabilize inherited assumptions of religion in the discipline such as (cis)male gender blindness (Woodhead, 2008) and the taken-for-granted status of Christianity as archetypical (Bender, Cadge, Levitt & Smilde, 2013a; Lassander, 2014). To a significant extent, these remarks are a response to scholars in the field who, after being introduced to the topic of this study, were inclined to exoticize it as an ethnographic curiosity of a fringe group with no bearing on their research interests. I cannot ask those who think in those terms to look harder, but I wanted to make clear that I disagree.

## 2.6 The analysis and results: facing a methodological paradox

As I mentioned above, the reading of transcripts and the preparation of semi-structured interviews constituted a preliminary and rather raw form of analysis. For a more methodic analysis, I used qualitative research software (Nvivo). However, before plunging into the analysis, I had to solve an apparent paradox in my research design. On the one hand, the core of the interviews with the participants had focused on their life stories. On the other hand, confidentiality concerning the participants' identities was one of the key research premises. In other words, I had to find a way to do justice to the depth and uniqueness of the participants' accounts without revealing any details that could lead to their identification. That was a challenging task since, as one of the participants pointed out,<sup>34</sup> their lives and particularly the events related to transition had a distinct quality that made them vulnerable to identification. The question, then, was how to code the transcripts and then report the results in such a way that I could preserve confidentiality without losing depth. It

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<sup>34</sup> I refrain from revealing which participant made that remark on purpose, to prevent attracting undue attention to their story. See section 3.4.1 concerning the particular use of third person singular pronouns in this study.

seemed clear to me that an attempt to anonymize through the erasure of names and references, as well as the intentional alteration of sensitive details, would not work. Even with camouflage, the elements of their stories and the unfolding of their narratives were particular enough to defy anonymization, and changing the stories beyond recognition would have defeated the purpose of doing research in the first place.

The strategy I finally developed was to move away from individual biographical accounts and to start looking for themes. Those themes emerged in the process of coding and analyzing the interviews and other research materials, such as my observations. At the first stage, I had only two main nodes corresponding to my research questions ‘intersections of Judaism and gender’ and ‘religious change.’ As I started to read through the interview transcripts, I tried to figure out which passages were relevant for either or both of the nodes, since a given passage could be coded more than once. Within each of the parent nodes I started to create child nodes with very generic titles such as ‘religious practice,’ ‘authority,’ ‘transition,’ etc. At some point each child node had enough material that it warranted creating subnodes for each child node. In the case of ‘religious practice,’ for instance, an older project file shows that it included nodes for ‘being called by new name,’ ‘burial,’ ‘circumcision,’ ‘holidays,’ ‘*kashrut*,’<sup>35</sup> ‘lighting candles,’ ‘*mechitzah*,’ ‘*mikvah*,’ ‘*minyan*,’<sup>36</sup> ‘morning blessings,’ ‘*negiah*,’<sup>37</sup> ‘observancy in general,’ ‘practices observed differently,’ ‘prayers,’ ‘*shabbat*,’ and ‘*smikhah*.’<sup>38</sup> Such a process of coding could also occur in reverse, starting with independent nodes such as ‘disembodiment,’ ‘dissonance Orthodox/transgender,’ ‘lack of concepts’ merging later on as subnodes for ‘process towards self-recognition.’

As anyone familiar with coding will probably confirm, a very rich material has a tendency to grow into an exuberant tree of nodes and subnodes. That was exactly my case and at some stage I started to feel that the profusion of nodes and subnodes was reaching unmanageable proportions. That was particularly the case with one of the main parent nodes, ‘intersections of Judaism and gender,’ since that was the node that concentrated most of the material. An important milestone in the coding and analysis process was to realize that the themes that were emerging tended to cluster and gravitate towards particular periods of the participants’ lives which were more related to transition (or lack thereof) than age. This is how I came up with a tripartite time division—pre-transition, transition and post-transition—which reflected important milestones in the gender journeys that all participants either had made or were in the process of going through. Of those three periods, transition was often the

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<sup>35</sup> Religious dietary laws.

<sup>36</sup> Quorum of ten Jewish men necessary to perform certain religious practices.

<sup>37</sup> The prohibition of physical contact with members of the opposite gender (binary speaking) outside the immediate family.

<sup>38</sup> Rabbinical ordination.

most difficult to pinpoint since as the Latin etymology of the word suggests,<sup>39</sup> it evokes a passage during which different positionalities overlap along the process (see section 4.2.2). For the eight transitioned participants,<sup>40</sup> though, the difference between pre- and post-transition was unambiguous. The diachronic approach was helpful in shedding some of the abstractness of the themes by recovering the temporality of lived experience and biographical accounts. Furthermore, it contributed to provide a structure to a plethora of nodes that had seemed previously to float around in a variety of constellations. That was not meant to cement any particular account since there is no master narrative of being transgender with an Orthodox background. Rather, what I attempted to do in reporting the results was to use that structure as a trellis onto which to weave complexity (see section 4.1). Other themes, though, were not confined to one of the three periods, but re-emerged throughout the participants' lives; most notably the theme of gendered religious practices.

Other researchers dealing with the problem of protecting participants' identities without watering down content have opted for other strategies. The main criticism that my choice to use themes received was that such strategy tended to present the results in such a way that it obscured and diminished the agency of the participants by suggesting that the themes worked through the participants instead of the other way around. The preferred alternative, according to this line of critique, would be to use composite characters (for an example, see Goldman, 2002) as a way to foreground human agency while still protecting the participants' identities. That sort of criticism certainly has a point in saying that there is a risk in the use of themes and that the full humanity of the participants may suffer as a result, but I was not convinced that the dignity of the participants, as people of flesh and blood, would be better served by lumping their experiences together in some sort of semi-fictional characters. The use of composite cases makes for a better read, and that is no minor consideration in a text, but the sense of human agency as well as immediacy that it creates is a literary effect that turns the researcher's intervention into something even harder to trace. In my view, the sad truth of any strategy of anonymization is that, to a greater or lesser extent, it entails defacement. The use of composite characters is better at concealing that, which in turn renders participants even less visible.

## 2.7 The role of participant

Last but not least, I would like to elaborate on both the concept of research participant (see Schofield Clark & Chiou, 2013, pp. 42-47) and the actual role that participants have taken in this study. I chose to use the term participant to

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<sup>39</sup> *Transire*, to go or cross over.

<sup>40</sup> Ben, Beth, Dov, Moshe, Noam, Yael, Yiscah and Yonatan.

distance myself from the more commonly used term ‘informant’. As I see it, each of these terms implies a very different view on how knowledge is produced and the hierarchies involved in that process. To talk about informants suggests that the people with whom the researcher enters into contact with are basically sources of information. Their role is therefore limited to producing data that the researcher will then capture, analyze and report on their own. I would call this the extractivist view of knowledge production (Klein, 2014), in which data is mined in a similar way that natural resources are exploited (see similar criticisms in Day, 2011; Bender, Cadge, Levitt & Smilde, 2013b). This approach seems inspired in theory-driven research projects in which the researcher already has a strong hypothesis in mind that requires empirical verification. A research participant, on the other hand, is someone who not only generates material in interaction with the researcher but who has also the possibility, if they so wish, to get involved in the analysis and reporting of that material. Furthermore, research participants are encouraged to voice their opinions about the research focus, since they probably have a better sense than the researcher about what the pressing issues are in their community. Last but not least, research participants are regarded as co-theorizers<sup>41</sup> on par with the researcher; that is, as people who not only possess an intimate knowledge of their circumstances but who also have valid theories about larger social and religious phenomena, particularly those that affect them most directly. If we loosely define theories as accounts about how the world works and why, rather than as scholarly abstractions framed in specialized language, then we might agree that any grown-up person, regardless of their level of literacy, may have a theory and can therefore potentially become a co-theorizer. This is to make clear that co-theorizers do not need to be academics or even literate. However, in the case of this study it turned out that all 9 participants above 24 years of age had a higher education (see the section “Brief introductions” below). Concerning the issue of co-theorizers, one of the leading actor-network theory (ANT) scholars, Bruno Latour, puts it this way:

[I]t is no longer enough to limit actors to the role of informers offering cases of some well-known types. You have to grant them back the ability to make up their own theories of what the social is made of. (Latour, 2005)

This approach seems most suitable for research projects studying a new topic and including a strong inductive element, as well as for projects focusing on a vulnerable population who are at risk of being discriminated, silenced or otherwise disenfranchised. This study in particular falls into both categories (novelty of the topic and vulnerable population). To be a participant, though,

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<sup>41</sup> A word of thanks is due to Peik Ingman for the fruitful discussions on actor-network theory and for offering the concept of ‘co-theorizers’ to refer to research participants. Compare to Barad’s (2012a, p. 29) use of the term “co-workers.” On the implications of being a co-worker, see Barad 2012a, p. 33.

should be seen as an open invitation rather than a fixed role. Not everyone is interested or has the time and energy to participate fully. For that reason, it should be left up to participants to determine to what degree they would like to be involved.

The choice between informant and participant cannot be reduced to an exercise in semantics and in order to be meaningful it has to make a difference in the research design. In my case, what I did was to let participants know early on in our communications not only that their identities would be kept confidential<sup>42</sup> and that they could withdraw from the project at any time of their choosing, but also that their views about the research focus and the results would be taken into account. It is possible that the first promise, concerning the research focus, sounded too vague to elicit a response or that participants felt comfortable enough with the framework I proposed. The fact of the matter is that no participant voiced opinions in regards to it. Concerning the second promise, it was more specific and it meant that a time would come when I would have to send my analysis and results chapter to the participants and wait for their (hopefully benign) comments. As for their role as co-theorizers, that was already built into the second research question, which asked about their views on religious change or lack thereof. By following such a three-pronged approach,<sup>43</sup> I attempted to live up to my understanding of what makes a participant. I must admit, though, that sharing my results chapter with the participants was something that I dreaded. My apprehension had to do with the nature of analysis which involves interpreting the material. I was concerned that participants would not recognize themselves in my interpretations or that they would find them wanting in terms of precision and nuance. I was not sure either how the structure between pre-transition, transition and post-transition and the use of themes would resonate among them. I was concerned that the biographical approach I had adopted during the interviews might have created different expectations and that some participants might feel disappointed at realizing that I had left parts of their stories out of the report. As much as I dreaded sending the chapter, I knew that there was no turning back and that, at the end, it would be for the project's best. So when the day came, I started sending out the results chapter to each participant and in the email I asked them to get back to me with their comments within a month. As shown in the table above, I was able to verify that 12 out of the 13 participants received the results, and after the month had gone by five participants got back to me with their comments. The chapter presented in this study includes their suggested changes and expansions, which the participants in question had a chance to review one more time before the final report.

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<sup>42</sup> On request, Ben and Yiscah kept their real names (see section 3.4.2).

<sup>43</sup> (1) inviting participants to share their views on the research focus, (2) promising that they would get to read and comment the results and (3) building their role as co-theorizers into the second research question.



Apart from the ethical reasons for sharing the results, there was also a strong methodological point to do so. In spite of the fact that I had access to other sources of material such as observations and literature, I found that sharing the results was the most reliable form of triangulation (Golafshani, 2003). That was particularly so since this study is not directly concerned with cold facts but with personal accounts. It was never part of my research design to launch myself onto fact-finding missions or to contrast a participant's account of a particular episode with the account of someone else (a rabbi, a family member, etc.) involved in that same episode. That would also be a valid research approach, but given the novelty of the topic and the vulnerability of the population, I considered that the participants' views and experiences should take precedence. In a similar way, I also chose to report the participants' accounts of their religious experiences, underlining how those experiences were meaningful to their personal journeys. While I had no reason to doubt the realness of religious experiences any more than any other experiences in the participants' accounts, I remained uncommitted in relation to any ultimate ontological claims that might be derived from them (see discussion about methodological agnosticism in section 6.2). Given that the participants' accounts provided the bulk of material for this study, sharing the results was the best method of triangulation since only the participants themselves could judge if I had managed to articulate both the nuances of their personal situation as well as the larger issues that, in their view, affected the community.

So far the reader might have been under the impression that embracing the concept of participant and sharing the results with them can only benefit the quality and transparency of research. There is, however, an important caveat. Given the participatory character of this type of research, there is a heightened risk that the researcher engages, consciously or unconsciously, in self-censorship when faced with controversial or divisive issues. Particularly in a study such as this one, with a relatively small number of participants available, there is a pressure not to do or write anything that might alienate one of the participants. In my case, I attempted to turn that pressure into a resource by forcing myself not to run away from delicate issues,<sup>44</sup> but rather to tackle them with an extra dose of reflexivity and care, so that those participants invested in different positions may feel that their view has been accurately presented. At the same time, I had to make choices concerning what results to share. I decided to share sections 3.4 as well as sections 4.1 to 4.3 with all the participants. On the other hand, I shared section 4.4 devoted to Ben's non-binary perspective with only Ben and Dov. Ben's choice is obvious and in the case of Dov, I shared the text with him since his account is also discussed at some length in

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<sup>44</sup> One of the most delicate issues were the conflicting views among different participants regarding what it means to be transgender, as a medical condition susceptible to treatment or an opening to a different range of religious experiences, for instance. These differences also had a bearing on the language preferences in relation to transgender (see section 3.4.1).

that section. I did not share that section with all other participants since their accounts were not discussed,<sup>45</sup> and I did not think it would be helpful to enable participants to comment on someone else's experiences. I think those were sufficient grounds on which to make that choice, but I would be fooling myself if I would not admit that there was one more concern; namely, that I perceived the question of the gender binary as a thorn in the side of the transgender community. As the argument goes, it is not only that some in the transgender community have little patience with queer theory and the performative and constructivist account of gender identity that is perceived to invalidate their lived experience (Namaste, 2000). In the context of Orthodox Judaism, it could also be argued that if communities were to associate transgender with a challenge to the gender binary, that would significantly raise the bar for their inclusion, which is already high. Through some of the participants I was aware that the inclusion of genderqueer had elicited heated reactions in the Dina list in the past, and I did not want to run the risk of turning Ben's chapter into a platform for those debates, even if Ben's gender expression and self-understanding was not genderqueer. On the other hand, the fact that Dov was reading that section was not only the appropriate thing to do given that his account was discussed there, but it also gave me some reassurance to know that a participant with a binary gender identity was getting access. I do not think there is a clear-cut answer to the question about if I should have shared Ben's section with everyone or not. There was a conflict between different values and each option had its own set of risks and potential downsides. In this case, though, what became the deciding factor was that although I had a commitment to the group of participants as a whole, first and foremost I had a commitment to each of them individually. From that, it follows that Ben's account, as with everyone else's, was primarily for Ben to review and comment. It is of the utmost importance, though, that my decision will not be projected back onto the rest of participants. If at all, they would have probably reacted to Ben's section as graciously as they did with the rest of the analysis and results. The fact that I took the precaution of not sharing that section should be interpreted much more as a comment about myself and my research dilemmas than about the participants' views.

## 2.8 Brief summary

In the course of this chapter I have explained my research design and methods. Although I started with the intention of writing an ethnographic study, the fact that the participants lived in locations far away from each other in three different countries (Canada, Israel and USA) excluded the possibility of a site

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<sup>45</sup> Amichai, Yael and Yiscah are mentioned in passing in section 4.4, but those mentions are taken from the previous sections which were already shared with the three of them.

(Falzon, 2009a, p. 1). The Dina list (see section 3.4.3) would have constituted a possible alternative site for a netnography (Kozinets, 2015), but I ruled out that option for ethical reasons (being transgender and having an Orthodox background were membership requirements). Although the ethos and methods of ethnography continued to be a source of inspiration in the course of the fieldwork, the final outcome cannot be described as such. Rather, this study is an attempt to answer the research questions on the basis of in-depth interviews supplemented by observations and the cultivation of a close cooperation with the participants.

As I have elaborated in greater detail above, participants were contacted using three different strategies: (1) snow ball effect (including postings in the Dina list written by members at my request); (2) contacting organizations for LGBTQ and formerly ultra-Orthodox, and; (3) posting in online forums and social media sites for LGBTQ. Out of that process, I contacted and interviewed 13 participants (see table in section 2.1 for details). The interviews, which provided the bulk of the material for this study, attempted to reflect the abductive approach of my research design (Shanks, 1998). The first interview usually revolved around the question ‘what is your story?’ That question was meant to give participants the maximum freedom to shape their own narratives and to raise the topics they believed to be important. In this way, an inductive element was built into the research process. In the cases in which opportunities for follow-up interviews were available (see table in section 2.1 for details), I conducted semi-structured interviews (Longhurst, 2010) on the basis of the transcript from the first interview and my two research questions. By letting my research questions infuse the semi-structured interviews, a more deductive, theory-driven, element kicked in. Fortunately, my research questions were specific enough to provide a research focus but also sufficiently broad and open-ended to allow for a vast number of possible answers. That made it possible to merge the inductive and deductive elements rather smoothly.

Concerning the analysis, I decided that in order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants’ identities, I would develop a structure of themes around each of the two research questions. In order to identify those themes, which were not meant to be representative but rather to provide richness and diversity, I used qualitative research software (Nvivo) to code the interview transcripts. The coding process started from the two research questions providing two parent nodes, into which child nodes such as ‘religious practice,’ ‘authority’ and ‘transition’ were added. The creation of nodes and sub-nodes, however, was not a straightforward process and it could proceed both top-down (from the abstract to the particular, as a node was unpacked in more and more specific instances) and bottom-up (from the particular to the abstract, as a collection of nodes were later identified as referring to phenomenon  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$  or  $\gamma$  and regrouped together as subnodes to  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$  or  $\gamma$ ). The first question in particular (intersections of gender and religion) concentrated most of the material and most of the nodes, to the effect that at a certain point in the coding

process, it started to become unmanageable. An important breakthrough at that stage was to realize that the emerging themes tended to cluster around one of the following time divisions: pre-transition, transition and post-transition. The diachronic approach contributed to provide a structure to a plethora of nodes that had seemed previously to float around in a variety of constellations. That move was not meant to cement any particular account since there is no master narrative of being transgender with an Orthodox background. Rather, what I attempted to do in reporting the results was to use that diachronic structure as a trellis onto which to weave complexity (see section 4.1).

Finally, I elaborated on my notion of research participant (see Schofield Clark & Chiou, 2013, pp. 42-47) as opposed to informant. The main difference is that participants are encouraged, though by no means obliged, to get involved in key aspects of the research process. In the case of this study, research participants were encouraged to voice their opinions about the research focus, were given access to section 3.4 as well as chapter 4 and they were regarded as co-theorizers (see section 2.7) on par with the researcher. I argued that such a participatory approach was both methodologically and ethically preferable, given the novelty of the topic (requiring a strong inductive element and the possibility of triangulation through the participants' reviews of the analysis and results) and my status as a double outsider (compounded by the risks of disenfranchising a vulnerable population).

## 3. The research triangle: the field, the researcher, the participants

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I would like to reflect on the three main elements that constituted the fieldwork: the field, the researcher and the participants. The chapter focuses particularly on the third side of that triangle, the participants, which in turn provides the necessary background to be able to follow chapter 4 on analysis and results. The other two sides of the triangle, the field and the researcher, are given less prominence but still discussed since they offer relevant insights on the political and cultural climate in which the fieldwork took place, as well as my connection and positioning *vis-à-vis* the topic of this study.

### 3.2 The field

The purpose of the reflections in this section is to provide a context for the fieldwork, including external factors such as a military conflict that affected my ability to conduct research, as well as a few of the interactions with the participants. It is important to point out that, neither in its aims nor design, was this project conceived as a comparative study between transgender in Israel and North America (mostly USA). Rather, my main interest here is to give a sense on how empirical work is inflected by the situationality of fieldwork in changing social and political landscapes. Although not the topic of this study given their broadness, such landscapes modulated in more and less subtle ways both my outlook and the personal encounters with the participants.

#### 3.2.1 Israel

My first period of extended fieldwork in Israel, from June to December 2014, coincided with a new peak of armed violence in the ongoing conflict between the State of Israel and Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip. Days before my arrival, three Israeli youngsters had disappeared in the West Bank. After weeks of searches and speculations, their lifeless bodies were found near the town of Hebron. According to reports, the youths had been murdered by a

Hamas operative while hitchhiking.<sup>46</sup> Whereas the Israeli government blamed the Hamas leadership, other sources pointed to a rogue cell acting of their own accord.<sup>47</sup> The following day three Israeli youngsters kidnapped and brutally murdered a Palestinian teenager in retaliation. A week later, Israel launched the so-called Operation Protective Edge, which would include a ground invasion of Gaza, and for the first time Hamas rockets launched from the Strip were able to reach as far as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Between July 8<sup>th</sup> and August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2104 Palestinians were killed in Gaza, 70 percent of them civilians, as well as 66 soldiers and seven civilians on the Israeli side.<sup>48</sup>

I had been to Israel several times in the past and for extended periods of time, but never before I had found myself in a country at war. At the beginning of my stay, I was living in a small apartment in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Nachlaot close to the picturesque Mahane Yehuda market, a true treasure trove for folks interested in middle eastern food. The day that the state funeral was being held for the three youths murdered in the West Bank, before the start of Operation Protective Edge, I happened to be at one of the coffee shops next to the market when an uproar in the street drew my attention. When I walked out into Jaffa Road I found myself in the midst of an anti-Arab demonstration organized by far-right Israeli groups. I was aware that such groups existed (one of them, a segregationist organization called Lehava,<sup>49</sup> used to put up a stand with propaganda inside the market) so, although I found the calls for ‘death to the Arabs’ chilling, they did not shock me. What I was not prepared for was realizing how young most of the demonstrators were, male teenagers in their majority. It was a harrowing experience to realize that such a wave of hatred washing over me came from demonstrators of such a young age. I have heard from religious people, both Jews and Christians, how they feel that the divine presence dwells in Jerusalem. I do not consider myself religious and I am not usually attuned to those feelings, but on the occasion of the anti-Arab rally I had a strong, almost physical sensation of emptiness as if that divine presence, which eluded me under less exceptional circumstances, had become paradoxically tangible by its withdrawal, in its absence.

Another vivid memory from my period of extended fieldwork in Israel was the first time that the civil defense siren blasted in Jerusalem. I was in the apartment preparing to cook dinner when the siren took me completely off guard. Until then, rockets launched from Gaza had never reached that far. I

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<sup>46</sup> See *New York Times*’ article “Israel’s search for 3 teenagers ends in grief” from June 30, 2014, retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/01/world/middleeast/Israel-missing-teenagers.html>.

<sup>47</sup> See *New York Times*’ article “A trail of clues leading to victims and heartbreak” from July 1, 2014, retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/02/world/middleeast/details-emerge-in-deaths-of-israeli-teenagers.html>. Retrieved: 05/08/2016.

<sup>48</sup> See *BBC News*’ article “Gaza crisis: Toll of operations in Gaza” from September 1, 2014: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404>. Retrieved: 05/08/2016.

<sup>49</sup> Shorthand for *למניעת התבוללות בארץ הקודש* (transliteration *LeMeniat Hitbolelut B'eret HaKodesh*; translation “Prevention of Assimilation in the Holy Land”).

have a clear memory of having a mixed bodily reaction. While my brain was telling me that the mathematic chances of being hit by a rocket were negligible, I also felt a visceral reaction in my gut that would be best described as fear. I finally rationalized that fear by telling myself that, regardless of the math, I had the civic duty to seek shelter at the sound of a civil defense siren. I then went downstairs to the courtyard on the way to the basement, where the bomb shelter was located. At the courtyard, I was met by a small group of my neighbors, by no means everyone in the building. It seems that some of my neighbors put more trust either in God or the laws of probability than I did myself. They stayed at home, their TV sets buzzing through the open windows, but among those of us in the courtyard the anxiety was running high. It turned out, though, that the basement was locked and the owner of the building, who had the only key, lived elsewhere. To make things worse, he was not answering phone calls and by the time he would have been able to come, the danger would have already subsided.

In relation to the rocket fire from Gaza, another experience that I remember vividly was the weekend visit I paid to Orthodox friends in Beer Sheva, the largest Israeli town in the desert region of the Negev. Given its relative proximity to Gaza, Beer Sheva was much more exposed to rocket fire than Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. In the short taxi drive from the bus station to my friends' place, it made an impression on me to see the streets completely empty, something unusual even for a *shabbat* eve. In spite of the circumstances, my friends were amazing hosts and thanks to their warmth and kindness I felt very welcome. That night I was awoken in the middle of my sleep by the siren. I rushed downstairs to the *merhav mugan* or 'security room' built on the ground floor, where I was joined by my friends carrying their small children. We waited until we heard the explosions in mid-air caused by the incoming barrage of rockets and counter-rockets of the so-called Iron Dome missile defense system, and then returned to our beds. Although in no way would I like to diminish the loss of life on the Israeli side, the rockets launched from Gaza were fortunately rather ineffective as conventional ballistic weapons. The barrages, though, were very successful in psychological warfare, effectively paralyzing the south of the country and prompting major international airlines to cancel their routes to Ben Gurion airport. In Gaza there is no doubt that the situation was an awful lot worse, both in terms of loss of life and destruction. About what was going on inside of Gaza, though, I did not know any more than I would have known if I had stayed in Sweden, since all the information I received was through the grisly media reports that journalists were sending from the Strip.

The escalation of hostilities into a full-fledged armed conflict made me question myself, particularly if it was sensible to stay in Israel and continue with the fieldwork as planned. I had to consider my personal safety, as well as the feelings of my beloved ones who were not thrilled about my staying. I also

struggled with questions of ethics and motivation. On the face of all the bloodshed and devastation, particularly among the civilian population in Gaza, my research preoccupations seemed petty and misplaced. After consultation with my supervisors, we concluded that the security concerns were not alarming to the degree that it would be justified to cancel my stay. Furthermore, my partner Jakob was undeterred to jump into one of the few planes still landing in Israel so that we could spend a couple of weeks together. Finally, after some reflection, I realized that it would be a mistake to let this project become another casualty of the conflict. I would be fooling myself if I were to deny that I also wanted to succeed in my PhD for purely selfish reasons, but over and above that I felt that I was part of a larger picture, involving not the least the participants and my supervisors, and that I would be letting them down if I did not do the best out of the circumstances.

Over time, the feelings of emotional dissonance about doing research in a country at war subsided and that echoed something that I observed around me. Since the start of Israel's operation I had moved to Jaffa, an ancient Arab town incorporated with Tel Aviv. The old house where I lived had no 'security room' and the neighborhood's bomb shelter was too far away to be able to reach it within the 30 seconds warning provided by the sirens. As a matter of fact, I stopped paying attention to the sirens and it looked like I was not the only one to do so. It seemed that for most people around me, the occasional siren and the heightened levels of tension in the air had become the new normal. It was a frightening thought to realize that we had quickly become used to living with rockets exploding above our heads and the echoes of a bloody conflict whose main theater was just a few dozen kilometers down the same coastline.

Besides the personal considerations mentioned above, the conflict also impacted my fieldwork in more practical ways. At the height of the rocket barages from Gaza, there were travel restrictions in place that made it harder to meet participants. Furthermore, when I was still interviewing potential participants from the LGBTQ communities, a few of them became unavailable after they had been called to reserve duty by the Israeli army. The conflict also became an issue that was raised in my interactions with the participants. I remember one occasion in particular when Yiscah invited me and other guests to her apartment in Jerusalem for a *shabbat* lunch. Without going into details,<sup>50</sup> it turned out that one of the guests was in distress due to their personal connection with a soldier deployed at the Gaza border. In response, Yiscah read for us, both in English and Hebrew, the prayer for the Israel Defense Forces,<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> I don't feel at liberty to be any more explicit about this episode, since it involves people who are not participants in this study.

<sup>51</sup> The original text in Hebrew can be found online at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/idfpray.html>. I copy here the English translation provided by Jewish Virtual Library:



a prayer commonly found in religious Zionist *siddurim*.<sup>52</sup> At the end of the prayer there was a mixture of *amens* and *lechaims* followed by wine drinking from the glasses. That was one of those situations in which I was concerned about alienating one of the participants by acting in an off-putting way, but I could not bring myself to raise my glass or say anything. The situation became awkward, and I had the feeling that everyone at the table realized that something was going on with me, though I might have just as well imagined it. In any case, from what I knew from Yiscah, I figured out that she appreciated people who are sincere. I was not afraid of being sincere but rather rude or insensitive, particularly since the whole episode started in relation to one of Yiscah's guests feeling distress at the situation of a beloved one. Nonetheless, I felt I owed everyone an explanation and I said that I did not feel comfortable raising my glass to a prayer for military victory. I added, though, that I wished for every soldier to return home safely and that Palestinians would be spared the horrors of war. Yiscah was very gracious in her response and she thanked me for speaking my mind. She pointed out, though, that the prayer was not about military victory but spiritual victory and then she mentioned reports she had read concerning divine intervention in different conflicts in which Israel had been involved.

All in all, conducting fieldwork in Israel in the midst of Operation Protective Edge and its aftermath was a challenge at different levels but it also forced me to think harder about myself as a researcher and my commitment to this project. One of the issues I struggled with was negotiating the boundary between the aims of the fieldwork and the conflict that was raging around me, as well as focusing on the participants without completely erasing myself. Politics was a particular concern regarding the latter. From previous experiences, I realized that when talking Israeli politics, positions are frequently entrenched and emotions run high. On the other hand, I did not feel comfortable bracketing out the conflict from my interactions with the participants since that was a major event through which we were all living. I finally decided that I would not bring up the topic myself, but I would share my thoughts if asked. Israeli

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He Who blessed our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- may He bless the fighters of the Israel Defense Forces, who stand guard over our land and the cities of our God, from the border of the Lebanon to the desert of Egypt, and from the Great Sea unto the approach of the Aravah, on the land, in the air, and on the sea.

May the Almighty cause the enemies who rise up against us to be struck down before them. May the Holy One, Blessed is He, preserve and rescue our fighters from every trouble and distress and from every plague and illness, and may He send blessing and success in their every endeavor.

May He lead our enemies under our soldiers' sway and may He grant them salvation and crown them with victory. And may there be fulfilled for them the verse: For it is the Lord your God, Who goes with you to battle your enemies for you to save you.

<sup>52</sup> *Siddur, pl. siddurim*: Jewish prayer book.

politics, after all, was not part of my focus but reality did not care about research agendas and it was pushing back. In the end, most of the participants in Israel did not say much or anything at all about the conflict and with those who did, like Yiscah, we managed to have candid and constructive conversations.

### 3.2.2 North America

My period of extended fieldwork in North America (mostly USA, but also Canada), from February to June 2015 and November 2015 to February 2016, was much less turbulent in comparison. Upon my arrival in New York, the main news was the weather, which is a welcome change when you have been spending some time in a country at war. The northern East Coast had been battered by a series of blizzards prior to my arrival and two weeks into my stay yet another snowstorm hit New York sending temperatures down to a new record low.<sup>53</sup> That is not to say that the USA did not have plenty of social and political problems of its own. Thanks largely to the activists of Black Lives Matter, a movement started in 2013 through a hashtag campaign,<sup>54</sup> racism was a recurring focus in media attention, especially in connection with police brutality and the criminal justice system. In relation to the topic of this study, prior to my arrival in the USA, transgender activism and visibility had reached extraordinary momentum, with a CNN commentator referring to the first half of 2015 as “America’s transgender moment.”<sup>55</sup> For example, in May 2014, actress Laverne Cox became the first openly transgender person to appear on the cover of Time magazine. The cover featured an article titled “The Transgender Tipping Point—America’s next civil rights frontier” (Steinmetz, 2014, May 29). And on January 2015, Barack Obama became the first US president to use the word transgender in a State of the Union address.<sup>56</sup> During my first period of extended fieldwork, the most widely commented event was Caitlyn Jenner’s public coming out as a transgender woman.<sup>57</sup> Given Jenner’s past as an Olympic medal winner and her family ties to reality celebrity Kim Kardashian, her coming out interview became a sensation overnight. Although

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<sup>53</sup> See article in *The Guardian* “Snowstorm paralyses central US as New York cold hits record low” from February 17, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/feb/17/winter-storm-paralyses-central-us-as-new-york-cold-hits-record-low>.

<sup>54</sup> See article in *The Guardian* “#BlackLivesMatter: the birth of a new civil rights movement” from July 19, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/19/black-livesmatter-birth-civil-rights-movement>.

<sup>55</sup> See CNN’s article “America’s transgender moment” from June 1, 2015, retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/23/living/transgender-moment-jenner-feat/index.html>.

<sup>56</sup> See “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address” from January 20, 2015, at the official website of the White House. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015>.

<sup>57</sup> See excerpts of the interview with ABC from April 24, 2015, in which Caitlyn Jenner came out as transgender. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/fullpage/bruce-jenner-the-interview-30471558>.

Jenner was later criticized by transgender activists on the account of her privilege as a white, wealthy and influential transwoman,<sup>58</sup> there is no doubt that her coming out had a large impact on the public whose ripple effects have continued to be felt long after. On a related note, by the end of my first extended period of fieldwork in the USA, the Supreme Court finally legalized same-gender marriage all over the country. That legal victory for advocates of lesbian and gay rights was not directly linked to my topic, but such a deep change in attitudes towards non-heteronormative couples suggested that a similar shift towards greater tolerance for gender minorities was within reach. Finally, shortly after the end of my second and much shorter period of fieldwork in 2016, a heated debate broke out in response to the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act passed by the Republican-led North Carolina legislature in March of that year.<sup>59</sup> One of the provisions that arguably drew most controversy, was a new policy banning transgender people all over the state from choosing bathrooms consistent with their gender identity. In response, in May 2016 the Obama administration passed a directive ordering public schools to let transgender pupils use the bathrooms of their choice.<sup>60</sup> In that way, what had started as a North Carolinian controversy quickly spread all over the country.

The events I have described in the USA, some of which took place during my periods of fieldwork there, are significant for a lot of different reasons, but in relation to this study there are two points in particular that I would like to raise. Firstly, when I started my PhD in 2012, the general public's awareness concerning transgender issues was rather low. At that time, I could not anticipate that in the course of my research the transgender question would become extremely topical, particularly in the USA. Secondly, the new visibility of transgender in the USA and the extension of American culture wars into school bathrooms is another instantiation of how gender has become one of the main sites of contestation in post-secular societies (see section 1.1). Given the strong identification of the Republican party with so called 'Christian values' (Williams, 2010), it is not too far-fetched to read a religious component into the bathroom controversy. On the other hand, critics could argue that the USA has never been secular (the famous question of European exceptionalism; see Green, 2010) from which it follows that post-secularity would be a misnomer. Furthermore, although religion probably plays a role in the bathroom controversy, it is much less salient and clearly defined than in the case

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<sup>58</sup> See article in *The Guardian* "Caitlyn Jenner: transgender community has mixed reactions to Vanity Fair reveal" from June 2, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2015/jun/02/caitlyn-jenner-transgender-response-vanity-fair>.

<sup>59</sup> See *CNN*'s article "North Carolina governor signs controversial transgender bill" from March 24, 2016, retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/23/politics/north-carolina-gender-bathrooms-bill>.

<sup>60</sup> See *BBC News*' article "Transgender toilet use: US schools 'must respect gender identity'" from May 13, 2016, retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36286111>.

of the *burkini* bans in a handful of French coastal towns,<sup>61</sup> to take a recent European example.

The surge of interest in the USA on transgender questions was something that I got to experience first-hand during a lecture I gave at New York University in December 2015 on my preliminary research findings.<sup>62</sup> In the handful of lectures and presentations I have given through the last few years, it was the first time that someone had to hang a sign on the door saying that the event was full. In such an amazing response there was certainly a strong local component. New York, of all places, with its large population of college educated Jews,<sup>63</sup> offered a unique platform for my lecture. To the extent that I could get a sense of the audience, my impression was that it was dominated by a very young crowd of Modern Orthodox and unaffiliated though Jewishly committed Jews.<sup>64</sup> It was almost intimidating to be in a room filled with folks who knew tons about Orthodox Judaism and gender studies, but from the questions and comments I got after the lecture it seemed that it went well. Later I heard something through the grapevine to the effect that several people in the audience were a bit disappointed that I had not addressed a genderqueer perspective.<sup>65</sup> The absence of genderqueer participants in this study is a criticism that I have to live with, but not for lack of trying. In the course of my fieldwork I was very much hoping to get in touch with someone who self-identified as genderqueer and who had an Orthodox background, but unfortunately I failed to get in touch with anyone in that community. There is no question that in terms of future research, the most urgent is probably a case study of genderqueer in Orthodox contexts. That is not only because it would be extremely interesting to learn how gender nonconformists negotiate a gendered religion such as Orthodox Judaism (see section and 4.4.1 and 4.4.7), but also because genderqueer perspectives seem to have gained a particularly strong appeal among younger generations. I have no reason to believe that the criticism I heard about, concerning the lack of genderqueer perspectives, was not coming from a desire for greater diversity and inclusivity. As I mentioned, that was a desire that I shared but failed to realize. I would take issue, though, with a particular strand of genderqueer critique that tends to look down on transsex-

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<sup>61</sup> The bans were finally reversed by the courts. See *BBC News*' article "France burkini: Highest court suspends ban" from August 26, 2016, retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37198479>.

<sup>62</sup> A word of thanks goes to Angela Zito and Janine Paolucci at the NYU Center for Religion and Media for making this lecture possible.

<sup>63</sup> This is emphatically not to say that gender questions only interest or are accessible to people with a college education. Rather that gender perspectives have increasingly become established across scholarly disciplines, thus reaching a larger number of students.

<sup>64</sup> I would describe the latter as Jews who do not identify with any of the extant movements, but who nevertheless form small communities with like-minded Jews committed in varying degrees to observancy and Jewish textual study.

<sup>65</sup> For my use of the term genderqueer see section 4.4.

uals as brainwashed people with a false consciousness who reinforce an oppressive heteronormative system (Serano, 2007, p. 110; 2013, p. 135). As trans feminist activist and author Julia Serano has brilliantly argued, that sort of gender policing fatally confounds the necessary critique of established gender norms with a unilateral use of a power to define others in delegitimizing and dehumanizing ways (2013, pp. 110-137).

In relation to the previous discussion, namely, the ways in which blanket criticism of transgender within the binary is always a caricature, it was illuminating to spend time with Moshe between interviews. Moshe self-identified as a gay transman and his way of expressing maleness was by bending that category. At a *shabbat* service we attended together at his Conservative egalitarian *shul*,<sup>66</sup> Moshe was wearing a matching pink and purple *kippah*<sup>67</sup> and *tallit*.<sup>68</sup> Looking back on that day, it strikes me how Moshe's male-identified characteristics, such as his sturdy build and stubble, were inflected by his choice of religious items or, in other words, how Moshe's unique humanity came into expression by his way of inhabiting particular intersections of gender and religion. In a related note, at the time of our meeting Moshe had become pregnant through a sperm donation (see section 4.2.3) and, although that decision had nothing to do with gender politics and everything to do with fulfilling a lifelong wish to become a parent, it also reflected back on his way of embodying maleness. Finally, what I mentioned above concerning the surge of transgender visibility in the US media might provide a relevant background to the incident referred to by Ben (see section 4.3.2) in which the *rebbetzin* in his community felt compelled to ask him about transgender issues after hearing a discussion on the topic in the radio. Although that episode took place in Canada, it is reasonable to think that Canadian media might have been exposed to a similar increase in transgender visibility, either through the influence of its powerful neighbor or as a consequence of more internal dynamics.

### 3.3 The researcher

In the previous sections and chapters, I have already written in passing about my biographical circumstances and there would be no point in repeating the same here, even in a summarized form. Instead, in this section I would like to write about something that connected me to the participants and that, through that connection, was one of the factors that encouraged me to pursue a topic focused on transgender. In order to explain myself, though, I will need to take a slight detour.

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<sup>66</sup> Term used mainly by Ashkenazi Jews to refer to the synagogue.

<sup>67</sup> Skullcap.

<sup>68</sup> Prayer shawl.

Although I am not Jewish myself, my degree of involvement in Jewish matters in recent years has been considerable. Before the start of the PhD, I had earned a MA in Jewish Studies, I volunteered for a Jewish organization and I often socialized in Jewish circles. I had also spent extended periods of time in Israel and was conversant in Hebrew. I never thought that the term Philo-Semite applied to me since, in my book, a Philo-Semite was someone characterized by an uncritical appreciation of everything and anything Jewish. I found that approach conspicuously alien to the Jewish ethos, since the way I understood it was as a call to wrestle with all things human and divine in the pursuit of *tikkun olam*.<sup>69</sup> The multivocality of the Talmud or the hubbub of conversations over a *shabbat* table seemed to me much more accurate instantiations of Jewishness than any attempts to close ranks and stifle dissent around controversial matters. Finally, since I became involved in the Jewish world I never seriously considered converting. Lacking any theistic beliefs myself, converting to a religion predicated on those beliefs seemed a non-starter.

My relative knowledge of the Jewish world—which did not include Orthodoxy at the beginning of this project—provided an important connection with the participants as well as a biographical element that modulated my status as a double outsider. A subtler connection, and the focus of my reflections in this section, was the fact that I was conversant in Jewish topics and that I often socialized in Jewish circles resulted in me unwittingly passing as a Jew.

### 3.3.1 Passing in the sociological literature: Goffman and Garfinkel

The concept of passing has prominent forebears in the sociological literature through the work on stigma by Erving Goffman (1963) and Garfinkel's (1967) groundbreaking ethnomethodological studies. In his work, Goffman described passing as "receiving and accepting treatment based on false suppositions" and he distinguished between willing and unintended passing depending on whether one's real social identity was actively concealed or not (1963, p. 42). Goffman discussed the concept of passing in relation to the management of stigma, which he described as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (1963, preface). Goffman had a broad understanding of stigma which he categorized into three different types: stigma due to physical impairment; due to psychological factors and "blemishes of individual character"; and finally the stigma derived from belonging to a despised group. Interestingly, homosexuals and Orthodox Jews figured as examples of the second and third categories respectively (1963, p. 6). Passing was therefore one of the main devices for the management of stigma in the search for full social acceptance.

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<sup>69</sup> The mending of the world (see glossary for details).

Although still full of insights, Goffman's study feels currently dated and problematically normative in its reification of stigma as a social fact which those affected by it need to manage. In such a reading, bigotry is given *carte blanche* and accepted as a fixture of normality. It is rather telling that Goffman includes himself and his readers among the full-fledged members of the community:

We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the *normals*.<sup>70</sup> (Goffman, 1963, p. 5)

Reading those passages now, one wonders to what extent Goffman, the son of Jewish Ukrainian immigrants, genuinely embraced his mainstream belonging or if that was part of his frontstage performance—his passing—as a respectable scholar in the early 1960s (Garner & Hancock, 2014, p. 341).

Although Goffman did not consider the case of transgender people, in his description of the most complete form of passing, (which he called “disappearance”), he pictured a scene inspired by the literature on black people passing as white and vice versa that had an uncanny similarity with a gender transition and what I describe as dislocation (1963, p. 79) (see section 4.2.2):

It may be noted that when relatively complete passing is essayed, the individual sometimes consciously arranges his own *rite de passage*, going to another city, holing up in a room for a few days with preselected clothing and cosmetics he has brought with him, and then, like a butterfly, emerging to try the brand new wings. (Goffman, pp. 79-80)

Although Garfinkel also used a broad definition of passing, including politically persecuted people and black people passing as white, the focus of his research was more attuned than Goffman's to the purpose of this study (1967, p. 136). Garfinkel's concern centered on the case of Agnes, a 19-year-old transwoman<sup>71</sup> who was seeking to undergo bottom surgery at the UCLA Medical Center. A reading of the text nearly 50 years after it was published lays bare its ethical problems, not the least how Agnes was in effect coerced to become a research subject in exchange for an operation that otherwise she

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<sup>70</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>71</sup> Garfinkel created a degree of confusion in the literature by referring to Agnes as intersex, since he and the team of medical researchers at UCLA were under the impression that Agnes' secondary female characteristics such as breasts, lack of facial hair, etc. were due to congenital factors (“testicular feminization syndrome” in their medical parlance). Although the researchers considered the possibility that Agnes might have had access to an “exogenous source of hormones” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 161), they dropped their reservations in light of how Agnes insisted that such was not the case, even after her surgery had been completed. Eight years later, though, after Agnes had moved on with her life, she offhandedly revealed to one of the doctors in Garfinkel's team that at age 12 she started regularly taking estrogens from a medication prescribed for her mother (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 287).

could not afford (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 161). In spite of its shortcomings, Garfinkel's study provides important insights on the workings of passing—particularly in regards to gender—which he defined as:

The work of achieving and making secure their rights to live in the elected sex status while providing for the possibility of detection and ruin carried out within the socially structured conditions in which this work occurred. (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 118)

As Garfinkel pointed out, passing was not a one-time event but an ongoing work (1967, pp. 136-137). The task of passing, in turn, required the deployment of passing devices such as talking in generalities, telling white lies and the ability to improvise, combined with a strong sense of awareness and “inner vigilance” (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 167-170).

### 3.3.2 Passing as a Jew

Unlike Goffman, Garfinkel did not consider the cases of people like myself who passed unintendedly, but his description of passing devices reflected some of the dilemmas that I faced when realizing that someone was making incorrect assumptions about myself. At the *shabbat* lunch hosted by Orthodox friends in Beer Sheva (see section 3.2.1) one of their guests asked me where I was from and upon hearing my response—Barcelona—he asked me where my family came from. My answer that my family came from Barcelona as well as southern and northeastern Spain seemed to puzzle him. “But where do they *really* come from?” he asked. It then dawned on me that I had passed in his eyes as a Jew and that he had a hard time—and rightly so—reconciling that notion with what he knew about Spanish Jewry. “As far as I can tell, they have always been in Spain,” I told him. Following my revelation, I could almost see the cogs turning in his head, trying to put together his first impression of my biographical circumstances with the somber record of Spanish history: the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, the sickening obsession with *limpieza de sangre*,<sup>72</sup> etc. Although the underlying question—*are you Jewish?*—had not been asked, I had a choice to disclose my background, but I did nothing. I pretended that I did not realize the awkwardness of the situation. In such cases, my primal form of passing consists in playing dumb.<sup>73</sup> Doing otherwise would have resulted in what Goffman calls “an embarrassing incident” (1963, p. 75). In that sense, being gay in heterosexual contexts or a non-Jew in Jewish circles share a similar feature: it is

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<sup>72</sup> Purity of blood, in Spanish. The widespread preoccupation that took root in the Iberian Peninsula around the early 16<sup>th</sup> century to establish oneself as an ‘old Christian,’ namely, as someone who had neither Jewish nor Muslim converts among their ancestors.

<sup>73</sup> Incidentally, that kind of feigned ignorance is referred to in Spanish as ‘*hacerse el sueco*,’ literally ‘pretend to be Swedish.’



awkward to inform people about those aspects of your background upon meeting them, out of the blue and for no reason, but it is equally awkward to correct the assumptions people project on you once they become apparent but still remain unstated. In both cases, volunteering the information in absence of an explicit question can easily be misconstrued as defensive.

There is no question that there are major qualitative differences between transgender experiences in passing and my own, not only because among some transgender people, passing may seem a desirable outcome, but first and foremost because I never risked being exposed to violence as a result of being read as a non-Jew. I am aware that a section of the transgender community has written critically about “passing privilege” (see Hansbury, 2005; Sawyer, 2003), that is, the claim that successfully passing as cisgender not only erases transgender biographies and subjectivities but that it also depends in no small measure on the social and economic capital of the individual and their ability to secure the necessary resources for a transition conducive to pass. In the context of this study, though, passing was important for a number of participants not the least as a matter of personal safety.

In exploring the connection between transgender experiences of passing and my own, I did not intend to blur the major differences or belittle the role of transphobia by comparison. Rather, my purpose was to elaborate on another aspect of my identity that modulated my position as a double outsider without canceling it. It also made me aware of the ways in which core aspects of identity are socially negotiated, potentially paving the way for a sense of belonging and new courses for agency but also to misunderstandings, internal dissonance and ultimately, in the transgender case, violence.

Extending the metaphor, it would be worth considering if the experiences of passing as a Jew suggests that there is a ‘gentile binary’ between Jew and non-Jew and, if so, whether the gender and the gentile binaries are somehow commensurable. It is rather telling that the question ‘who is a Jew?’ has become an infected topic in the Jewish world, particularly since the *halakhic* standards of Orthodox Judaism acknowledging only Orthodox conversion or Jewish matrilineal descent are at odds with the standards of other branches of Judaism, as well as the late modern trend to increasingly leave matters of personal identity to self-definition. In that regard, the question of ‘who is a Jew?’ echoes similarly vexed questions in queer and feminist theory such as ‘who is a woman?’ or ‘who is a man?’. What those questions have in common is that whereas their answers once seemed obvious and taken for granted, they are now open to deconstruction and critical scrutiny.

### 3.4 The participants

In this section, I would like to provide some background on the participants and the place they found themselves in their personal journeys at the time of

our meetings. In order to do so, however, I need first to focus on questions of language since it is not possible to refer to the participants as a whole without previously coming to terms with how their commonality should be articulated. Finally, I end the chapter by providing some relevant background information on the Dina list and the ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer, both necessary to understand the following chapter of analysis and results.

### 3.4.1 A note on the language

One of the challenges in writing this dissertation has been finding an appropriate language that works on different levels. The results chapter itself, for instance, has been conceived in such a way that people familiar with the Orthodox world would not need to spend lots of time reading through explanations, while those who have no or little experience of Orthodox Judaism could understand the emic terms with the aid of a glossary.

Concerning the participants, though, the issue of language was raised first and foremost in relation to finding a word to refer to the group as a whole. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that there is no consensus around the definitions of terms such as ‘transgender,’ ‘transsexual’ or ‘genderqueer,’ to mention just a few. One option would have been to use different words in different contexts, but that would undermine the idea that the participants actually form a group with a certain degree of commonality. In relation to this, it is important to point out that this sense of commonality was not a bias that I, as a researcher, brought into the field, but rather was something that the participants themselves recognized. It was that sense of commonality, for instance, that brought several participants to join the Dina list or to refer to the Tzitz Eliezer’s ruling as being relevant to their situation. The crux of the matter, however, is how to find a language to articulate that commonality. When participants were asked directly, they expressed different preferences which in turn revealed a range of nuances and understandings. Dov, for instance, spoke of the “Jorgensen condition” in reference to Christine Jorgensen, the MTF woman who, after undergoing ‘bottom surgery’<sup>74</sup> in Denmark in 1952, became “arguably the most famous person in the world” upon her return to her native USA (Stryker, 2000, p. v). With his choice of language, Dov seemed to indicate that Jorgensen’s was a medical condition amenable to diagnosis and treatment. Yiscah, on the other hand, spoke of being a “transitioned” woman, suggesting that her gender journey had already come to a close. In the case of Beth, in the description for the Dina list that she wrote, she spoke of “transsexuals,” arguably referring to people who, within the

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<sup>74</sup> I decided to use this colloquial expression, frequently used by the participants themselves, to avoid more medico-technical terms such as ‘sex correction surgery’ or ‘sex reassignment surgery.’ The reason I am avoiding those terms is that for some people they might imply value judgments on questions of correct gender presentation and body configuration. I am using ‘bottom surgery’ as an inclusive and neutral term aimed at referring to the medical procedure alone.

framework of the gender binary, had a gender identity different to that assigned at birth. “Post-op transsexual” was the expression that Yael used to identify herself, although she cautioned that she would use that expression only when absolutely necessary (in a medical context, for instance) and that otherwise she preferred to refer to herself simply as “female.” Other participants had different preferences. Ethan referred to himself as a “transman,” while Noam used the expression “political transwoman” to underline her commitments towards feminism and the reclaiming of the Sephardic tradition.<sup>75</sup> Finally, Ben felt comfortable with a wide variety of concepts: “transgender,” “transsexual,” “transman,” “FTM.”<sup>76</sup> From my different interactions with the participants, it emerged that the terms that came closest to functioning as a common denominator were MTF and FTM. For that reason, I have used MTF and FTM in my results chapter when it was relevant to make such distinction, at times accompanied by the word ‘woman’ or ‘man.’<sup>77</sup> Those concepts, however, did not meet the need to find a term to refer to the group as a whole and, as we have seen, participants had different preferences in that regard.

After much pondering, I decided to use the word ‘transgender’ which is often used as an umbrella term and is, therefore, the most inclusive of the alternatives available. Consistency with the scarce scholarship available on the topic (Dzmura, 2010; Farber, 2015, August 6; Kabakov, 2010; Zeveloff, 2014), which also used the word ‘transgender’ as an umbrella term, was an important reason for my choice. Furthermore, the term has also been used in neutral or positive tones in Joy Ladin’s (2012) and Yiscah Smith’s (2014) autobiographical works (concerning the background of these authors, see section 4.3.1). By using the term ‘transgender’ I mean no disrespect to the participants who did not identify with that word. I am aware of the pitfalls of forcing people into one category. My use of ‘transgender’ does not wish to create such category and should be read as a family-resemblance term in the Wittgensteinian (1953/1973) sense, that is, as a term with overlapping similarities with other terms none of which are common to all. Finally, I reserved the term ‘genderqueer’ for gender nonconforming people who both in their gender identity and expression challenge the gender binary. As such, the term does not apply to any of the participants.

A similar exercise in elucidation is required to explain my use of the term ‘Orthodox.’ In the context of this study ‘Orthodox’ is also understood as an umbrella term which includes diverse communities, from liberal Open Orthodoxy to secluded *charedi*<sup>78</sup> communities. Furthermore, no ‘Orthodoxy test’

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<sup>75</sup> Pertaining to the Jews who trace their ancestry back to the Ladino-speaking communities who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>76</sup> Female-to-male.

<sup>77</sup> FTM and MTF are adjectives after all and on occasion they require an accompanying substantive for reasons of grammar.

<sup>78</sup> ‘God-fearing’; the self-designation of the people in the group that outsiders usually call ultra-Orthodox.

was required to become a participant in this study. Transgender Jews who self-identified as formerly or currently Orthodox were welcome to join. During my fieldwork in Israel, for instance, where the concept ‘Orthodox’ is rather foreign, I used the Hebrew word ‘*dati*’ meaning ‘[Orthodox] religious’. In the analysis, I have often used more specific words referring to subgroups such as Modern Orthodox, religious Zionist, *yeshivish*,<sup>79</sup> *chasid*,<sup>80</sup> *charedi* and ultra-Orthodox, the last two interchangeably. I also used terms such as ‘religious’ meaning someone who reports holding either religious beliefs or engaging in religious practices or both. Another term that I use is ‘observant’ meaning someone who lives their life according to the *halakha*.<sup>81</sup> As such, ‘observant’ can refer either to Orthodox or to so-called *Conservadox* affiliated with the Conservative movement,<sup>82</sup> or both. Participants, however, may use those same words in a different way. Moshe, for instance, didn’t consider himself religious at the same time that he regularly attended *shabbat* services, something that he mostly associated with aspects of his tradition and community life.

One last language issue to take into account is that in the results chapter, the past is the preferred verbal tense. I made this choice to clearly signalize that the accounts presented are, at best, a snapshot in the lives of the participants. As their personal journeys continued after our meetings, their views and interpretations could potentially change adding new nuances or developing in new and unexpected directions. For that reason, rather than freezing their accounts in an eternal present, I wanted to acknowledge the situatedness of this study and the open-ended nature of the participants’ lives.

### 3.4.2 The participants

#### Self-selection

The 13 participants included in this study self-selected themselves. All potential participants that could be reached through different channels of communication (the Dina list first and foremost, but also different organizations for

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<sup>79</sup> ‘Black hat’ Orthodox Jews whose life is centered around Talmud study in the *yeshivot*, often used as a synonym for *litvish*.

<sup>80</sup> An ultra-Orthodox Jew belonging to the branch of Judaism called *Chasidism* that was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in eastern Europe

<sup>81</sup> To avoid unnecessary gendering, I use “they/their/them” to refer both to 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural and gender neutral 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular. God is considered in the context of this study one of those gender neutral terms, with the slight difference that pronouns referring to God will be capitalized (They/Their/Them). On the other hand, when God is referred to in the quotes by the participants I preserved the pronouns of their choosing.

<sup>82</sup> *Conservadox* is a portmanteau of ‘Conservative’ and ‘Orthodox’ and is used to informally refer to Jews in the Conservative movement who lead observant lives. *Conservadox* Jews will frequently follow the sexual and gender ethics of the Conservative movement (acceptance of LGBTQ, for instance) while living an observant life (a principle espoused by the Conservative rabbinical leadership but with much less traction among the laity). The fact that *Conservadox* Jews are much more committed to the *halakha* than the average Conservative congregant is what makes their lifestyle align much closer to Orthodoxy.

LGBTQ and formerly ultra-Orthodox in the USA and Israel) were invited to take part in the study, but early on I made the decision that I would only use material from participants that I had met in person. Having a face to face communication at some point was important for two reasons. Firstly, I was of the opinion that, given my status as a double outsider, this project would only be feasible if I earned the trust of the participants. In my experience, face to face communication is qualitatively very different from computer-mediated communication, particularly when it comes to building trust. My second reason was related to the research design. Given the ethnographic approach with which I started out, I believed that meeting face to face would provide more opportunities for the participants to get to know me and for me to get to know them, hopefully opening new avenues to deepen my insights through interaction and observation. The requirement to meet face to face had its limitations, with at least one potential participant being left out due to the logistical difficulties in time and space to arrange a meeting. Other than that, participants self-selected themselves and my travels to meet them were made possible thanks to the generous donors that sponsored the periods of extended fieldwork.

Self-selection was a feature of the research design from the beginning, since one of my main concerns was to make sure that enough participants would be found in a group whose demographics are unknown but total numbers worldwide might run in the lower thousands.<sup>83</sup> The numbers got increasingly smaller if we consider (1) how many did not live completely in stealth or denial and would therefore consider meeting a researcher; (2) how many had access to a computer with internet connection and regularly visited the online platforms where I or others on my behalf posted requests for interviews; (3) how many lived in Israel and North America, which were the only geographical areas that I was planning to visit; and (4) how many, after fulfilling all the previous conditions, still had the time, energy and motivation to want to meet with me. As mentioned, the total demographics of the group are unknown but it is rather telling that the Dina list, arguably the main communication hub for transgender Orthodox Jews, had 34 members at the time of my meeting with Beth Orens,<sup>84</sup> the list's moderator.

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<sup>83</sup> One report (Tighe, Saxe, De Kramer, & Parmer, 2013, September 1) estimated a population of 6,814,000 Jews in the USA in 2012. According to a Pew report (2013, October 1), the percentage of Orthodox Jews in relation to the general Jewish population in 2013 was 10 percent. Finally, according to Gates (2011) 0.3 percent of the adult population in the USA is transgender. These figures cannot be combined since they refer to different years and population groups (total population vs. adult population) and it is unclear that the distribution of transgender people follows even patterns. However, as a thought experiment, if we were to combine them they would throw an estimate of over 2,000 transgender Orthodox Jews only in the USA. Numbers worldwide could possibly double that figure.

<sup>84</sup> Beth Orens is a *nom de plume* used by Beth in publications and other contexts, not her real name.

Apart from being transgender, the only criterion for joining the study was that participants would be formerly or currently Orthodox. In this way, my goal was to make the parameters of the study as inclusive as possible in order to be able to reflect greater diversity. That notwithstanding, the fact that the Dina list was one of the main platforms to contact potential participants added some selection bias, as I will explain. Seven participants reported being members of the list at the time of our meetings: Belinda, Ben, Beth, Dov, Moshe, Yael and Yiscah. As the Dina list description states,<sup>85</sup> it is open for “transsexuals who are Orthodox Jews” and “transsexuals who used to be Orthodox but are not anymore provided that they retain a positive view of Orthodox Judaism.” Taking that into account, it is reasonable to assume that the fact that roughly half of the participants had a relationship with the Dina list influenced the results towards a more positive outlook of Orthodox Judaism. Similarly, the fact that three out of the four participants who became more observant after transitioning (see section 4.2.3) were members of the Dina list is also telling.<sup>86</sup> If they would have given up on Orthodoxy after transition they might not have sought to become members of the Dina list in the first place. In short, my point is that the group of participants in this study is almost surely not representative for the majority of transgender people with an Orthodox background. As Beth put it:

[T]he vast majority of people who are *frum* and trans stop being *frum*. A big chunk refuse to transition. Some of those may even survive.

In this sense, the group of 13 participants offered the opposite view. The vast majority (ten) wanted to be observant to a greater or lesser extent<sup>87</sup>, one wanted to be religious but not necessarily observant,<sup>88</sup> one continued to engage in community life and *shabbat* services without considering himself religious,<sup>89</sup> and one did not want to have anything to do with religion at all.<sup>90</sup> If Beth’s statement is accurate, and there is no reason to think otherwise, the group of participants would not be at all representative for the wider collective of transgender people with an Orthodox background. However, there is a good reason for that bias. Arguably, most of the transgender people who stop being Orthodox either assimilate, become unaffiliated Jews or join other Jewish movements such as Reform or Conservative. In all three cases, finding them would have been a formidable task since, to the best of my knowledge, there exist no fora (organizations, online platforms, publications, etc.) for formerly Orthodox transgender Jews. In order to solve that blind spot in the selection,

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<sup>85</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.starways.net/beth/dina.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Moshe, Yael and Yiscah reported being members of the Dina list, Noam did not.

<sup>87</sup> Belinda, Ben, Beth, Dov, Ethan, James, Noam, Yael, Yiscah and Yonatan.

<sup>88</sup> Amichai.

<sup>89</sup> Moshe.

<sup>90</sup> Loren.

I approached two organizations, one in the USA and one in Israel, helping people who want to break away from the ultra-Orthodox community to get a new start in life. The one in the USA, Footsteps, seemed particularly promising since in one personal communication with the staff I was told that around 20 percent of their clients had LGBTQ backgrounds. Unfortunately, after some promising contacts, Footsteps declined to get involved beyond posting a notice on my behalf on their Facebook page. As for the organization doing similar work in Israel, it was them who put me in contact with Loren who was, at that time, the only transgender person involved with the organization.<sup>91</sup>

With the possible exception of Loren, the group of participants reflects the views of people who were still connected to Orthodoxy in one way or another, either because they were part of the community, or they were struggling to find their way in, or they decided to stay out but close by. Maybe one day someone will write about the stories of those who decided to leave for good. In this dissertation, I am mostly writing about those who, at the time of our meetings, were still sticking around, often defying the stereotypes of what it was to be Orthodox and what it was to be transgender.

### **Brief introductions**

Given that participants self-selected themselves, it was a welcome surprise that the resulting group turned out to be balanced in terms of number of participants who identified as FTM and MTF. Similarly, among the participants there was a wide spectrum of ages, from early adulthood to an age bracket of 55-64. It also contributed to the diversity of the group that two participants (Loren and Noam) reported coming from Sephardic backgrounds. Another remarkable characteristic of the group was the large proportion of participants with higher education (9), including 4 participants with a PhD or similar (Belinda, Ben, Noam<sup>92</sup> and Yonatan<sup>93</sup>) and 2 participants with master's degrees (Moshe and Yiscah). The other 4 participants without higher education belonged to the 18-24 age bracket, which suggested that they might still be too young to have been to college, particularly since all of them lived in Israel where college age is considerably higher due to compulsory military service.

Concerning the identity of the participants, I am using pseudonyms of their choice to protect their identities. That being said, two of the participants—Ben Baader and Yiscah Smith—asked me to use their real names and, after discussing the possible repercussions of such a request, both with Ben and Yiscah as well as with my supervisors, we decided to waive the confidentiality protecting their real identities. A decisive factor in revealing their identities was that Ben and Yiscah were out of the closet both in their private and professional

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<sup>91</sup> I omit the name of the organization in order to better protect Loren's identity.

<sup>92</sup> A PhD student at the time of our meeting.

<sup>93</sup> Given the intensity of the studies required to earn the title, rabbinical ordination is on a level with a PhD.

lives. Yiscah's story, in addition, had received extensive media coverage and was easily available to the public through the publication of her memoirs (Smith, 2014). Ben, on the other hand, was associate professor in Jewish history at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, at the time of our meeting. In his capacity as scholar, he had published extensively on gender and Judaism, although not specifically on transgender issues.

In what follows, I briefly introduce the participants in this study. In the introductions I use a language close to what the participants would use to describe themselves. Although in the following pages I will use terms such as 'transgender,' 'FTM,' 'MTF' and 'transition' for reasons of language economy and fluency, I ask the reader to keep in mind the linguistic nuances and terminological preferences of each of the participants.

**AMICHAÏ (18-24, Israel)<sup>94</sup>**

Amichai was raised in a Religious Zionist family. At the time of our meeting he was doing his military service in the Israeli army. He had started to transition socially and he was considering hormonal treatment after his service. He had stopped all form of religious practice but he still had religious beliefs. In the future, he wanted to learn more about religion but at his own pace.

**BELINDA (45-54, US)**

Belinda became Modern Orthodox as a young adult. She had earned a PhD and at the time of our meeting she had started hormone treatment but she had not socially transitioned yet. She self-identified as a transwoman or MTF, with a slight preference for the former. She also self-identified as Ashkenazi. Religiously, she felt close to Open Orthodoxy. She was a member of the Dina list.

**BEN (55-64, Canada)**

Ben grew up in a secular household but the fact that his father is a Holocaust survivor marked Ben's Jewish identity from an early age. Since Ben's mother was not Jewish, he underwent an Orthodox conversion as an adult. He had earned a PhD in Jewish history and gender studies at Columbia University and at the time of our meeting he was associate professor at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada. Ben had already transitioned at the time of his conversion. He self-identified as transgender, transsexual, transman or FTM. By background and upbringing, he considered himself Ashkenazi but he also

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<sup>94</sup> For the participants' introductions their pseudonym or name is followed by their age bracket at the time of our meetings and the country where the meeting took place. Please note that the country does not necessarily refer to birthplace or nationality. Several participants had migratory backgrounds that have not been reported for the sake of better protecting their identities.



engaged with some Sephardic traditions and practices. Religiously, he preferred to think of himself as *shomer mitzvoth*<sup>95</sup> or *frum*, but he was also comfortable with the designation Orthodox as an umbrella term. He defined his relationship with some Orthodox institutions, social conventions and aspects of Orthodox theology as ambivalent, but he had strong sympathies for Open Orthodoxy. At the time of our meeting he was a member of the Dina list.

#### **BETH (45-54, US)**

Beth grew up lukewarm Conservative and became Modern Orthodox as a young adult. She had earned an undergraduate degree and at the time of our meeting she had already transitioned. She only self-identified as a transwoman when she had to, or as a post-op transsexual, if she needed to be more specific. Religiously she considered her *hashkafah*<sup>96</sup> on the right-wing of Modern Orthodox and, in terms of practice, she leaned towards the center. Technically, she considered herself Ashkenazi. She was the founder of the Dina list and the author—under the same pseudonym—of two seminal chapters on the topic of Orthodox & transgender (Orens 2010a; 2010b).

#### **DOV (55-64, US)**

Dov was raised secular and became Orthodox as an adult, after his physical changes had already taken effect. He referred to himself as a man with “Jorgensen’s condition” and, secondarily, as FTM. He had earned an undergraduate degree and self-identified as Orthodox Jewish and Ashkenazi. At the time of our meeting he was a member of the Dina list.

#### **ETHAN (18-24, Israel)**

Ethan was raised in a Modern Orthodox family. He had finished high school and at the time of our meeting he had started to transition socially and was considering hormonal treatment. He self-identified as a transman and Ashkenazi. Religiously he self-identified as believing without practicing, but he wanted to practice more in the future after his transition was completed. At the time of our meeting he was not a member of the Dina list.

#### **JAMES (18-24, Israel)**

James was born to a non-Jewish family that converted to Orthodox Judaism when he was a small child. Thereafter he was raised as a Religious Zionist. At the time of our meeting he had completed secondary school and was serving in the Israeli army. He was considering starting his transition and he self-identified as a transgender man, trans man or trans. Religiously he identified as Orthodox, much as he was raised, but he was still not sure about certain feelings towards the religious obligations and traditions usually identified with

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<sup>95</sup> Male form for someone keeping the commandments.

<sup>96</sup> Outlook, worldview.

Jewish males. He was commonly identified as Ashkenazi by others, but he himself did not identify with any particular group. At the time of our meeting he was not a member of the Dina list.

**LOREN (18-24, Israel)**

Loren was raised in a *charedi* Sephardic family. She dropped out of *yeshiva*<sup>97</sup> as a teenager and joined the Israeli army, where she received training. At the time of our meeting she described herself as being halfway through her transition process. Religiously she described herself as a non-believer. At the time of our meeting she was not a member of the Dina list.

**MOSHE (25-34, US)**

Moshe became Orthodox as a child and subsequently he became ultra-Orthodox as he became older. He earned a MA and at the time of our meeting he had already transitioned. He self-identified as FTM, transman or transguy and Ashkenazi. Religiously he self-identified as being on “the spiritual side of agnostic” and he professed having a strong Jewish identity that included valuing Jewish tradition and learning. At the time of our meeting he was a member of the Dina list.

**NOAM (45-54, Israel)**

Noam was raised Religious Zionist in a Sephardic family. At the time of our meeting she was in the process of earning a PhD and she had already transitioned. She described herself as a “political transwoman” and Sephardi. Religiously, she identified with the Sephardic ritual tradition within the Conservative movement. At the time of our meeting she was not a member of the Dina list.

**Yael (35-44, Israel)**

Yael was raised in a secular family and became *shomeret halakha*<sup>98</sup> as an older child. She had earned an undergraduate degree and she transitioned one year after finishing college, long before we met. She self-identified simply as female and, where absolutely necessary such as in a medical context, as a post-op transsexual. She also self-identified as Ashkenazi. Religiously she felt conflicted at the time of our meeting. She kept *kashrut* and *shabbat*, though not always strictly to *halakhic* standards. If she had been pressed to define herself, she would have said that she was either Open Orthodox or *Conservadox*. She was a member of the Dina list.

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<sup>97</sup> Religious school mainly devoted to the study of Talmud.

<sup>98</sup> Female form for someone keeping the *halakha*.

### **YISCAH (55-64, Israel)**

Yiscah became a Religious Zionist as a young adult and later she joined *Chabad* and became a student of R. Shlomo Carlebach. She earned a MA in Jewish education at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. At the time of our meeting, she had already transitioned and she was a lecturer at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. She self-identified as transitioned or MTF. Concerning the question of Jewish ethnic affiliation, she rejected those labels and identified with the Jewish people as a whole. Religiously she self-identified as an observant Jewish woman close to the religious Zionist movement. At the time of our meeting, she was a member of the Dina list and she had recently published her memoirs (Smith, 2014).

### **YONATAN (25-34, Israel)**

Yonatan was brought to an Orthodox school as a child and, as a result, his family became Orthodox as well. At the beginning of his transition he started learning in different *yeshivot* and he finally received ordination as an Orthodox rabbi by one of the *chasidic* groups. At the time of our meeting he had already transitioned and was living in the Orthodox community.

### **3.4.3 The Dina list & the ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer**

I first learnt about the ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer through one of Beth Orens' chapters in *Balancing on the mechitza* (Orens, 2010b). Several of the participants<sup>99</sup> reported learning about the Tzitz Eliezer through the Dina list and related websites<sup>100</sup> maintained by Beth Orens. The Dina list started in June 2000 and is a semi-moderated email list. On one of the sites,<sup>101</sup> there is the following description:

The purpose of this list is to provide a place for male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals who are Orthodox Jews to meet and discuss things. The list will also be open to transsexuals who used to be Orthodox but aren't anymore provided that they retain a positive view of Orthodox Judaism. [...] Prospective Orthodox converts will be accepted to the list on an ad hoc basis. In other words, there is no rule about them, and each case will be dealt with on a one-by-one basis.

In the same page it is mentioned that prospective members of the Dina list are advised to join under a pseudonym to keep their anonymity. Even if it had been remotely possible, I did not try to become a member of the Dina list for

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<sup>99</sup> Ben, Dov, Moshe, Yael and Yiscah. Belinda already knew about the Tzitz Eliezer's ruling by the time she joined the Dina list.

<sup>100</sup> *The Dina Blog* (retrieved from <https://dinablog.wordpress.com>) and *Beth Orens' Gender Pages* (retrieved from <http://www.starways.net/beth>). Originally, *The Dina Blog* was not started by Beth but by someone else.

<sup>101</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.starways.net/beth/dina.html>.

several ethical reasons. As a cisgender, non-Jewish researcher I considered that it would have been inappropriate. All information I had from the Dina list was secondhand through some of the participants' accounts. Among those, first and foremost was Beth Orens, moderator of the Dina list. At the time of our meeting (May 2015), Beth mentioned that the Dina list had 34 members ranging from ages 15 to 60+ and with a ratio of approximately two MTFs for each FTM.<sup>102</sup> According to Beth, membership figures have oscillated through the years between 30 and 50.

Before ending this chapter, it is important to elaborate on the *psak*<sup>103</sup> of the Tzitz Eliezer and its role in creating a space for transgender Jews in Orthodox Judaism (Orens, 2010b). Strictly speaking, the Tzitz Eliezer is the name of the seminal treatise of *halakhic* responses written by the widely respected Israeli Orthodox rabbi specialized in medical *halakha*, R. Eliezer Waldenberg (1915-2006). The name Tzitz Eliezer came to refer to him after the publication of the treatise of the same name. Without going into the subtleties of his argument, R. Waldenberg ruled in that treatise that a MTF woman who had undergone bottom surgery was to be considered female for all *halakhic* purposes. It is important to point out that R. Waldenberg did not make a ruling on bottom surgery itself (whether it is *halakhically* permissible or not and if so, under what circumstances) only on the *halakhic* implications, after the fact, for MTF women who had undergone that kind of procedure. His *psak*, written in response to a question posed to him, referred explicitly to MTFs but several participants<sup>104</sup> pointed out to me that on the basis of the argument there was no reason to believe that the validity of the ruling did not extend also to FTMs who had undergone bottom surgery. Although the Tzitz Eliezer's ruling only applied to post-op transgender people, thus limiting its scope and inclusivity, it was still a major breakthrough in the *halakha*.

To this day, the ruling of R. Waldenberg does not enjoy widespread acceptance among mainstream Orthodox rabbis and according to both Beth and Yael his ruling is considered a *daat yachid*.<sup>105</sup> However, given the stature of R. Waldenberg and the multivocal nature of rabbinical Judaism, based on the preservation of different authoritative opinions as part of the legal canon, the ruling of R. Waldenberg cannot be ignored.

Finally, R. Waldenberg was also sensitive to the difficulties posed to transgender Jews by the verse in the morning blessings (see the section "Gen-

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<sup>102</sup> Usually members need to be 18 or above, but an exception was made for an MTF teenager whose access to the list was filtered by her mother.

<sup>103</sup> *Halakhic* ruling given by a rabbi with comprehensive training as a scholar in Jewish law.

<sup>104</sup> Beth, Dov and Moshe.

<sup>105</sup> 'Single opinion;' ruling made by one *posek* that is not shared by any other *posek*.

dered religious practice before transition” below). For this reason, he suggested introducing small modifications to the verses. Accordingly, the verse for FTM men would then be recited as follows:<sup>106</sup>

Table 2.

Hebrew original	ברוך אתה ה' אלוֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהִפְכֵנִי לְאִישׁ
Transliteration	<i>Barukh atah Adonai Elokeinu melek ha-olam she-hafkhani le-ish.</i>
Translation	Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, who changed me into a man. <sup>107</sup>

And for MTF women:

Table 3.

Hebrew original	ברוך אתה ה' אלוֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהִפְכֵנִי כְרִצּוֹנוֹ
Transliteration	<i>Barukh atah Adonai Elokeinu melek ha-olam she-hafkhani kirtzono.</i>
Translation	Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, who has changed me according to His will.

<sup>106</sup> Following Jewish Orthodox custom, I replace the Tetragrammaton in the original Hebrew verses by 'ה' which is an abbreviation for הַשֵּׁם (*Hashem*) the Name [of God]. Given the prohibition to pronounce the Tetragrammaton, in recitation it is substituted by *Adonai*, translated as LORD (in capital letters as a reminder that it is not the textual translation from the original). For similar reasons, I write the slightly modified form אֱלֹהֵינוּ/Elokeinu, with a *kuf* instead of the original הֵ/hey.

<sup>107</sup> The translation for both verses comes from Orens, 2010b, p. 226.

## 4. Analysis and results

### 4.1 Introduction

In the following chapter I intend to present the fruits of my fieldwork studies with research participants in Israel and North America.<sup>108</sup> The results shown below are mostly based on the interviews with the participants, although I have also included a few comments from my observations when relevant. An important part of the analysis has focused on developing different themes that have grown organically—through interaction with the participants, readings and reflection—in the course of my research. The themes are structured in two main topics: (1) the participants' ambivalent attitude towards the role of Orthodox Judaism in their lives; and (2) their views and experiences of religious change. A structure by themes involves a level of abstraction that allows me to keep biographical details about individual participants to a minimum, which in turn contributes to preserving confidentiality. In doing so, I strive to avoid crossing the line from abstraction to undue generalization in which nuances and individual differences are sacrificed for the sake of clarity. My goal is rather to weave complexity into the framework provided by these themes, so that they reflect the richness of the participants' accounts as much as possible.

In the course of writing this chapter I chose to make generous use of participants' quotes. The reason for doing so was twofold: to let participants speak in their own voices and to give readers greater access to the material. Concerning the former, I found that to be a particularly important measure to mitigate the representation problems derived from my position as a double outsider. As for the latter, it is clear that the access I am providing to the reader is heavily mediated by my interventions as a researcher, from creating themes to selecting quotes out of a much larger body of material. However, I believe that the richness of several of the quotes is not exhausted by my commentary, which is limited by necessity. Hopefully readers interested in the topic will benefit from the extended access.

There are a few more caveats that I would like to introduce here. Early on, I decided that I would not attempt to interview any rabbis or other figures in the Orthodox community who might be mentioned in the participants' accounts. There were sound practical reasons to do so, particularly given the limited time and resources available to complete a dissertation. However, the

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<sup>108</sup> Mostly the USA but also Canada.

main reason to focus only on the accounts of transgender Jews with an Orthodox background was related to the fact that this dissertation is the first in approaching this topic and, as such, I wanted to give participants the chance to present their own narrative, to tell the stories of joy and struggle that they experienced first-hand from their perspective. That means that the results presented below should be read as what they are: personal accounts. Fact-finding missions have never been a part of this dissertation's design and whatever the participants have said, unless internally inconsistent, has been taken in good faith. This is related to the next point I would like to make. In the results below, when I mention that a participant reported so and so, that is exactly what it means. It means that the participant in particular made a statement to that effect. It does not mean that the statement does not apply to the other participants, just that they did not report it. Since I worked with semi-structured interviews, not all participants talked about exactly the same things and, as a result, there has been room for variations. It is also important to take into account that all results are written in the past tense for a good reason. The interviews with the participants managed to capture, at best, a particular snapshot in their lives. Since then, some of the views as well as personal and religious attachments they expressed at the time of our meetings might or might not have changed. Another stylistic detail that may catch the attention of the reader is my use of 'fortunately' and 'unfortunately,' as in the sentence, 'fortunately, participant x found a welcoming synagogue.' The obvious reason why I am using those adverbs is because, in spite of my commitment to being open and respectful to a wide range of opinions, I do have a position. I am in favor of transgender inclusion in Orthodox and any other settings, plain and simple. That does not mean that I have any desire to vilify or misrepresent those who think otherwise; on the contrary. When participants thought that it was relevant to provide a rationale for disagreeing arguments, I have done my best to reproduce them accurately.

Finally, as it cannot be stressed enough, the research presented here is neither in its intentions nor in its design aimed at being comparative or representative. The reason that I chose Israel and North America as fieldwork sites was that those two geographical areas concentrate the largest populations of Orthodox Jews worldwide. It seemed reasonable to think that among large numbers of Orthodox Jews the chances of encountering transgender people in their midst was higher. This is important to take into account since this study, from its inception, was never aimed at drawing a comparison between Israel and the USA, just to mention the two main countries in which fieldwork was undertaken. Concerning representativeness, given the qualitative nature of the research and the number of participants involved (13) the findings cannot be said to be representative of the general transgender population with a Jewish Orthodox background. Hopefully, the themes presented below are relevant to the larger community, but if that is the case it is not for me to decide.

## 4.2 The ambivalence towards Orthodoxy in transgender Jewish lives

Taken as a whole, the accounts of the participants show a degree of ambivalence towards Orthodox Judaism. One of the reasons is the flexibility of the selection criteria (transgender Jews with an Orthodox background) which encompassed both currently and formerly Orthodox. This allowed for a variety of positions in the spectrum between religious and non-religious, as seen in how participants self-identified (see section 3.4.2). The ambivalence towards religion was not only a characteristic of the group of participants as a whole, but also of most of their individual accounts. In this first part I would like to focus on this second aspect, i.e. the ambivalence towards religion as experienced by the participants in three key periods of their lives: pre-transition, transition and post-transition.

### 4.2.1 Pre-transition: a difficult start

In this section I will focus on the accounts of the participants in the pre-transition period. That period was relevant for all those who were Orthodox at some point in their lives before they transitioned.<sup>109</sup> For five participants,<sup>110</sup> who were at the threshold or in the midst of transition at the time of our meetings, the pre-transitional period was particularly vivid in their memories.

One of the main themes that emerged in relation to the pre-transitional period was the role of gendered religious practices in the religious and gender journeys of the participants. It is important to remark that the distinction between religious and gender journeys—as two separate biographical trajectories—is done more for analytical clarity than anything else. Often those journeys were so intertwined that their boundaries blurred and they merged seamlessly into each other. Taking that into account, gendered religious practices emerged as the most promising site in which to study the intersection of gender and religion in the lives of the participants.

#### **Gendered religious practices before transition**

Among the participants, eight were either born into Orthodox households or became Orthodox before age 15,<sup>111</sup> four were *baalei teshuvah*<sup>112</sup> and one<sup>113</sup> converted to Orthodox Judaism as an adult. Except for Ben and Dov, all participants had been Orthodox before their transition started. As a result, their

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<sup>109</sup> Beth, Moshe, Noam, Yael, Yiscah and Yonatan. Ben and Dov transitioned after they became Orthodox.

<sup>110</sup> Amichai, Belinda, Ethan, James and Loren.

<sup>111</sup> Amichai, Ethan, James, Loren, Moshe, Noam, Yael and Yonatan.

<sup>112</sup> Plural of *baal teshuvah*, a non-Orthodox Jewish person who becomes Orthodox. Among the participants, Belinda, Dov, Beth and Yiscah were *baalei teshuvah*.

<sup>113</sup> Ben.



backgrounds in Orthodox Judaism substantially informed their relation to their gender identity and their approach to transitioning.<sup>114</sup>

Orthodox Judaism is a gendered religion, that is, the gender of its adherents is decisive in determining a significant number of their religious roles and practices. Although *chazal*<sup>115</sup> recognize a diversity of body configurations including the *androgynos*<sup>116</sup> and *tumtum*<sup>117</sup> (Fonrobert, 2009; Dzmura, 2010b), for practical purposes the *halakha* follows the gender binary and distinguishes between women and men on the basis of the genitalia. Although a handful of communities have made attempts at including gender variance,<sup>118</sup> the gender binary continues to be the main organizing principle for the community and religious life of Orthodox Jews. Through interaction with the participants and my own observations in Orthodox settings, I noticed that the gendering of Orthodox religious practice works at least at five levels which are frequently intertwined.

i. Spatial–separation of genders

In Orthodox synagogues, for instance, the *mechitzah* is used to separate between the women’s and men’s sections. Among ultra-Orthodox communities, the physical separation of genders outside the family extends to almost every facet of life (see Wieselberg, 1992, p. 313).

ii. Performative—who does what and how

a) Different practices for each gender

Certain practices, like keeping *kashrut*, are equal and obligatory for both genders. Other practices, however, are associated with either women or men. This association can be a matter of Jewish law, barring members of the opposite gender from performing that particular practice, or due to custom. There is, for instance, no law prohibiting men from lighting candles on the eve of *shabbat*, but the *mitzvah*<sup>119</sup> applies specifically to women. The opposite can be said of donning *tefillin*,<sup>120</sup> which is strongly associated with men (for whom the commandment is obligatory) although there is no explicit prohibition against women doing the same. On the other hand, being counted in a *minyan* is only permitted to adult males.

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<sup>114</sup> Concerning the latter, the possible exception is Loren, who started her transition after she severed her ties with religion.

<sup>115</sup> Hebrew acronym for “our sages of blessed memory”; term used to refer to the sages from the Mishnah and Talmud eras.

<sup>116</sup> Intersex.

<sup>117</sup> A person whose biological sex is not visible to the naked eye and, therefore, cannot be determined.

<sup>118</sup> See, for instance, the case of the *trichitzah* as reported by Dzmura (2010a, p. xxvii, note 3), in the Modern Orthodox synagogue of Mission Minyan in San Francisco. The *trichitzah* presents three instead of two praying areas: one for women, one for men and one “for those who wish not to *daven* in segregated space, or belong to another gender category.”

<sup>119</sup> Religious commandment as codified by the *halakha*.

<sup>120</sup> Phylacteries.

b) Same practices with variations according to gender

Certain practices are common to both women and men, but are inflected in different ways according to the gender of who is performing them. The morning blessings, which both Orthodox women and men are commanded to recite every morning, present variations in the text depending on the gender of the worshipper (more on the same topic below).

iii. Material–gendered religious items

Orthodox Judaism has a gendered material culture which, in relation to gender religious practices, takes particular expression in the use of gendered religious items. *Kippah*, *tefillin* and *tallit*, for example, are strongly male inflected items. In the case of women, the commandment to dress modestly influences their dress code (skirts and long sleeves) and for those who are married it makes headcovering compulsory (usually with a wig, a cap or a headscarf).

iv. Linguistic–Hebrew as a gendered language

Hebrew has only two grammatical genders, feminine and masculine. As the main ritual language, Hebrew contributes significantly to the gendering of religious practice and experience (see Cohen & Berkowitz, 2005). This can be found, for instance, in the way that Orthodox Jews address God and themselves in prayer.

v. Ideological–a gender hierarchy?

The question ‘Is there a gender hierarchy in Orthodox Judaism?’ has different answers depending on who is responding. One possible view, often advanced by Orthodox commentators,<sup>121</sup> is that Orthodox Judaism sees women and men as different but equal:<sup>122</sup> they have different tasks and play different roles, but both are equally necessary for the wellbeing of the community. According to this view, women were relieved from many of the duties that men perform so that they could focus on the rearing of children. Another view, also popular in

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<sup>121</sup> See for instance one view expressed by a popular website, *Mechon Mamre*, offering the Hebrew Bible in a bilingual Hebrew/English version. According to the website, it is maintained by ‘a small group of observant Jewish Torah scholars in Israel [mostly belonging to] the mainstream ‘Baladi’ Yemenite Jewish community’ (retrieved from <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/about.htm>). In an article titled “The role of women” and providing a range of different sources, it is claimed that it is a “mistaken assumption that Jewish religious life revolves around the synagogue. It does not; it revolves around the home, where the woman's role is every bit as important as the man's” (retrieved from <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/jewfaq/women.htm>). Here I am picking that opinion for the purpose of illustrating one particular view, but the article is actually an exercise in multivocality also offering views that support that women have been both exalted and vilified by the sources, as well as views explaining the fact that men are subjected to more commandments which can make women feel less privileged. I am indebted to R. Jack Abramowitz from the Orthodox Union for pointing me to this article.

<sup>122</sup> Yiscah pointed out that equality here should be understood as equality in women's and men's access to God, as indicated by the verse in Genesis 1:27. The article from *Mechon Mamre* (see previous note) refers to the same verse as the textual source for women's and men's equality.

Orthodox circles, is that women are actually more attuned to spirituality than men and for this reason they are subjected to fewer commandments (see Kahn, 2011, p. 5). Contrary to men, they would not need to be frequently reminded of their connection with God. Other commentators spouse opposite views. The fact that in Orthodox Judaism women are generally barred from becoming rabbis has been interpreted as clear evidence of a gender hierarchy<sup>123</sup> (Israel-Cohen, 2012). As the argument goes, given that rabbis have a large influence in the way the religious affairs of the community are conducted, the fact that women are barred from ordination would put them at an important disadvantage when it comes to exerting leadership. Furthermore, the fact that women are subjected to fewer commandments has also resulted in some Orthodox women feeling relegated to a secondary role in the religious life of the community (Israel-Cohen, 2012). This, however, can greatly vary from community to community, with a small but growing number of women's prayer groups and egalitarian *minyanim* striving to include women more fully within the bounds of *halakha* (Israel-Cohen, 2012).

The accounts of several participants illustrate how the gendering aspects of religious practice at the five levels mentioned above might have contributed to their gender dysphoria. By religiously validating and repeatedly underscoring the gender assigned at birth, those religious practices constituted an obstacle in the early stages of the journey to accept and give expression to their own gender identity. The difficulties for someone coming from an Orthodox background in developing self-acceptance were an important issue. Given my focus on biographical accounts, though, in my conversations with the participants I did not explore the psychological depths of the process of self-acceptance, although glimpses of it surfaced in some of their stories.

The fact that the gendering aspects of religious practice were not conducive to accepting and expressing their gender identity does not mean that the participants' relation to Orthodox Judaism as a whole was negative. Their religious attachments could also be a source of spiritual nourishment or provide a sense of purpose, identity and community (including family ties) which constituted powerful motivations to remain Orthodox. As a result, religious practices that were at odds with the participants' gender identity were negotiated as part of a larger scheme of things that included both positive and negative aspects of living an Orthodox life—hence the ambivalence. Furthermore, the extent to which participants could actively opt in or out of an Orthodox lifestyle at the onset of gender dysphoria depended very much on their personal circumstances. No participant, however, reported feeling trapped in Orthodox Judaism against their will. On the other hand, several participants spoke in

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<sup>123</sup> Mimi Feigelson was the first woman to receive *smikhah* from an Orthodox rabbi in 1994. Since then there has been a trickle of women ordinations which so far have not been recognized by the mainstream Orthodox world (Israel-Cohen, 2012, pp. 69-78).

unambiguous terms of their feelings of struggling with religion, both a source of nourishment and distress. This resulted in negotiations and compromises to mitigate the detrimental aspects of their religious lives.

### *The morning blessings as a case*

Among MTF participants, one of the clearest examples of how gendered religious practices were negotiated was the way they recited the morning blessings before they transitioned.<sup>124</sup> The morning blessings for Orthodox women and men share all but one verse.<sup>125</sup> That verse takes the following form for Orthodox men:

Table 4.

Hebrew original	ברוך אתה ה' אלוֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁלֹא עָשִׂי אִשָּׁה
Transliteration	<i>Barukh atah Adonai Elokeinu melek ha-olam she-lo asani ishah.</i>
Translation	Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a woman.

As for the corresponding blessing for Orthodox women, the form it takes varies from one Orthodox stream to another. *The Koren Sacks Siddur* (2009), popular among Modern Orthodox communities, offers the following blessing for women:

Table 5.

Hebrew original	ברוך אתה ה' אלוֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשִׂי כְרִצּוֹנוֹ
Transliteration	<i>Barukh atah Adonai Elokeinu melek ha-olam she-asani kirtzono.</i>
Translation	Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, who has made me according to His will.

Noam, who was raised in a Sephardic household, was familiar with a shortened version of the same verse for women that leaves out the *shem u-malkhut*.<sup>126</sup>

Table 6.

Hebrew original	ברוך שֶׁעָשִׂי כְרִצּוֹנוֹ
Transliteration	<i>Barukh she-asani kirtzono.</i>
Translation	Blessed be [the One] who has made me according to His will.

<sup>124</sup> The blessings are part of the *siddur*, but their source can be found in BT Menachot 43b.

<sup>125</sup> The other verses do not differ in content but they are grammatically adapted to the gender of the speaker.

<sup>126</sup> The name of God (Tetragrammaton) followed by the kingly attributes recited in blessings.

Finally, Yisrah reported that in *Chabad* there is no corresponding verse for women, only the verse for men is recited.

At least three MTF participants reported struggling with the special verse for men.<sup>127</sup> Yael, for instance, commented:

I said [the blessing], but my *kavanah*<sup>128</sup> was *afilu she-lo asani ishah*.<sup>129</sup> I did not actually say it that way, because that's what I talked to myself. Even though, even though you did this to me. [...] Sometimes you have to make *brakhot*<sup>130</sup> to *Hashem*<sup>131</sup> even when He does things to hurt you.

Along similar lines, Belinda reported:

The morning prayers were a problem for me, from the get-go [...] When I pray it myself, I say modified versions to myself. When I am called upon to say blessings [...] I say what is in the prayer book because that is what people are expecting and if I modify it, people will get very upset and I don't want to rock that boat. [...] I always had a problem with *she-lo asani ishah*, that It did not create me a woman. First of all, I am very angry that that is the case, I wish it were not the case. I am taking steps to remedy that, in so far as one can take steps to remedy that, and a number of years ago I simply stopped saying it. I said instead the women's blessing, Who has created me by His will, which is gender neutral, positive, and there is no actual *halakhic* problem saying that.

In the case of Noam, the difficulty with this blessing was compounded by the fact that as a child she was asking God to change her body to female:

The only thing that was hard for me to say was *she-lo asani ishah*. Because I was praying that He will make me a woman, that God would make me a woman. And this is the one thing that it was very hard for me to say but I said it because this is part of the *siddur*, we were praying every morning and noon [...] in the school where I was studying and putting on *tefillin*.<sup>132</sup>

One exception among the MTF participants was Loren, who reported experiencing no conflict when she recited this verse as a youth. This could be due in part to the fact that growing up, Loren felt very confused about herself and her feelings (see section "Lacking concepts" below). Another MTF participant who did not struggle with the morning blessings was Beth. For her, reciting

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<sup>127</sup> Belinda, Noam and Yael.

<sup>128</sup> 'Intention,' the attitude and mindset of an Orthodox Jew when praying or performing rituals.

<sup>129</sup> Yael inserts here the Hebrew word *afilu* (even though) to the original verse (*she-lo asani ishah*, God did not make me a woman) effectively subverting the original meaning.

<sup>130</sup> Plural of *brakha*, a blessing.

<sup>131</sup> 'The Name,' a pious way to refer to God.

<sup>132</sup> In this, Noam seemed to echo, over a span of almost seven centuries, the words of the Jewish scholar Kalonymus ben Kalonymus (1286- after 1328) when he wrote: "And since I have learned from the tradition / that we bless both the good and the bitter, / I will bless in a voice, hushed and weak./ Blessed are you, O Lord./ who has not made me a woman" (Translated by R. Steve Greenberg).

the morning blessings was akin to a ritual formula devoid of personal connotations, similar in that sense to the confession “*ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*, etc.,”<sup>133</sup> that Jews recite aloud on *Yom Kippur*<sup>134</sup> even if they have not done any of those things. For Beth, saying the morning blessings was the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* rather than a comment on her own gender.

FTM participants also reported on their struggles with the morning blessings and the different approaches they developed to deal with that. Yonatan, for instance, commented:

I always did say the two of them [the verse for men and the verse for women] actually, even before my transition [...] one after the other. [...] Because I did not feel He created me a woman and He did not create me the way I see, like, I wanted it, but He created me the way He wanted.

Amichai and James, on the other hand, reported skipping the blessing “*she-asani kirtzono*” altogether.

As the examples above suggest, the special verses for women and men in the morning blessings were often the site of conflicted feelings among the participants, which led them to develop different strategies. Those included reciting the verse with a different *kavanah* from what was intended (Yael), using different verses in private and in public (Belinda), reciting both verses (Yonatan) or skipping the verse (Amichai and James). Noam, on the other hand, felt a dissonance between the verse and what she was personally asking from God, but did nonetheless recite the verse without modifications.

### *Other gendered religious practices*

Other gendered religious practices elicited similar reactions in the way participants dealt with them prior to their transition, from flat out rejection to different ways of bending and negotiating them. Concerning going to the *mikvah*, for instance, Yael reported that while she was studying at a *litvish*<sup>135</sup> *yeshivah*, she enjoyed the actual practice of the ritual bath but she tried to go to the *mikvah* late on *erev shabbat*<sup>136</sup> to make sure she would be alone. During Yiscah’s period at *Chabad* she reported that she dreaded going to the *mikvah* and that she only went there reluctantly. Both Belinda and Beth mentioned avoiding the *mikvah* out of personal discomfort. Yet the practice Beth struggled most was not the *mikvah* but donning *tefillin*:

I hated [donning *tefillin*] with a fiery passion. I was never so happy as I was when I stopped [...] It was a reminder, it was a stark reminder, every time [...]

<sup>133</sup> “We have been guilty, we have acted treacherously, we have robbed, etc.” (Sacks, 2009, p. 136).

<sup>134</sup> The ‘Day of Atonement,’ one of the central Jewish holidays.

<sup>135</sup> Literally Lithuanian; frequently used to refer to ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews who were historically opposed to *Chasidism*.

<sup>136</sup> The eve of *shabbat*.

[Donning *tefillin*] is something very specific, very gendered and it bugged me. The day I decided to go ahead and transition, finally, at the end, I got up the next morning and did not put them on [...] It felt like freedom, you know, you have nothing to lose but your chains, leather though they may be.

In a very evocative way, *tefillin* epitomized the bondage to the gender assigned at birth from which Beth wanted to break free. Belinda did not have as much a loaded relationship with *tefillin* as Beth had, but she reported feeling no connection. She donned *tefillin* because, as long as she was presenting as male, she felt that she had to do it in order to conform to the gender and religious expectations of the community. That approach extended to other male-inflected religious practices:

I do not feel any deep spiritual longing to put *tefillin* or to carry *lulav* and *etrog*<sup>137</sup> in *Sukkot*<sup>138</sup> or just to wear a *tallit* at all. I do it because it is a requirement. Sometimes it is just a social requirement. During the week I am not wearing my *tallit* at all when I am praying, I wear *tefillin* but not *tallit*. In a synagogue, of course, for a married person to come and not to wear a *tallit* it is unheard of, something you would not do.

Among the five FTM participants who were Orthodox before transitioning,<sup>139</sup> there was considerable agreement about the gendered religious practices they had been struggling with. Four of them reported that dressing up for *shabbat* was something that bothered them.<sup>140</sup> Wearing special clothes on *shabbat* is actually a *mitzvah* devised to honor the day of rest.<sup>141</sup> Amichai, for instance, did not want to wear skirts, while James felt uncomfortable wearing clothes that revealed too much and opted for wearing trousers under a tunic. Likewise, Moshe did not like to wear “girly clothes” on *shabbat* and for a period of time he wore just white shirts and black skirts because, as he put it, “that is what boys did, boys just wore white and black pants, so, I felt, why do I have to choose colors?” Ethan stopped wearing dresses altogether.

Another practice that some of the FTM participants struggled with was standing on the women’s side at synagogue. Because of this, both Amichai and Ethan stopped attending regular services. After a break of several years, James tried to attend services again but that posed its own challenges:

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<sup>137</sup> The four species (myrtle, citron, willow and date palm leaf) needed to perform a special blessing for *Sukkot* that is mandatory for Orthodox men.

<sup>138</sup> The feast of the tabernacles, celebrated in memory of the 40 years spent by the people of Israel in the wilderness.

<sup>139</sup> Amichai, Ethan, James, Moshe and Yonatan.

<sup>140</sup> Amichai, Ethan, James and Moshe.

<sup>141</sup> See Shulchan Arukh O.C. 262 (based on BT Shabbat 119a which in turn is based on Isaiah 58:13).

I tried to sit at the front because then I don't have to see them all around me, all the women in the *ezrat nashim*.<sup>142</sup> I feel very uncomfortable in *batei kneset*<sup>143</sup> when it is like completely closed off, but I also feel really uncomfortable where it is really, really open. [...] If a man would look over and see me in the *ezrat nashim* and see me as woman- That, like, disgusted me.

For James, the gendering aspect of being in the *ezrat nashim* was not only affected by virtue of being placed on the wrong side of the *mechitzah*, there was also a gendering of the gaze, of being watched by men but not really seen.

Another gendered religious practice that several FTM participants reported struggling with was lighting candles before *shabbat*. Both Amichai and Ethan refused to light candles on *shabbat*. James, on the other hand, had no problem with lighting candles in itself but felt bothered when this turned into a gendered practice by having a group of women lighting candles while men gathered around to watch.

Before finishing this section, it is worth mentioning that at least one FTM participant (Moshe) recalled a practice prior to his transition that, far from undermining his gender identity, allowed him to give it expression within the normative boundaries of Orthodox Judaism. That occurred on *Purim*,<sup>144</sup> a holiday that Moshe would celebrate each time by choosing as his costume to dress up as a boy. Strictly speaking, though, since there is no *mitzvah* related to masquerading on *Purim*, it is unclear if that should be considered a religious practice (such as lighting candles or taking a ritual bath) or rather a custom occurring in a religious context.

As a final note, I would like to mention one more gendered religious practice which, fortunately, none of the participants has been exposed to since the time we met: the ritual preparation of a corpse for burial by the *chevra kadisha*.<sup>145</sup> The reasons I think it is important to mention it here are various. On the one hand, the *chevra kadisha* illustrates the ways in which gendered religious practices in Orthodox Judaism mark the life cycles of Orthodox Jews from the cradle to the grave: through circumcision,<sup>146</sup> *bar mitzvah*,<sup>147</sup> marriage and death. Furthermore, the practice of the *chevra kadisha* and subsequent burial in a Jewish cemetery was a topic that troubled Noam. As the first generation of openly transgender Jews were aging in Israel, Noam was concerned about how the Orthodox rabbinate would deal with the situation, that is,

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<sup>142</sup> The women's section in an Orthodox synagogue.

<sup>143</sup> Plural of *beit kneset*, literally 'house of assembly' in Hebrew, a synagogue.

<sup>144</sup> A holiday that commemorates the story told in the book of Esther and in which masquerading is customary.

<sup>145</sup> The 'burial society' devoted to preparing a corpse for burial, which includes a ritual washing of the body. In Orthodox Judaism women and men are prepared for burial by a 'burial society' composed of members of their same gender.

<sup>146</sup> In some Orthodox circles, naming ceremonies for babies assigned female at birth have been presented as a counterpart to circumcision. Something similar could be said of the *bat mitzvah* as a direct response to the coming of age ritual for Jewish males.

<sup>147</sup> Ritual ceremony in which a Jewish boy comes of age.



whether the religious establishment would honor the gender identity of the deceased or not. Noam's concerns became tragically prescient when news came out that transgender activist May Peleg had committed suicide.<sup>148</sup> Peleg was raised in an ultra-Orthodox family and she went on to become the first transgender chairperson at the Jerusalem Open House, the main institution for LGBTQ in the holy city. Before her untimely death when she was 31 years of age, Peleg had filed a will with her lawyer expressing her wish to be cremated, a practice that contravenes the *halakha*. After Peleg's death, her mother petitioned the Israeli courts to stop the cremation and to receive custody over Peleg's body—whom she repeatedly referred to as her son—so that the family could give Peleg a *halakhic* burial under the name and gender assigned at birth. Finally, in November 2015 the court ruled against Peleg's mother and her appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected, paving the way for Peleg's cremation.<sup>149</sup>

### *FTM participants and male religious practices*

We have seen how several FTM participants struggled with four particular gendered religious practices: the morning blessings, dressing up for *shabbat*, standing on the women's side at synagogue and lighting candles. Given that they were assigned female at birth, they had fewer time-bound positive *mitzvot*<sup>150</sup> to fulfil and therefore many of the gendered religious practices performed by the MTF participants did not correlate. In the case of the FTM participants, it was often the case that the dysphoria was not only triggered by what they had to do, but also by the *mitzvot* they were not allowed to perform. Ethan reported feeling excluded from his dad and brothers while they performed their religious duties. Yonatan mentioned how as a child, he used to play with a blanket imagining that it was his *tallit*. Amichai, James and Moshe reported donning on one occasion male-inflected religious items from their

<sup>148</sup> See article in *Haaretz* "Haredi family of transgender woman tries to stop her cremation after suicide" from November 17, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.haaretz.com>.

<sup>149</sup> See article in *Haaretz* "Supreme Court rejects family's appeal against transgender woman's cremation" from November 24, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.haaretz.com>.

<sup>150</sup> According to the rabbinical tradition followed by Orthodox Judaism, *halakha* is comprised of 613 *mitzvot*. From those *mitzvot*, 248 are positive and 365 are negative. Positive *mitzvot* are those which command an action (e.g. donning *tefillin*) and negative *mitzvot* are those which prohibit an action (e.g. do not worship other Gods). Positive *mitzvot* are in turn divided between those which are time-bound and those which are not. Time-bound *mitzvot* are those which can be performed only within a specific timeframe (e.g. reciting the morning *Shema*) and non-time-bound *mitzvot* are those which apply at any time (eating kosher food). Although some time-bound positive *mitzvot* such as resting during the *shabbat* apply to women, as a rule of thumb time-bound positive *mitzvot* are associated with men and the ritual and religious life of the community. Some time-bound positive *mitzvot* which men are obligated to perform and women are exempted from are donning *tzitzit* and *tefillin* or praying three times a day.

brothers. Amichai, for instance, donned his brother's *tallit katan*<sup>151</sup> and *tefillin*. In the case of Moshe, he reported:

When my brother's *bar mitzvah* [came about] I was really jealous of everything he was getting to do and I knew I would never be able to do those things. So I watched very intently when he learnt how to wrap his *tefillin*, cause I wanted to learn how to do that and I woke up in the middle of the night and I snuck in and opened his *tefillin* and I started trying to put them on, but I got scared that I was doing something terrible and I put them back.

Concerning James, he tried once his brother's *tallit katan*. He also reported wearing a *kippah* "sort of jokingly" a few times and daydreaming about one day entering the *ezrat gevarim*<sup>152</sup> wearing a hat.

### *Closing remarks*

Taking the group of participants as a whole, there are grounds to believe that certain gendered religious practices, most notably the morning blessings for MTFs and dressing up for *shabbat* for FTMs, were potentially detrimental to the acceptance and affirmation of their gender identity. Other gendered religious practices seemed to have uneven effects, which suggests that each practice needs to be looked into on a case by case basis. In relation to this, it is important to point out that not all gendered religious practices triggered a negative reaction and that even those which triggered a negative reaction did not affect all participants in the same way. MTF participants, for instance, did not report any distress prior to their transition as a result of wearing particular religious items associated with men such as *kippah* or *tzitzit*.<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, at least one participant (Moshe) reported a practice (either religious by definition or by association) that allowed the expression of his gender identity: dressing as a boy on *Purim*. This opens the possibility, marginal as it may be, that other gendered religious practices could be deployed to express other gender identities than those assigned at birth. Likewise, this also calls for a nuanced approach to a religion such as Orthodox Judaism which, at face value, seems to provide no outlets for the expression of gender identities outside the norm.

Another important insight is that gendered religious practices cut both ways, laying down not only what each gender is expected to do but also—and more crucially in the case of FTMs—what one gender is barred from doing. For transgender Orthodox Jews, gendered religious practices have the potential to include them in a group they do not want to belong or to exclude them from the group they feel they are a part of. Although the predicaments for FTMs

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<sup>151</sup> Fringed garment covering the chest and back containing ritual tassels usually worn by Orthodox men under their clothing.

<sup>152</sup> The men's section in an Orthodox synagogue.

<sup>153</sup> Ritual tassels.

and MTFs may vary, in the final analysis both groups agreed that prior to their transition they felt standing on the wrong side of the *mechitzah*.

### **God during childhood: a fraught relationship**

In the context of this study, several of the participants<sup>154</sup> who were aware of their gender issues from childhood reported experiencing the blossoming of their gender identity as a secret. The gap between how they saw themselves and how they were perceived by others, particularly their parents, led to a feeling of existential isolation and a deep sense of incongruence between their inner and outer worlds. In this sense, the maturation of their gender identities occurred in a kind of psychological closet for several of the participants. It was a secret well-kept from everyone, except from the One whom they believed nothing could be hidden from: God. In those early years, several participants<sup>155</sup> reported turning to God and asking Them to miraculously change their bodies so that, according to the normative understanding, they would fit with their gender identities.<sup>156</sup> In the case of those participants, God occupied a complex position. The fact that God was privy to their secret made God a sort of confidant, offering a much needed outlet to pour out the anxiety of growing up transgender and Orthodox. At the same time, God was the ultimate authority figure, ruling over the lives of the participants without disclosing for them the reasons why they were created transgender. In relation to this early stage of her journey, Yael reported developing a sort of religious zealotry as a way to earn merit in the eyes of God and make Them better disposed to grant her request of a female body. For those who turned to God in their childhood, the combination of intimate and distant aspects of the relationship with God (as both the secret confidant and the unfathomable ruler) created a fraught relationship that often soured with the outburst of puberty. As their bodies started to mature under the effect of hormones, the hope in God making a change began to vanish and gave way to a gamut of reactions, from anger (Noam, Yael) to embarrassment (Amichai) to resigned acceptance (as Moshe put it, “the end of magical thinking”).

### **The path towards self-recognition**

In this section I would like to explore some of the main themes that arose from the interviews and that illustrate important milestones in the path towards self-recognition which led participants to acknowledge their need to transition. It is important to remark, though, that not all transgender people transition. It

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<sup>154</sup> Amichai, Noam, Yael and Yiscah.

<sup>155</sup> Amichai, Moshe, Noam and Yael.

<sup>156</sup> These findings are consistent with Beemyn & Rankin’s (2011, p. 42): “In the current survey, a number of the interviewees—who, as young children, prayed before they went to sleep at night that they would wake up a different gender—realized by age six or seven that this wish would not come true.” The religion of the interviewees is however not specified.

just happened that all the participants in this study either had already transitioned or were taking or considering steps to do so. Beth, for instance, mentioned several cases of Orthodox people who were fully aware of being transgender but who had resolved, often at great psychological cost, not to transition. This should serve as a reminder that the structure and themes below are not meant by any means to provide universally explicatory patterns.

### *Lacking concepts*

There is a remarkable difference between the awareness that something is out of joint with oneself and the realization that there is actually a wealth of language to articulate those experiences. A majority of eight participants reported growing up without the concepts to refer to what they were going through and often believing that they were alone in the world with those feelings.<sup>157</sup> It is not easy to assess the role that living in an Orthodox environment played in slowing down the growth in awareness about transgender issues. The fact that among those eight participants were three who became Orthodox as young adults<sup>158</sup> suggests that, not so many years ago, the awareness of transgender issues was not easily available either for society at large. Among the younger participants who grew up Orthodox, it is interesting to note that those who reported having unrestricted access to internet<sup>159</sup> and those who did not have any access at all<sup>160</sup> were equally in the dark in their teenage years concerning transgender questions. If you don't know how to name it, you can't google it. A more thorough and comparative analysis with non-religious transgender participants from similar ages and socioeconomic backgrounds would be required to be able to elucidate the role, if any, of Orthodox Judaism in limiting the awareness of transgender issues at a time when those are becoming more visible in US-dominated pop culture.<sup>161</sup> That being said, the story of Loren provides a compelling example of how her personal circumstances aligned in such a way to make the realization of being transgender particularly challenging. She was raised in a *charedi* Sephardic family and she explained that during her upbringing she lacked the concepts to understand what was going on with her. She had to work out her gender identity inductively through the cues provided by her own body. That helped her realize that something was different about her, but she lacked the concepts or clarity to articulate it. Until she

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<sup>157</sup> Beth, Dov, Ethan, James, Loren, Moshe, Noam and Yiscah.

<sup>158</sup> Beth, Dov and Yiscah.

<sup>159</sup> Moshe and James.

<sup>160</sup> Loren.

<sup>161</sup> As the high-profile case of Caitlyn Jenner's transition in 2015 in the USA illustrates, or the success of TV shows such as *Transparent* and *Orange is the new black*, both with prominent transgender characters. In reference to the same phenomenon but in the context of the broader Jewish community, see for instance the article by the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* "How 'Transparent' is reshaping views of transgender Jews" from December 30, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.jta.org/2015/12/30/life-religion/how-transparent-is-reshaping-views-of-transgender-jews>.

managed to smuggle a little radio into her room in her late teens, the only media and information she had access to was religiously sanctioned and expunged from undesirable content. It was not until after she stopped being religious that she started exploring her gender identity through the internet and support groups, a process that led her to finally transition.

### *Dissonance between Orthodox and transgender*

Becoming aware of the existence of transgender, both as a concept and a living community, was only the first and most basic step towards self-recognition. Another obstacle that several participants had to negotiate in the course of their gender and religious journeys was the perceived dissonance, if not outright antagonism, between being Orthodox and transgender. Four participants expressed in unambiguous terms what at some point in their lives, before transition, they believed was an irreconcilable conflict between being Orthodox and transgender. Amichai put it rather succinctly: “I felt that if you are trans then you cannot be religious.” Yonatan chimed in with a similar insight: “I knew that people did transition in their lives, but I knew that they are not *frum*.” Yael also expressed herself in a similar way, suggesting that transitioning and being Orthodox were mutually exclusive options. Moshe also believed that to be the case and it was not until after he stopped being observant that he considered transitioning. In the case of Belinda, she did not express herself in the same unequivocal terms as the others, but she spoke of a “crisis of faith” brought about by the conflict between being Orthodox (both at the level of belief and practice) and the dysphoria that resulted thereof:

How can a noble God create a person who has sexual orientation issues or body dysphoria issues, in the same way that you might ask why do bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people? This is a crisis of faith. To join a faith that is strongly gendered, or to become attached to one, you have the development of a conflict. How do I stay part of a faith when I know I am standing on the wrong side of the divider in the synagogue?

As the views of the participants above illustrate, there were no easy paths for those wishing to remain Orthodox. If transitioning was perceived as irreconcilable with Orthodoxy, Belinda’s quote suggests that not transitioning was a recipe for sustained psychological distress and growing disaffection with religion.

Finally, in this section I would like to bring in certain elements from Dov’s story that speak directly to the dissonance theme. I am doing so here, in the segment devoted to pre-transition, in spite of the fact that Dov became Orthodox after his physical changes had taken effect. The main reason for my choice is to add depth to this theme in particular, but also to illustrate how the participants’ accounts do not lend themselves to be neatly placed in a diachronic grid. The choice to locate a theme in one of the three main time divisions (pre-

transition, transition and post-transition) reflects how a certain theme, in light of the available material, tends to gravitate towards that period. That does not mean that it is exclusive of that period. Different participants may come across the same themes at different points of their gender and religious journeys, and they might as well revisit those themes at a later stage in their lives. For that reason, if there is a mismatch between chronology and content I will always favor content.

Concerning Dov, he reported that he had been struggling for most of his life to integrate his male self which had been shattered due to childhood trauma. Despite becoming Orthodox after his physical changes, getting rabbinical approval in retrospect felt necessary so he could continue his longstanding effort to gain cohesiveness around his male self. That led him to practice something that he called “oblique Judaism.”

I was in a quest to integrate myself but that self was male [...] So how could I integrate myself as a man when my quest to integrate myself, an integral part of that quest was hormones and surgery? [...] How could I be in that quest and face Torah full face, when everybody seemed to be saying the basis of your quest is *treif*?<sup>162</sup> So I could not face Torah full on. I guess another way of saying it is ‘put those questions in the back burner,’ but it was more than that. I had just to ignore, I had just- Oblique Judaism. You could also say unconscious Judaism, where I just did *shabbes*, I did kosher, but I could not really think about what I was doing. So I was practicing oblique Judaism from the time I stopped trying to settle the issue the frontal way.

*Rabbis: seeking their counsel or staying away from them*

Prior to their actual or planned transitions, several participants reported having thoughts about approaching rabbis and asking for their advice.<sup>163</sup> Belinda and James thought about that option but discarded it for different reasons. At the time of our meeting, Belinda reported that her son was soon going to have his *bar mitzvah* and she was afraid that if she would talk to her rabbi, he would tell her that she could not come to synagogue until her transition was completed, thus missing her son’s *bar mitzvah*. In her situation back then, as someone who still presented as male but had already started hormone replacement treatment, she was afraid that the rabbi would decide that she was not fit to stand on neither side of the *mechitzah*. James’ reason to stay away from rabbis was of a different sort. He did not want to hear from a rabbi that there was a prohibition against any step of the transition process that he was planning to start. He was considering, though, the possibility of asking anonymously through the internet. Amichai, on a related note, did not ask himself through the Hebrew equivalent of ‘Ask-the-Rabbi’ sites but he read some of the answers posted by rabbis to other transgender people with similar questions. In

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<sup>162</sup> Yiddish for non-kosher.

<sup>163</sup> Amichai, Belinda, James and Moshe.

the responses he read, he felt upset that the rabbis were consistently misgendering the person asking and that they equated being transgender with a disease. Amichai had wanted to speak with a rabbi face to face, but he felt that there was no one to talk to and that made him feel frustrated and depressed. Finally, Moshe was the only one who reported speaking with a rabbi prior to his transition. He spoke with a rabbi that had already helped him once, providing valuable advice on how taking care of mental health issues took precedence over observancy. He was hoping he would get a similar answer in relation to being transgender, but that time the rabbi basically told him that he could not condone it and that he had no answers for him. Moshe was not surprised by the reaction, as he put it:

I already knew through whoever I had spoken to, just from being part of that community, I already knew they were not going to know anything. The majority, 99.99 percent of Orthodox rabbis would have no idea of what I was talking about. So it did not feel like a hopeful endeavor.

As the instances above illustrate, the actual or perceived lack of support from rabbis coupled with the feeling of dissonance between being Orthodox and transgender resulted in a number of participants feeling that they did not walk away from Orthodoxy but that they were rather being pushed out. The desire of clinging to Orthodoxy made that several of them developed different strategies to mitigate the effects of gender dysphoria.

#### *Disembodiment and other strategies*

Several participants referred to transition as a last resort.<sup>164</sup> They reported different conscious and unconscious strategies to mitigate the gender dysphoria and avoid transition. One of the strategies that was raised by Yael and Yiscah was to engage in practices, religious or otherwise, that furthered feelings of disembodiment. Yael, for instance, reported how before her transition she told the following to the rabbi in the *yeshivah* where she was studying:

I want to spend every waking moment of my life learning Torah. And that was the idea I had then, if I do that I am not thinking of all the gender issues, all becomes irrelevant, it is like everything is fine.

Yael found further validation for her approach in the religious tradition. At that time, she believed that her gender identity issues were caused by the *yetzer ha-ra*.<sup>165</sup>

I began to see this, like, identify as female, not being comfortable being like other guys, I began to see this as *yetzer ha-ra*. And it was like the religious

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<sup>164</sup> Moshe, Noam, Yael and Yiscah.

<sup>165</sup> The evil inclination; what incites people to sin.

world tells you. There is a recipe for dealing with the *yetzer ha-ra*. If you study Torah the *yetzer ha-ra* cannot affect you.

Yael also devoted a lot of time to the study of secular subjects and to other intellectual pursuits that allowed her to live in her mind. However, she pointed out that learning Torah in the stream of Orthodoxy where she grew up was never a purely intellectual activity, but it also involved an emotional side. Learning Torah was more than just getting access to information. For Yael, it was also about the experience of learning itself, a process according to Yael no less spiritual or emotional than prayer. That suggests that thoughts, or the life of the mind, are not the only way to experience disembodiment. Religious emotions and the life of the spirit can, under certain circumstances, be equally effective. This is a point that is also underscored by Yiscah's journey. In her case, she came to religious observance and Zionism at the same time. For Yiscah, the pain over living in the diaspora echoed her own internal exile from her body. As in the case of Yael, Yiscah's disembodiment was not affected through focusing on a purely intellectual activity. The faculties involved in her attempt at disembodiment had much more to do with the aspiration of living a life fully devoted to religious Zionism:

I was being in trouble due to my disconnect with my body. To me *Eretz Israel*,<sup>166</sup> the Jewish people, serving God, represented a way out of my conflict. If I could give myself over, if I could surrender my ego which was so in pain, to something greater...

Going back to Yael, once she left the *yeshivah* where she had been studying, she returned to a more secular lifestyle and during that period she explored a very different approach to mitigate her dysphoria: she started taking figure skating classes. In relation to that, Yael reported:

I had a tremendous jealousy for the girls and how they could express themselves and the fact that they got to wear beautiful dresses while I had to wear, you know, pants and boring stuff. But it was still better than the environment [i.e. the *yeshivah*] I had been in, where I could not express femininity in any way, shape or form. There is a considerable scope for guys to express femininity within the figure skating world.

In relation to this quote, when I read it to Yael in the course of one of our interviews, she picked up a contradiction between the quote and what she had said on a different occasion. In a previous interview, she reported that one of the reasons she felt attracted to Orthodoxy as a child was that Orthodox boys were more gentle and sensitive than the non-Orthodox kids in her school. Furthermore, as a teenager in the *yeshivah*, she mentioned that the environment allowed for the expression of emotions and for non-sexual physicality between

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<sup>166</sup> The Land of Israel.



men. The conclusion seemed to be that Orthodox masculinity allowed for the expression of traits which in other cultural contexts (such as Yael's home country) would be considered rather feminine. This led Yael to clarify her assessment:

I could express femininity of a form in [the *yeshivah*] in being more open with my emotions. And that was probably more so in [the *yeshivah*] than in the skating world, if I compare them. What I could not do, what the skating world helped me do, I think, it helped me to be a little bit more accepting of my body.

If the time of intensive study at the *yeshivah* had provided an occasion to mitigate the gender dysphoria through disembodiment, it seemed that the discovery of Yael's other great passion—figure skating—was a chance to mitigate the same distress through the opposite approach, by learning to feel more at home in her body. In both instances, though, Yael was able to express her femininity to a certain extent, through emotions and non-sexual physicality in the *yeshivah* and through the specific body language that is permitted to male skaters in the figure skating world. Each of the spheres (the religious and the secular) seemed to allow for a particular expression but repressed others and it was not until Yael transitioned that she was able to integrate all those aspects into a cohesive whole.

Concerning other participants, Noam also mentioned pouring her energies into study and reading as a way to mitigate the dysphoria. Belinda, on the other hand, mentioned doubling down in her religious life in the community. She reported that her greater zeal could have possibly been related to a need to overcompensate for being transgender, but she was not completely sure if that had actually been the case. As for the FTM participants, Moshe mentioned that for a while he had considered different alternatives to transition. One of them was to present as a woman on an online dating service for Orthodox singles, but to include in his profile a cue about being bisexual. He was hoping that, by volunteering that information, he would be signaling his queerness to any potential male suitor. As a gay FTM man, Moshe had no problem in dating men, but he just did not want his partner to treat him or look at him as a woman. Unfortunately, once the Orthodox service providers found out about Moshe's bisexual cue, his profile was terminated and the money he paid for it was reimbursed. Finally, James reported that before joining the Israeli army he had been fantasizing about the military since he believed that, no matter how many women served in the Israeli army, it was perceived as something intrinsically masculine. As a result, it is reasonable to assume that service in the army provided James with an outlet for his masculinity and thus helped to mitigate his dysphoria during those years before transition.

### *Future plans to engage*

Given the challenging ways in which gender and religion had been intersecting in their lives, it is remarkable that three of the FTM participants, who were either at the threshold or at the early stages of transition, had plans to engage with religion after their transition was completed. Amichai, for instance, reported that for the time being he wanted to learn by himself, especially *Chasidut*<sup>167</sup> and *Kabbalah*.<sup>168</sup> Once he would “pass” he was thinking of exploring not only Orthodox congregations, but also Conservative and Reform. As he put it:

I wanna give everything a chance and see what I like best and what feels more comfortable for me, like find my own way, see how it makes me feel, if I feel comfortable with it, if I like it, or if I want to go back [to Orthodoxy]. So I wanna know that I try everything and choose my own way.

James also had plans to actively engage in religious life, but he had no wish to explore non-Orthodox affiliations to Judaism unless he had no other choice. He envisioned himself studying Talmud at a *yeshivah* and being taught how to pray on the men’s side by an anonymous congregant. He was planning to continue keeping all the *mitzvot* after he transitioned, with the only difference, as he put it, that “they just might be different ones.” As for his ideal future community, he described it as follows:

If I am asked what sort of the ideal future that I see is that I would live in a community, I don’t know if there is one, that would know about me, accept the fact that I would come to pray in the *ezrat gevarim*, and that I put *tefillin* and wore *tzitzit* and a *kippah*, but at the same time know that if there were only nine of them in the *minyan*, that they need another one and that they would be okay with it.

In Ethan’s case, his plans to re-engage with Orthodoxy were intimately intertwined with his desire to claim his place in his family, returning as an exemplary son:

I do believe, after I start taking hormones and stuff, I will wear a *kippah* daily and if my parents can understand everything, I am going to be helped at home with the *kippah* too, cause I do not like my brothers, they do not really believe, you know, today everybody has their own phones and their own rooms, no one really does at home what they really have to do.[...] When I go back with my dad I would like to keep *shabbat* with my dad, something I can’t do today.

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<sup>167</sup> The teachings of the *chasidim*, beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century R. Israel Ben Eliezer, the *Baal Shem Tov*.

<sup>168</sup> A mystical and esoteric tradition in Judaism frequently based on the teachings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century R. Isaac Luria.

Finally, I would like to include also a piece from Moshe's story which takes place at a time when he had dropped religious practice but had not transitioned yet. I think that Moshe's story illustrates both the depth of the desire of belonging and the subtle and unconscious ways in which that desire can be revealed. At that time, Moshe had started reading and completing the exercises from a book called *My gender workbook* (Bornstein, 1998). As Moshe recalls it, one of the exercises said:

[D]raw a picture of your gender now. So I drew like a [description of a man in uniform<sup>169</sup>] and short hair, short spiky hair, and kind of my awkward place that I was in at the time and the next box said, draw what you consider the perfect gender, or like, the perfect gender for yourself, I do not remember exactly what the question was, and I drew an Orthodox man and, it was kind, it was like really this moment for me when I said, oh, this is really what I wanna be, like I am not comfortable exactly with what I am, I am okay, but I am not as good as I could be, and so that was kind of the moment when I said, okay, I think I am going to have to try this transitioning thing and see if, see if that is what's right, see if that works for me.

Going back to the theme of dissonance (see section "Dissonance between Orthodox and transgender" above), it is interesting to point out that Moshe felt that he needed to leave Orthodoxy (at least outwardly) in order to transition. Transitioning itself, though, felt empowering and seemed to open the door to re-engage with Orthodoxy in the fullness of his identity. The theme of temporarily stepping out of the Orthodox space in order to transition provides the main thread for the next section.

#### 4.2.2 Transition: the need for dislocation

In the long term, strategies such as disembodiment and religious abnegation did not work, the gender dysphoria did not go away, and binary transition became a vital necessity. By binary transition we could understand the process by which a transgender person moves from one side to the other of the gender binary and, by doing so, aligns their gender identity with their gender expression (i.e. the way they present to themselves and others).<sup>170</sup> Transition may include one or more of the following steps: changing name and gender pronouns, dressing according to the code of the preferred gender, taking hormones, changing hairstyle, voice training, or undergoing different kinds of surgeries (hair removal, top surgery, Adam's apple removal, bottom surgery, etc.) Transition is often bound up with the sensitive topic of passing. Basically,

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<sup>169</sup> The details of the description have been removed for confidentiality purposes.

<sup>170</sup> There exists also the possibility of a non-binary transition, but that option was not relevant given that all participants (with the exception of Ben) had a binary gender identity. In Ben's case, although his gender identity did not neatly fit the gender binary (with female and male understood as mutually exclusive options) he functioned outwardly as a male.

passing occurs when a transgender person is perceived (‘passes’) as cisgender in the eyes of others. The ability to pass among transitioned people depends often on a range of factors: age at the time of transition, bone structure, availability of financial resources to undergo medical procedures, etc. The fact that not all transitioned people ‘pass’ has led commentators to talk about “passing privilege” (Hansbury, 2005; Sawyer, 2013). In the framework of this study, passing was often considered a requirement in order to safely function within an Orthodox context. As a result, the length of transition for some of the participants depended on how long it took for them until they felt passable enough to be safe. And added element in the picture is that, at least until fairly recent, the low awareness about transgender issues in the Orthodox world arguably made it easier to pass, since most Orthodox people would not have entertained the possibility that a transgender person could be part of their community.

### **Dislocation of place**

Among the participants, eight of them<sup>171</sup> had already transitioned at the time of our meetings and five<sup>172</sup> were at different stages of their transition. Except for the case of Ben and Dov, who transitioned before becoming Orthodox, for most of the participants it was not possible to transition in their communities. Noam and Yiscah had left Orthodoxy years before and were living secular lives at the time of their transitions. Others had been slipping away from Orthodoxy for a long period of time, either staying at the margins (Yael) or continuing to drift until not living outwardly as Orthodox anymore (Moshe). Beth continued to live an Orthodox life but felt the need to physically abandon her community in order to be able to transition. Among the younger participants<sup>173</sup> at the threshold or initial and intermediate stages of transition, all of them had left their communities and three of them (arguably with the exception of James) were living non-Orthodox lifestyles.

As the cases of the participants suggest, transitioning for an Orthodox Jew often involved displacement. Transitioning in place would have probably become, against the will of the participants, a public issue in which their communities and the rabbinical leadership would have felt the need to take a stand. Family and friends could occasionally show support, but they could equally step up pressure to either leave the community or conform. Given the negative *halakhic* views on transition most likely espoused by a majority of Orthodox rabbis<sup>174</sup> and the extent to which society—including the Orthodox world—still

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<sup>171</sup> Ben, Beth, Dov, Moshe, Noam, Yael, Yiscah and Yonatan.

<sup>172</sup> Amichai, Belinda, Ethan, James and Loren.

<sup>173</sup> Amichai, Ethan, James and Loren.

<sup>174</sup> As the reader can imagine, there is no official or unofficial survey about the views of Orthodox rabbis concerning transition. The view expressed here, stemming from the participants, is an assumption but according to R. Jack Abramowitz from the Orthodox Union that would be a “very educated assumption” in light of the current mainstream interpretation of the *halakha* (personal communication with R. Abramowitz).

suffers from transphobia, transitioning in place is often particularly challenging. That is not to mention the still unresolved social and *halakhic* issues of what people undergoing transition are supposed to do in their religious lives, i.e. at what point they should religiously act according to their gender identity in public and what applies or not for the stages in-between.

The case of Yonatan deserves special attention. As most other participants, he uprooted himself from his community, but instead of moving to a more religiously neutral space, he sought refuge in two ultra-Orthodox *yeshivot* in Jerusalem. He reported that, once he got a masculine-looking haircut and the appropriate clothes, he was able to reasonably pass among ultra-Orthodox Jews almost overnight. Lacking a beard though (he had not begun hormone replacement therapy yet) he looked exceedingly young. In the first *yeshivah* where he attempted to be accepted, his boyish looks raised some questions and he was asked to produce an ID to verify his age. That sent him away since his ID had been issued with the gender and name assigned at birth. He then thought about a way to get around the ID checking issue and decided to try his luck among one of the anti-Zionist *chasidic yeshivot* in town. His hunch proved correct since the anti-Zionist *chasidic* Jews running the *yeshivah* could not care less about an ID issued by the State of Israel and they never asked. This allowed Yonatan to live unmolested in the *yeshivah* for a while, but that came with its own set of challenges, as the following exchange illustrates:

Y: *Chasids* are usually going every day to the *mikvah*. And for sure, it's the *halakha* that a boy should not sleep on his belly or on his back, and for sure that if you did sleep on that side means you did something wrong, or you masturbated, or that you got just horny at night and you had an accident.

O: So you were trying to avoid the *mikvah* at all costs?

Y: Yes, at all the costs. I used to go, put my head down the water before I used to wake up everybody, come with the towel and tell them, "okay, wake up! You should go to the *mikvah*!"

Life in the *yeshivah* put a significant strain on Yonatan, not only forcing him to make sure he was the first one to wake up and pretend he had been in the *mikvah*, but more fundamentally pushing him towards constantly watching over himself to make sure he did not do anything that would reveal his FTM background.

Finally, from the participants who were at different stages of their transition when we first met, only Belinda was considering to transition in place as a member of her community. It was unclear, though, if that would be finally possible. She pointed out that she belonged to a fairly progressive synagogue and she anticipated that, in case her marriage ended in divorce as a result of her transition, the main challenge for the community would not be accepting

her as a MTF woman, but dealing with a divorced couple. The disruptive social dynamics created by the divorce would in this case be of a greater concern.

### **Dislocation of authority**

The need for physical dislocation (to leave family and community) paralleled a similar need which occurred at a different level. For most of the participants, transitioning crucially involved a dislocation of religious authority from the rabbis to other sources of authority. The dislocation of rabbinical authority was often a pre-requisite for transition, since the public position of most if not all Orthodox rabbis was that transitioning violates the *halakha*.<sup>175</sup> This dislocation of authority could have happened years before their transition and in a traumatic manner. That was the case of Yiscah, for instance, who went through two distinguishable stages. The first one, when she stopped being religious, involved her loss of confidence in the infallibility of the rabbis:

I empowered the rabbis over me in such a way that they were almost deities to me. And I could not believe, because I felt so wrong within me, I could not believe that they could also be wrong. Not only about me, but about anything! And I ascribed to them powers that no human being has. So that is why I could not stand up to them. I felt pummeled into the ground. And I lost my trust, I was furious with them, so I went from one end of the spectrum—which is an extreme—all the way to the other. So rather than God being the center point of it all, the rabbis were the center of it all.

The second stage, involved a reassessment of Yiscah's religious commitments which involved placing in God her previously lost trust:

My coming back to *Hashem* is what allowed me the strength and trust to go through my transition. Not the other way around. I did not start the transition and then came back to God. I came to God and because I came to God, well not only did I get the strength, I felt that God took me on transition.

The dislocation of authority from the rabbis to other sources such as God or oneself could also happen in other ways. This could take the form of filling an authority vacuum left by the lack of rabbinical leadership in questions relevant to Orthodox transgender Jews. Amichai, for instance, reported:

I feel like the religious people, they pay more attention to the body and the, like, how you were born, and they do not want to deal with the question. [The rabbis] say if you have a penis you are guy, if you do not have a penis, if you

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<sup>175</sup> As reported by several participants, a handful of Orthodox rabbis have been willing to state *in private* that transitioning is permitted. Considerations regarding *pikuach nefesh* were among the reasons mentioned. *Pikuach nefesh* is particularly relevant given the high risk of suicide that affects the transgender community (for the USA see Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Herman, & Keisling, 2011, p. 8). Yonatan also made the case that the eventual surgeries involving a transition are no different from the *halakhically* sanctioned surgeries practiced to remedy a medical condition.

have a vagina, you are a girl, and then when you try to ask them, if I am doing a transition, if now I am coming to the synagogue and I have a beard and a deep voice and still I do not have a penis, what am I? Where should I be? So they do not give you an answer, they just say, do not come to the synagogue. They don't wanna deal with it.

The fact that some participants such as Amichai felt that rabbis were unwilling to deal with the complexities of being Orthodox and transgender forced them to take matters into their own hands. In the quote above, Amichai points out how social mores and *halakhic* gender definitions can be at odds in an age with hormone replacement therapy treatments. In Amichai's experience, rabbis showed a great reluctance to deal with such difficult issues and chose to bury their heads in the sand instead. This lack of rabbinical leadership is what created the authority vacuum that Amichai had to fill in, mostly by putting *halakhic* questions in the back burner and taking steps towards transitioning based on his personal well-being. For Ethan, to take care of his well-being was also his main priority.

In the case of Yonatan, he did not stop being observant as Yiscah and Amichai did. However, he also felt a similar need to wrest authority from the hands of the rabbis. The way he chose to do so was to become one of them. Yonatan reported that he studied *halakha* at a *yeshivah*,<sup>176</sup> and received *smikhah*. In relation to his rabbinical ordination, he mentioned:

I did not do it for the diploma and not for work. I did it because most of the time people were answering me: you do not know enough about it, it is not allowed and that's it [...] or they were telling me things about, that it is written there and there, and I was like that does not make any sense, I have to know what the truth is and I have to learn to answer them with the same tools that they are using.

Yonatan's approach was to distrust the rabbis of flesh and blood with whom he had interacted and who could not offer satisfactory answers to his questions. In this sense, he also sought to wrest authority from their hands but he did so in a way that challenged their human limitations without undermining the legitimacy of the rabbinical institution based on different readings of the *halakha*. In doing so, he hoped that the rabbinical scholarly tradition would be able to provide better answers than those he was given.

In the case of Beth, her views on authority did not change in the course of her life before, during, or after transition. From a young age, Beth did not entertain any hopes about the infallibility of individual rabbis. However, the behavior of rabbis did not affect the ontological status of Judaism. As she succinctly put it: "If Judaism is true, Judaism is true even if individual rabbis are douchebags." According to Beth, God rather than the rabbis was the ultimate

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<sup>176</sup> A different *yeshivah* from the one referred in the previous section.

authority. At the time of her transition, her gender dysphoria had gotten so bad that her choice was either to transition or to put her life at risk. She felt that she had to compromise her beliefs in order to transition and that her decision might have consequences in the afterlife:

My position for myself is that I did what I had to. I do not think, to the best of my knowledge, I've never seen anything that would suggest that transitioning itself was permissible. The question would only be, you know, what's the situation after, *bedieved*.<sup>177</sup> And I would never say this to someone who is transitioning because that is really dangerous, there is a *pikuach nefesh*<sup>178</sup> there, but I did what I had to do and if I was wrong, and it is possible that at 120 I will found out that I was wrong, and I will, I will take whatever comeuppance there is.

In relation to the dislocation of authority, Noam felt that a poem by the Israeli author Hannah Klein echoed her own feelings. The poem describes a MTF woman from an Orthodox background and how she went from reading the original verse in the morning blessings (see section 4.2.1) to recite a modified version after her transition:

Table 7.

Hebrew original in Klein's poem	ברוכה אני / ישעשית יתוא ניוצר / אשה!
Transliteration	<i>Brukha ani / she-asiti oti kirtzoni / ishah!</i>
My translation	Blessed am I / who made myself according to my will / a woman!

When I read this verse, I felt that it clearly expressed the idea of a dislocation of authority from God to oneself, but Noam had a more nuanced understanding:

God did not make me like this, it just happened and I have to fix it, okay? I have to fix it by myself. Maybe this is what God meant, I do not know. But I believe it is good. God created the world and let it go. So from this point it is the task of men to run the world, to run themselves and to run the world, '*the heavens belong to the LORD but the earth He gave over to man*'.<sup>179</sup>

Rather than a dislocation of authority, Noam had adopted a cosmogony that found support in scripture. From that perspective, to 'made oneself a woman' was not a rebellion of a self-assertive human being against God's pre-ordained order but rather part of a larger scheme of things in which human beings were

<sup>177</sup> 'After the fact,' Talmudic term.

<sup>178</sup> Principle in Jewish law according to which saving a life takes precedence over most other commandments.

<sup>179</sup> Psalm 115:16 quoted in Hebrew in the original. Translation taken from the Hebrew Bible by the Jewish Publication Society (2003, p. 1558).



asked to take responsibility for their own fate and act when the situation so demanded it. That suggests that theological considerations about the nature of God and the world could also play an important role in framing the fact of being transgender as a part of a larger narrative. James also provided a good example for the latter, although he took the opposite approach from Noam's. For him it was important to believe that God had made him transgender. As I mentioned above (see section "Rabbis: seeking their counsel or staying away from them"), James was avoiding rabbis for fear that they would raise halakhic injunctions against transitioning. Arguably, the process of authority dislocation for James already started through the shift of focus from the rabbis to God. James acknowledged that he did not know what God wanted him to do in his situation, if he should act on his gender identity issues or struggle with them, but he believed that, in the last analysis, God would want him to be happy.

### **Dislocation of practice**

The need for dislocation may at times include a third aspect related to religious practices performed in communal spaces. As the previous quote from Amichai illustrated (see the section "Dislocation of authority" above), for Orthodox transgender Jews the possibility of participating in the religious life of the community—primarily synagogue services—cannot always be taken for granted. The question to which side of the *mechitzah* they belong—according to the rabbi of the synagogue, the community and themselves—might become a particularly thorny issue during the process of transition. The moment in which transition is completed may vary from person to person, depending on their religious beliefs and understandings of gender. Some may consider transition completed the day a person starts to consistently present in the preferred gender. Others, especially those who would like to abide by the *psak* of the Tzitz Eliezer,<sup>180</sup> may consider transition completed when in addition to changing the way they present themselves, they also have undergone bottom surgery. In the latter case, if there is a considerable gap between the time when that person started to present as female and the bottom surgery, the person in question may feel that their gender status is compromised. In other words, they might perceive that there is a mismatch between how they present and the *halakhic* status of their gender. Regardless the question of bottom surgery, a degree of indeterminacy is built into the concept of transition. Depending on personal circumstances, the indeterminacy of their transitional status may put practicing Orthodox transgender in a situation in which they find themselves "balancing on the *mechitzah*" (Dzmura, 2010a, p. xviii), unable to resolve with certainty to what side of the *mechitzah* they belong during their transitional period. The fact that, with very few exceptions,<sup>181</sup> most Orthodox synagogues

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<sup>180</sup> See section 3.4.3 for a brief explanation of the Tzitz Eliezer's ruling.

<sup>181</sup> Concerning the *trichitzah*, see the section "Gendered religious practices" above.

do not have gender neutral areas that could function as transitional spaces, is a potential factor contributing to the dislocation of Orthodox transgender people during their transition. Another way to avoid the dislocation of practice would be to facilitate a sharp transition from one side to the other of the *mechitzah* (this was the preferred alternative by Belinda and Yael) but even that option would require significant support from the community as well as education on transgender issues. As Yael put it:

There are people who never stopped being religious through transition, a lot more people did stop, but they stopped because they felt there was no place for them and I think to a great extent that is a flaw of the community.

To the physical dislocation and the dislocation of authority, this adds a dislocation of communal religious practices. Under this third dislocation, communal religious practices are either no longer performed or confined to the private sphere of the home. In relation to this, Amichai and Ethan, for instance, considered themselves Orthodox in terms of basic beliefs but did not lead orthopractic lifestyles. In their cases, the withdrawal from public worship already started years before they began transitioning and constituted one of the main signs of their gender dysphoria. For others, the dislocation of place, particularly when a non-Orthodox setting is chosen, brought often by itself a dislocation of practice since Orthodox Judaism is not a religion that is amenable to being practiced alone. Without a community to rely on for the provision of a wide range of needs and services, from kosher food to a synagogue within walking distance, the practice of Orthodox Judaism becomes a major challenge if not an impossibility.

Beth's story illustrated one particular instance of dislocation of practice which, in her case, was not related to feeling rejected by the community but rather by practical considerations concerning how passable she thought she was during a particular period in her transition:

One of the problems during transition was that, during electrolysis, I had to put on this gunky make-up and I could not put that on on *shabbes* because it was too thick, so I stayed inside on *shabbes*. [...] I made *shabbes* by myself and I spent *Rosh HaShanah*<sup>182</sup> and *Yom Kippur* in my room by myself, which, okay, I am a loner, but that was a little too much even for me.

Due to unexpected circumstances, Beth was once forced to leave her apartment on *shabbat* and she realized that she was passing, so she decided to resume regular attendance to synagogue. Beth had gone both through a dislocation of place (leaving the community where she was living) and a dislocation of practice (staying at home during *shabbat* and High Holidays) but during all

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<sup>182</sup> The Jewish new year, one of the central Jewish holidays.

that time she had not stopped being observant. In her case, she stopped being observant *after* her transition (see section 4.2.3).

### **Closing remarks**

The different cases commented previously illustrate how the need for dislocation was a recurrent theme in the life stories of the participants. This suggests that transition itself and the process leading to it resulted in a series of negotiations in which the participants often had to redefine the physical and imaginary boundaries of their communities, most crucially the question of by whose authority they may or may not transition. These series of negotiations, as well as their outcomes, were unique to each journey, but all of them resulted in a redrawing of positions in relation to the Orthodox world. The position occupied at the end of transition and how that influenced the religious lives of the participants is the topic of the next section.

### **4.2.3 After transition: similar attempts and different outcomes**

The way participants navigated their own transitions was an important factor in the outlook of their religious lives after transition. One shared element in the narratives of the participants who had already transitioned and who felt the need to leave religion either during or in the process leading to transition was that after transitioning, all of them attempted to return to an observant life.<sup>183</sup> Yonatan, on the other hand, did not cease to be Orthodox in the course of his transition but transitioning enabled him to live his religious life more fully. In the case of Ben and Dov, they became Orthodox for the first time after transitioning. At the time of our meetings, five of the transitioned participants lived observant lives,<sup>184</sup> while two were religious though not fully observant,<sup>185</sup> and one identified simultaneously as being non-religious and on “the spiritual side of agnostic.”<sup>186</sup>

### **The search for a place in the Orthodox world**

A shared theme among several transitioned participants was the perception, at least initially, that transitioning had empowered them to either return or live their observant lives more fully. They felt that gender dysphoria had been their main obstacle to live a religious life and once that had been fixed they would be able to embrace their religiosity. After the processes of dislocation described in section 4.2.2., they were hoping to reintegrate those aspects of their religious lives that they had to abandon or compromise: finding a community,

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<sup>183</sup> Moshe, Noam, Yael and Yiscah.

<sup>184</sup> Ben, Beth, Dov, Yiscah and Yonatan.

<sup>185</sup> Noam and Yael.

<sup>186</sup> Moshe.

abiding by the *halakha*, and engaging in public worship. Beth was an exception in this regard. Although she went through episodes of dislocation of place and practice, she managed to stay observant throughout her transition. In her case, she stopped being religious shortly after she had undergone bottom surgery:

I read somewhere that the most difficult for somebody who transitions is between six months and a year and a half after surgery because you go into it and think surgery is the finish line, that's it, right? And half a year later you realize, you know what, it's not over yet, we are still driving. And that was about when I stopped being religious.

Beth described feeling stuck at that time, partially because she was MTF, but mostly because she was a lesbian and the odds of finding another Orthodox lesbian to start a relationship did not look promising. To make things worse, a rabbi at the place where she was working tried several times to set her up with different bachelors. Under such circumstances, to function and socialize within the Orthodox world became increasingly difficult for Beth and she ended up taking a break:

That was hard. It was actually harder in a way to stop being religious than it was being religious while being trans because some people can change their views to whatever makes their life more comfortable. I am not one of those people, so I never stopped thinking what I think about Judaism, I never stopped being religious in the inside. I would have loved to have been able to forget everything I knew about it, but it does not work that way, so I used to, when I was asked by people in a context where I was like eating at a *treif* restaurant, I would say I am not observant Orthodox, I guess the opposite of what they call orthoprax nowadays, where they keep the *mitzvot* but they do not believe. It was the other way around, which is kind of untenable.

Eventually, Beth found her way back into living an observant life by finding a like-minded partner. The stories of all transitioned participants in their attempts to re-engage with observance and community life were, to a greater or lesser extent, fraught with challenges and difficulties. Yiscah, for instance, reported the following incident in which the ultra-Orthodox rabbi of her synagogue at that time failed to stand up to a transphobic verbal assault by another community member. After the rabbi inquired about the issue, he asked Yiscah to meet with him:

[The rabbi] said: “now we have a problem.” [...] I said: “No, we do not have a problem, you have a problem”—I made that very clear to him—“I am here to help but I do not have the problem, I am not the rabbi of the *shul*, I do not oversee people's behavior, you do.” He said: “Well, I think I am going to have

to bring this to the *vaad*,<sup>187</sup> are you prepared for that?” I said: “Are you threatening me? Bring it to the *vaad*.” “Well, they may come back with an answer that you do not like.” I said: “I really don’t care!” I said: “Rabbi so and so I don’t think you realize, I am not asking for permission. What is the worst in your mind, when you say they may come back with an answer that I don’t like, what is that to you? What would that be?” And he said: “What about if they come back and say that you have to *daven*<sup>188</sup> on the men’s side?” I said: “That, that is not an option for me! If you want to go to the *vaad* because you don’t know how to handle the behavior of some of your congregants, go to the *vaad*. I am not bound by them. I am not going to the *vaad*. You are going to the *vaad*. I have my answer from the Tzitz Eliezer.<sup>189</sup> I don’t have a situation.”

Yiscah ended up leaving that synagogue and finding a new one in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Nachlaot, an area known for attracting a young crowd of spiritually-bent and unconventional Orthodox Jews.

As we have seen, several transitioned participants attempted to become more observant after their transitions. The different outcomes seem very much related to their fortunes in finding welcoming communities and their perseverance against what at times seemed like unsurmountable obstacles. It is also crucial to understand that, at their best, the interviews with the participants managed to gain an insight into their lives at that particular point in time. It is more likely than not that their religious journeys will continue to develop in unpredictable directions in the future. The case of Moshe seems particularly illuminating to illustrate how the first experience with an Orthodox community after transition can be critical to the chances of success in the attempt to re-engage with observance and community life. Moshe was invited to visit by Orthodox friends living in a different town and they assured him that their synagogue was LGBT friendly.<sup>190</sup> However, as the events unfolded it turned out to be otherwise:

[T]hat was the first time that I got to *daven* on the men’s side and it was, I was, it was ecstatic! It really felt so, so right, it just felt totally right to be *davening* with the men, singing with the men and the men were very welcoming, they shook my hand, but there was one guy there that [...] ended up outing me to the rabbi. [...] [B]y *shabbes* the rabbi approached my friends and said, your friend cannot come. Your friend can either sit on the women’s section or she can leave. [...] [S]o that was awful and that is when I gave up on trying to be religious. I said, you know, if these people don’t want me I don’t want them.

Moshe’s identity as an Orthodox FTM man took a severe hit by a negative experience in the first Orthodox synagogue he attended after his transition. In

<sup>187</sup> Rabbinical council, different from the *beit din*.

<sup>188</sup> Yiddish for praying (verb).

<sup>189</sup> See section 3.4.3 for a brief explanation of the Tzitz Eliezer’s ruling.

<sup>190</sup> In this case, I drop the Q for queer since the synagogue’s purported friendliness did not extend to removing the *mechitzah* or, alternatively, putting a *trichitzah* in place. For the meaning of the *trichitzah*, see the section “Gendered religious practices” above.

the aftermath of this experience, he felt that there was no place for him in the Orthodox world. Prior to that, though, he believed that his problems to fit within Orthodox Judaism had been due to his gender issues and that after transitioning he would finally be able to lead the Orthodox life he was meant to. From Moshe's testimony, it seems that his Orthodox male identity was most vulnerable at the initial stages of re-engagement with religion, particularly in its communal dimension. A negative response and lack of religious validation at such early stages had far-reaching consequences for his ulterior religious journey.

Unfortunately, the experience of being kicked out of a synagogue was not exclusive to Moshe. Ben went through a similar incident during the period in which he was becoming acquainted with Orthodoxy. At that time, he had started attending services at a *Chabad* synagogue. Furthermore, he had become friendly with one of the rabbis with whom he had been learning and who invited him for *shabbat* lunches with his family. After a year attending services, the news about Ben's FTM background reached the synagogue and a different rabbi confronted him. Ben provided confirmation and waited for a decision:

[H]e basically got back to me by email after a few days saying I shouldn't come back. I don't remember what he said, like I can't be with the men because I am not a man, and the way I look can't neither sit on the women's side, and there is no place for me to sit and it is very sad, I can't come back. Then I had a meeting with the rabbi who always invited me to his home and so on, and he basically suggested that I transition back. So now that I discovered Judaism and Torah, I can leave the erroneous ways behind and be a proper Jewish woman. I considered that for five minutes [...] and I quite panicked.

Contrary to Moshe, though, Ben's rejection at the early stages of his engagement with Orthodoxy did not put an end to his willingness to find a welcoming Orthodox community. He then reached out to his contacts in the scholarly and activist LGBTQ world who referred him to Eshel<sup>191</sup> where he was able to find a community of sorts that sustained him in that time of crisis.

### *Exploring other streams of Judaism*

All transitioned participants struggled one way or another to find welcoming communities and several of them gave up in the process or found an alternative in other streams of Judaism, particularly the Conservative movement. At the time of our meeting, Yael was still socializing in Orthodox circles in spite of the fact that she was not fully observant. On the other hand, she had started exploring other affiliations and she was particularly excited about the small but growing community of *Conservadox* Jews in Israel.

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<sup>191</sup> The main Orthodox LGBTQ organization in the USA.

Another participant who also chose to explore other streams of Judaism was Moshe. During my visit to Moshe's town, I had a chance to attend a *shabbat* service with him at his regular Conservative egalitarian synagogue which was home to a diverse group of congregants, including at least one gender-queer person. As for Noam, she was not only attending services at a Conservative synagogue but she had also taken a leadership position as *chazanit*,<sup>192</sup> something that I had occasion to observe myself while attending a Sephardic service led by her. Apart from services, Noam's re-engagement with the Sephardic tradition of her ancestors extended also to other more far-reaching questions (see section "Two qualifications: re-engaging on their own terms & grey areas" below). Yiscah, on the other hand, did not self-identify as Orthodox and preferred to refer to herself as "a *halakhic* person." Although the synagogue she regularly attended was Orthodox, she had no qualms in attending services at an egalitarian Conservative synagogue. Finally, Ben, Beth, Dov and Yonathan, adhered to Orthodoxy and had mostly succeeded in reintegrating their gender journeys with their religious lives.

### *Vulnerability*

Although five of the transitioned participants managed to lead observant lives, in several cases their standing in their communities was somehow precarious. Among those five, at the time of our meetings two were completely out of the closet,<sup>193</sup> two were partially closeted,<sup>194</sup> and one was completely closeted.<sup>195</sup> Yonatan, for instance, chose to stay totally or partially in the closet to avoid harassment and the fact that his gender journey could be exposed at the wrong time and place was something that worried him. In the case of Yael, even though she was not living a fully observant life, she was socializing with Orthodox people and at the time of our meeting she was still in the closet to avoid alienating her friends. In Beth's case, she was out to her rabbi and was welcomed by those who knew about her background in her community, but she was still careful to keep that piece of information under the radar of the larger Orthodox world. Furthermore, she was concerned that her background might impact her child at school. She also speculated that the acceptance that she was enjoying at her community might diminish if more transgender people were to move in.

Yiscah was on the other side of the spectrum. After she published her memoir (Smith, 2014), Yiscah became a public speaker and educator for transgender issues in the Orthodox world. She was completely out to her community in Nachlaot and she had been attracting considerable attention from media both in Israel and abroad.<sup>196</sup> After living in a different community where

<sup>192</sup> Female synagogue cantor.

<sup>193</sup> Ben and Yiscah.

<sup>194</sup> Beth and Yonatan.

<sup>195</sup> Dov.

<sup>196</sup> Some of the media that covered Yiscah's story were:

she experienced the vulnerability of being transgender (see quote above in section “The search for a place in the Orthodox world” concerning a verbal assault) she had finally found a community that was fully accepting. For other participants, however, being out of the closet was no guarantee for sustained acceptance in the future. Ben, for instance, reported:

[The local rabbi] is leaving now [...] and I am a little, not very much, but I am slightly worried, of course, what comes next, because if the next rabbi takes a different stance, it would be very bad for me because I do not have a lot of other options here otherwise.

Moshe, although not observant at the time of our meeting, had a similar experience with the rabbi at the local Orthodox synagogue. Once in a while, especially for the *yahrzeit*<sup>197</sup> of a relative, Moshe liked to go to the local Orthodox synagogue but he was not sure if he would be safe. After meeting the local rabbi, he assured Moshe that he would be welcome, but after a while that rabbi moved to another position and the relationship with the new rabbi changed:

The rabbi who is there now knows the story but he doesn’t really know me, we’ve never sat down and talked. So the last time I went [...] I was nervous, I was worried somebody was going to say something, kick me out, because there was nobody in the *shul* that I had a connection with.

Finally, Beth’s experience illuminates another of the challenges of transgender people to find a place in the Orthodox world, particularly for those who would like to live in stealth.<sup>198</sup> Beth reported stumbling on repeated occasions with people connected to her life before transition (people she had gone to school or summer camp with, friends of friends, friends of relatives, etc.) In some quarters, the Orthodox world is small enough that these kind of random encounters are more likely to happen than not. She reported, for instance, how once she was recognized in a train by a woman she had known before transitioning, and how that woman attempted to out her to the community she was a member of at that time. Concerning these kind of encounters, Beth reported:

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- Israel-based: *The Jerusalem Post* (web/press, original article, posted online on December 19, 2014), *Haaretz* (web/press, original article, posted online on January 17, 2015), *Channel 2* (TV, news feature, broadcasted on January 17, 2015), *Voice of Israel* (radio, interview, broadcasted on February 12, 2015), *i24news* (TV, interview, broadcasted on May 3, 2015)

- US-based: *The New York Times* (web/press, reprint from AP, posted online on January 15, 2015), *The New York Post* (web/press, original article, posted online on January 25, 2015)

- UK-based: *The Daily Mail* (web/press, reprint from AP, posted online on January 15, 2015), *The Independent* (web/press, original article, posted online on January 20, 2015)

On top of that, Yiscah was one of the invited speakers at TedxJerusalem 2015. She also runs her own podcast *Jewish Soul Food with Yiscah* on iTunes.

<sup>197</sup> Death anniversary.

<sup>198</sup> A trans person lives in stealth when they erase any traces of having ever transitioned. That may include passing as cisgender at all times and breaking contact with people who knew them before transitioning.



When I was living in [location] and before that when I was in [location], if somebody found out about me I was absolutely devastated, like it destroyed, it wrecked me for weeks on end, I would be a quivering mass of mess. It was terrible and I realized that, you know what, the only way that happens is if I am absolutely determined that nobody should know. If I accept that some people will know, then it won't kill me when I find out they know. It's healthier. I know a lot of people who are 100 percent stealth. That doesn't work for me.

After Beth accepted that her life would always include a certain degree of exposure, she decided to return to her home community, the one in which she had grown up. In this way, she had come full circle.

### *Asking a rabbi for a psak*

Among the transitioned participants, several of them attempted to get a ruling on their gender from a rabbi that would legitimate their involvement in the community in the gender that they were presenting, thus silencing potential critics. Yael, for instance, reported having her local rabbi rule her female and then, a few years later, in 2007, retract the ruling when the community turned against her in the aftermath of the Joy Ladin case (see section 4.3.2). She also spoke with two other Orthodox rabbis who were well known for their progressive views concerning lesbians and gays. With the first rabbi, Yael only spoke on the phone and he told her that what she had been through was not right and that he would call her back a few days later, but he never did. With the second rabbi, Yael went to meet with him in person. She reported the encounter in the following way:

I went and saw him and I said: "Look, this is the situation, this is my history, what do you want me to do?" And he said: "I want you to do what is right." "Do you really think these rabbis are right, that I should, you know, go and put on *kippah* and *tzitzit* and go into the *ezrat gevarim*?" And he went this color [points to her white sleeve] and said: "Under no circumstances are you to wear *tzitzit* or *tefillin* or go into, you know, I cannot see you as anything else than a woman and Orthodox women do not do those things, do not even think about it." [...] I said: "Okay, well, if that is the case can you put that in writing, please? Because I had other rabbis say that to me and when questions arose they were not willing to confirm it." And he said: "Not a problem at all, this is like a no brainer."

According to Yael, the rabbi promised to put everything in writing but when the letter finally came (after much insistence from Yael's part) it was written in Biblical Hebrew, a language that Yael did not master. Once she managed to translate it, she figured out that what the rabbi had written on the letter was that her *halakhic* gender was male but that she should be allowed to live as a woman since there was no issue with *negiah* or *yichud*.<sup>199</sup> According to Yael,

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<sup>199</sup> According to *halakha*, the prohibition for a woman and man who are not married to each other nor closely related to be together in a secluded space.

those views were a rehash of the views expressed in a book called *Dor tahapukhot*<sup>200</sup> (freely translated here as ‘The Generation of Inversions’) which had been circulating for a while among *Chabad* rabbis. Yael was upset and disappointed by the rabbis’ letter since she felt that he had changed his *psak* and that if she had shown the letter to someone without checking the content first it would have had the opposite effect from that she intended.

According to Yael, until not long ago *Chabad* rabbis would follow the views expressed in the *Dor tahapukhot*, which allowed MTF women to function in the gender they presented in the community in spite of the fact that their *halakhic* gender remained unchanged. However, Yael pointed out that *Chabad*’s halfhearted acceptance was no impediment for *Chabad* rabbis to encourage MTF women to don *tefillin* in the privacy of their homes, if they thought they had any chance to get away with it. That is exactly what happened to Yiscah with a *Chabad* rabbi. Although Yiscah did not ask for a *psak*, the rabbi told her that while she was welcome to pray on the women’s side at synagogue, she might also have to don *tefillin* in the privacy of her home. The rationale of that rabbi was that MTFs might still be considered men in the eyes of God and therefore possibly obligated to don *tefillin*. In doing so, the *Chabad* rabbis mentioned by Yael and Yiscah introduced an interesting distinction between the implications of gender for the public and private domains.

Among the other MTF transitioned participants, Beth also reported having one rabbi giving her a ruling, though its meaning was rather vague:

[That rabbi] told me once, “in my halakhic opinion you are a different person,” whatever that means. But I do not expect that he would ever admit to saying that.

Among the transitioned FTM participants, Ben and Dov had contacted rabbis in search for a *psak*. In the case of Ben, the rabbi sent him to genetic testing but while Ben waited for the results he desisted in his original intention to get a ruling. As for Dov, he went to meet a highly regarded *posek*<sup>201</sup> with the intention of clarifying his status according to the *halakha*. He reported the encounter as follows:

[A]s I walked into the room he raised his hands like this [*raises hands above his head*] and said: “It is a difficult question!” Later I understood him to mean not that it is difficult to answer, but it is going to be difficult for you if I answer. So he said: “It is a difficult question! If I haaad to say would prooobably be female, but you must have a question.” So basically he was saying that he

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<sup>200</sup> דור תהפוכות in the original Hebrew. The book is also mentioned by R. Zev Farber (2015, August 6), who also provides the following bibliographical reference: Idan Ben Ephraim, *Dor Tahapuchot* (Jerusalem, 2004 [Hebrew]).

<sup>201</sup> A rabbi who, due to extensive training in *halakhic* scholarship, can decide over complex *halakhic* questions.

didn't want to answer and in that way the issue could be left in the limbo and it wouldn't be hard on me.

In this way, the *posek* made it clear to Dov that he was not able to give a favorable ruling, at the same time that he avoided making an actual ruling that would have weighed down on him. In that same encounter, the *posek* told Dov that he was allowed to learn in *yeshivah* and that he might even become a Talmud scholar one day.

As the instances above suggest, the different attempts to receive an affirmative *psak* did not succeed. The rabbis approached by the participants were either not willing to rule on their *halakhic* gender in affirmative ways or were too afraid to speak up their mind in public. However, as the cases of the *Chabad* rabbis and the *posek* approached by Dov suggest, rabbis could also be sympathetic to the plight of the participants and attempt to alleviate their problems without compromising their views on *halakha*.

### *Forming a family and social isolation*

Finally, this section would not be complete without a few words about the role of family life in an Orthodox setting. Typically, an adult Orthodox person is expected to get married and have children within a few years of reaching the age of consent. For some of the participants, particularly those who contemplated living an Orthodox life after transition, the community's expectations concerning family life posed a significant obstacle to their reintegration in the Orthodox social fabric. For starters, there were the difficulties of dating with potential Orthodox partners and navigating complicated ethical issues about disclosure. Dov, for instance, reported the story of one FTM acquaintance of his who was dating Orthodox women and who once, after revealing his background, was threatened by his date with outing him to the whole community. Dov's acquaintance was then forced to seek the help of a rabbi who issued an injunction ordering the woman to keep quiet. On a similar note, Yael reported:

I had a few times that I was dating people and it got to the point that I had to tell them and they broke it off and now I really don't like dating people, because I have to tell them and when I tell them they can out me to the whole world. So for a lot of us dating relationships is a big problem. Once we are in a relationship and we don't have to talk about it, our lives become very normal.

Another thorny issue was childbirth. Belonging to an Orthodox community posed a sort of double bind for some participants. Dov, for instance, felt that the fact that he remained a bachelor elicited a kind of peer pressure that made him very uncomfortable. That, in turn, contributed to his decision to stay away from certain social occasions such as *shabbat* dinners at other people's homes where questions about his marital status were likely to be raised. In the case of the MTF participants, the problems experienced by FTMs were aggravated

by the fact that the family is traditionally considered the main focus of Orthodox women's lives. As Yael reported it:

One of the problems for women in the religious world is social isolation. [...] I stayed in the religious world because every morning the first thing you do, you go up and you do *tefillah betzibur*<sup>202</sup> with a whole group of people. You feel part of a community all the time, three times a day you are in the *beit kneset* doing something together with the same group of people [...] day after day after day. Women do not get that experience, especially if a woman is single or a woman is divorced. At a certain extent, you are effectively thrown out of the community. There is nowhere for you to go. The hardest thing about being a transwoman in the religious community probably it is not about being trans, it is being an unmarried woman in the religious community without children.

Social isolation, therefore, was one of the potential challenges that participants willing to re-engage in observance and community life had to face. Isolation, though, was not necessarily a given. Beth, for instance, had a partner and a child. Yiscah, on a related note, had been severed from most of her nearest family after the publication of her memoir but since then she had found a few young couples who welcomed her as a member of their families. Finally, at the time of our meeting Moshe had become pregnant through a sperm donation. Back then, Moshe did not know the biological sex of his child and he was concerned about the question of circumcision in case the child turned out to be male. Although not Orthodox anymore, Moshe was still deeply committed to Judaism, but he resisted circumcision. He considered that, unlike vaccinations and other health related body interventions that he would approve as the sole parent, circumcision was not health related and therefore the decision was his child's to make. Although his *shul* held generally liberal views, the rabbis were not thrilled about Moshe's resistance to circumcision. Moshe's dilemma, in any case, illustrates how the intersections of gender and religion, as well as questions of ethics, go beyond oneself and extend to others and their bodies, particularly when children are involved.

### **Gendered religious practices after transition**

Gendered religious practices were a key element in the re-engagement with religion of the transitioned participants. In the course of this study, gendered religious practices provide one of the main threads across the three diachronic divisions: pre-transition, transition and post-transition. The dislocation of practice, for instance, was due in no small measure to the fact that those practices subjected to dislocation were gendered in such a way that participants felt that they could not take part in them as long as they would not 'pass.' In

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<sup>202</sup> Public worship, usually in the synagogue.

the following sections, we will take a look at some of the implications of gendered religious practices for those participants who had already transitioned.

### *Learning and unlearning gendered religious practices*

Except for Ben and Dov, who became religious for the first time after their transition, all the other participants were socialized into Orthodoxy in the gender assigned at birth. That included the gendered religious practices that they were expected to perform. As a result, once they transitioned they had to go through a process of learning new gendered religious practices and unlearning previous ones. The adjustment, though, was different for FTM and MTF participants. As explained in section 4.2.1, a significant number of commandments apply only to men and for that reason FTM participants had significantly more to learn. Finding someone willing to teach those skills was not a minor issue, particularly for someone who had grown up religious and, thus, was supposed to know those kinds of things. Yonatan found an ingenious way to get around some of those problems:

I say thank you to *Hashem* that put me in this generation because we got YouTube! [laughs] [...] That was my school actually, that is how I learnt the first time to put *tefillin* on. I bought myself *tefillin* and I did not know how to put them, I remembered a bit how my father used to do it every morning, but it is different, plus... I could have not... I did not know that... I mean they put it there [points to the biceps] and I remember I used to see it but I did not know that it is supposed to be inside, inside [points under the armpit]. It says in YouTube that you are supposed to put it here [points to the biceps] but when I came to the *shul* the first time the guy was telling me “in! in!” He put it inside and I could not figure why. But yeah, it was a process to learn how to be a religious man.

As the quote shows, Yonatan taught himself to don *tefillin* through a YouTube video and what he learnt was enough to pass as observant but not sufficient to get it completely right. Moshe was another participant who mentioned using online resources (YouTube, Ask-the-Rabbi websites, etc.) to learn how to perform male religious practices. In spite of the different resources and support from friends, who taught him how to put *tefillin*, he commented:

I feel I am still in that process [of learning how to act religiously as a man]. When I go to *shul*, I still sometimes feel like, I do not really know what we do now because on the women’s side you do not always see what’s happening, so like when it comes, when they take the Torah out or put the Torah in, what you say at what point, I still when I go to *shul*, even a Conservative *shul*, I am still a little behind and I do not know exactly what’s gonna happen when they read in the scroll.

In the case of Ben he learnt to put *tefillin* from a Renewal *chazanit*, but otherwise his socialization as an Orthodox man was facilitated by the fact that he

could introduce himself as a previously unaffiliated Jew. Furthermore, the task of teaching someone to become observant was at the core of *Chabad*, the outreach group he had turned to at the beginning of his religious journey. Among the FTM participants who were at the threshold or initial stages of their transitions, they had already been thinking about similar questions. James, for instance, was hoping that his brother would teach him to don *tefillin*, although he was concerned that his brother might find that awkward at first. Ethan, on the other hand, would love to learn how to don *tefillin* from his father but he had already been offered to be taught by a friend who happened to be an older FTM man also from an Orthodox background.

Among the MTF participants the situation was different. Beth and Yiscah reported that they learned all they needed to do through living together with their ex-wives. In the case of Yiscah, she mentioned that she and her ex-wife became Orthodox at the same time and that they were socialized from the beginning as a couple. In the case of Yael, she mentioned that it took her rabbi five minutes to explain to her all the *halakhic* implications of being an Orthodox woman. Finally, Belinda also reported having learned through her marriage and a balanced division of household tasks, particularly concerning questions of *kashrut* in the kitchen. In her case, though, a different issue came to the fore: the importance not only of learning new skills but also of unlearning previous ones. For someone who spent decades routinely performing certain practices which, although somehow gendered did not trigger gender dysphoria, it is reasonable to think that at the early stages of transition it would take a degree of self-consciousness to avoid performing those practices unwittingly. Belinda, for instance, had been to an event organized for the Orthodox LGBTQ community presenting as female and she remembered that she had to hold herself back not to say *kiddush*<sup>203</sup> at the table, something that women are allowed to do but that traditionally is performed by men.

### *Reversal stories: gendered religious practices and God*

Returning to an observant life after transition had a potential benefit related to the gendering aspect of religious practice. If, prior to transition, several of the gendered religious practices of Orthodox Judaism had the effect of undermining the gender identity of the participants, the reverse was often the case in a post-transitional situation. After transition, the fact that religious practices were significantly gendered was often a powerful source of validation. By performing those practices, the participants were not only recovering the religious aspect of their identities but also reaffirming their gender in front of themselves, the community and God. This is an important element to take into account, since feminist discourses about gendered religious practices often highlight their potential for disenfranchisement without considering how those

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<sup>203</sup> Blessing over wine recited at *shabbat* and Jewish holidays.

practices can also enable identity and community.<sup>204</sup> Gendered religious practices cut both ways. Compared to the gender journeys of secular transgender people, the gendered religious practices of Orthodox Judaism had the potential to become an obstacle during growing up. After their transition, though, gendered religious practices could become a valuable resource for affirmation and cosmic validation.<sup>205</sup> We have already seen how elated Moshe felt when he got to *daven* for the first time on the men's side of an Orthodox synagogue (see section "The search for a place in the Orthodox world" above). Belinda and Yiscah reported a similar feeling of elation the first time they took part in a religious service on the women's side of the *mechitzah*. Belinda, for instance, reported in relation to an Orthodox LGBTQ event she took part in:

Friday night I attended the regular service and I stood on the women's side and that felt great, I felt right, the amount of right that felt was perfect.

It is important to point out, though, that not all participants felt the same way. Noam for instance, reported:

The times that I was in the *ezrat nashim*, the women's section of the *mechitzah*, when I was praying in [name of the synagogue], [...] there I knew why some transwomen are saying that they like to sit in the women's section and also religious women that are saying that they like to sit in the women's section because you feel more secure, you feel somewhat sisterhood. I didn't, I never felt this sisterhood. Maybe because I am not passing so well.

Noam's concerns about her passing removed any gender-affirming quality from the experience but still she understood why that practice could be particularly meaningful to other women, MTF or otherwise. Among the MTF participants another of the gendered religious practices that stood out was the *mikvah*. Yiscah, for instance, reported:

[W]hen I was able to be in a women's *mikvah*, where all the other women went, I felt such a sense of wholeness and sisterhood [...] It was just so spiritual, experiencing my womanness, my femaleness, and it felt so right, it was so natural for me, it was everything like the other side of the *mechitzah* that was

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<sup>204</sup> "Mainstream (liberal) feminist thinking [...], especially in the West, has tended to occupy a default 'secularist' position, viewing gendered religious practices, especially non-western, with suspicion and inevitably at odds with women's equality" (Reilly & Scriver, 2014, p. 261). I take "non-western" here to mean "not Christian" in a context such as USA and Canada. See chapter 5 for a detailed discussion.

<sup>205</sup> By cosmic validation I mean that, whereas in a secular setting validation is often considered a socially-constructed concept derived from changing gender mores, in a religious setting validation has the potential of acquiring an ontological quality warranted by God which aligns the worshipper with the created universe or cosmos. Here I am also relying on the Greek etymology of *kosmos* as referring to the perfect order and arrangement of the universe (Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com>).

negative, this was the positive side for me. [...] [G]oing into the *mikvah* was affirming. It really was so wonderful to affirm my sisterhood that way through spiritual tradition, spiritual ritual.

Other practices that were reported as gender-affirmative were lighting candles (Beth and Yiscah) and being called to the Torah (Beth and Yonatan, the former in the context of a women's *tefillah*<sup>206</sup> group). Finally, Belinda had been reflecting about two practices in particular (*negiah* and *yichud*) in relation to her ongoing transition. The first practice became relevant when she attended the Orthodox LGBTQ event I have been referring to. She mentioned that the women at the event, who were fully aware of her MTF status, had no problem being physical with her and this sort of interaction helped her to feel accepted as a woman. Concerning *yichud*, she felt that enforcing that practice, although not always convenient, would have gender-affirming effects:

I imagine that there will be a sort of societal pressure, which I have no problem accepting, to avoid [*yichud* infringement], I actually think that from an emotional standpoint that would be preferable, because it would mean a level of acceptance of my new gender expression that previously was unavailable.

As we have seen, religious practices in Orthodox Judaism are gendered to a significant extent and that could be detrimental to the participants' gender identity before transition but, by the same token, that gendering aspect could also become a source of validation and affirmation after transition. Something similar could be said about the role of God in relation to the participants' lives. In section 4.2.1, I mentioned how during their growing up the relationship of several participants to God went from being a source of solace and hope to becoming a cause for anger and frustration at the outbreak of puberty. After the falling-out over puberty, God became for several participants a sort of present but distant figure. At some point around or after transitioning, several participants reported feeling the presence of God coming back into their lives.<sup>207</sup> It is important to note that it is not possible to neatly place this resurgence of God in the scheme of pre-, during or post-transition that I have been following. This happened at different times for different participants. In the case of Yiscah, for instance, she felt that it was the re-encounter with God what gave her the strength to transition. What the different accounts have in common is that, after the ambivalent relationship in the past, God frequently returned to the lives of the participants as a much more unequivocal source of support. The series of dislocations often involved in a transition in an Orthodox setting, either anticipated before the process started or experienced firsthand in the course of it or its aftermath, were often described by the participants as something tantamount to an existential crisis. The price paid for the

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<sup>206</sup> Jewish prayer.

<sup>207</sup> Noam, Yael and Yiscah.



need for dislocation was frequently a feeling of isolation from everything that participants held dear: family and community first and foremost. In that darkest of moments, some like Yiscah felt compelled to cry out to God. Others, such as Noam, felt God's presence coming back in the midst of personal and emotional turmoil. Noam, for instance, reported that after she came out to her wife she had to move out from her home where she left her children. At that time, she felt extremely lonely and vulnerable. She remembered an occasion when she was getting ready to move out yet another time:

It was *shabbat* afternoon, something like this, the whole apartment was already in boxes. I was sitting inside between the boxes containing all my life. All my future was unclear to me [...] what people in my work [...] would say, what they would do, how my mother and sister would accept me, if I would ever have any other relation.

While sitting in that apartment, Noam began to spontaneously sing *bakashot*. In the Sephardic tradition in which she grew up, *bakashot* are liturgical poems sung as a means to praise and petition God. The timing of the episode (*shabbat* afternoon) was also significant. Noam reported that in the *kabbalistic* tradition *motzaei shabbat*<sup>208</sup> is the time when the gates of Heaven open to receive prayers. Noam elaborated further:

In that situation [God] came back [...] and I was saying the *bakashot* and I was crying, but afterwards I felt like I had my strength back, that from this moment He was also in my life, He was coming back [...] In that loneliness, the only one who was there and very close to me was God, the same God that I was angry about and I don't know how but somehow I felt so close to Him on this point of my life that He came back.

Leaving theological considerations aside, what this episode suggests is that for those transgender people who experience their transition as an existential crisis, having a theistic background might prove a valuable resource to mitigate the distress caused by the situation. The re-centering of religious life in God provides a similar reversal story to what has been previously discussed concerning gendered religious practices. If the relationship with God was ambivalent during their upbringing and often ended in a falling-out over the effects of puberty in their bodies, the resurgence of such a relationship at a time of crisis was often a source of personal strength. Also, Yael's re-encounter with God occurred at a turning point of her life just as she was waking up from her bottom surgery operation:

While I was under anesthetic I had a dream, like, half dream half, you know, strange things happen when you are in lots of drugs in a hospital, and I saw

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<sup>208</sup> Saturday evening time after the end of *shabbat*.

myself doing *amidah*<sup>209</sup> and crying to *Hashem* saying please give me a female body, I want to be female, I want to be female, how can you do this to me? I woke up and there I am in the hospital, post-operative. And I just started, half crying, half laughing, just like, He did answer me in the end! And I keep thinking on this all the time, it's like, you know people ask *Hashem* find me a nice *shiddukh*<sup>210</sup> or give me a nice, whatever, I asked *Hashem* to change my body, to change my gender. At the end of the day, He did. How can I after that not be religious?

For Yael, God's presence was revealed at the moment in which that what she had been praying so hard for, and which she thought impossible, finally came to pass. In the case of Moshe, though, God's presence was rather felt as a guiding hand appearing in the most unexpected places:

So I went to the transgender support group in [location] [...] I felt like there were a lot of God moments while I was transitioning, when I felt like God was really pushing me in a certain direction and one of those was, at the trans group, I shared a story about having to go to my brother's for *Pesach*<sup>211</sup> and that I had to wear skirts when his kids were awake. [...] So I shared about that in the support group and a guy came up to me after the meeting and he said: "Yeah, thanks for sharing what you shared, I am a member of the tribe, too." And I said: "You don't understand, I am Ortho—I am from an Orthodox background." He said: "I went to [name of an Orthodox Jewish school for girls]." I said: "I went to [name of the same school]!" So we ended up we knew people in common, you know, he was also from an ultra-Orthodox background, it was really cool.

Arguably, the positive re-encounter with God as a source of strength and encouragement in the stories mentioned above was also related to the dislocation of authority described in section 4.2.2. In those cases, the building of a personal relationship with God seemed to provide a more solid ground for religious life than an exceeding reliance on rabbis and their guidance.

#### *Two qualifications: re-engaging on their own terms & grey areas*

The examples provided above concerning how gendered religious practices had potentially beneficial outcomes require two important qualifications. The first one concerns the way in which participants re-engaged with religion. In the case of several MTF participants, the exhilaration over living a religious life as women did not always last. For Yael and Yiscah, once the novelty waned they started to feel uneasy about what they perceived in certain contexts as the marginalization of women from Orthodox religious life. The *mechitzah*, again, was a case in point. The *ezrat nashim* in several synagogues they knew

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<sup>209</sup> 'The Standing Prayer,' one of the main prayers in a religious service.

<sup>210</sup> A match, a marriageable partner.

<sup>211</sup> Passover.

about was built in such a way that women could not see the *bimah*<sup>212</sup> or the Holy Ark. Furthermore, the women's section was often not big enough to accommodate a large number of congregants. As a result, the participants who raised such concerns felt that women were being discouraged from leading an active religious life at synagogue. This example suggests that returning to a religious life after transitioning was not synonymous with an uncritical acceptance of Orthodox custom and practice. In several cases, such as Noam's, their gender journeys helped them to become sensitized about other groups who they perceived as being excluded and discriminated, such as lesbian, gay or Jews of Sephardic descent like Noam herself. In relation to the latter, Noam started to learn the *halakha* of Sephardic rabbis. She particularly appreciated that the Sephardic tradition of *halakha* was more flexible and less dichotomic than its Ashkenazi counterpart. As a result, Sephardic Judaism appeared to be much more inclusive of difference and varying degrees of observancy to Noam. Therefore, re-engaging with religion was also a way to reclaim her cultural roots which, growing up within the religious Zionist educational system, she had not been able to fully explore. At the same time, Noam's renewed interest in Sephardic Judaism was not uncritical either. At the time of our meeting, for instance, she was not reciting the morning prayers according to the Sephardic tradition but rather adding the *shem u-malkhut* before '*she-asani kirtzono*' (see section 4.2.1). Noam was not alone in making changes to the liturgy to better reflect both her religious and political commitments. Ben, for instance, also changed the counterpart verse in the men's blessings. Instead of the traditional version he was reciting:

Table 8.

Hebrew original	ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם שעשני בצלמו
Transliteration	<i>Barukh ata Adonai Elokeinu melek ha-olam she-asani betzlemo.</i>
Translation	Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, who has made in His image.

The reclaiming of Orthodox Judaism went beyond introducing small changes in the liturgy. As mentioned above, the re-engagement with religion frequently led also to a re-evaluation of the relationship with rabbis. While observant participants generally accepted the mainstream rabbinical opinions in questions of *halakha*, they frequently made an exception when the issue at stake was transition or the place of transgender in the Orthodox community. For those matters, they either relied on the *psak* of the Tzitz Eliezer (Beth, Yiscah) or declared that the rabbis had not enough knowledge about transgender issues to make authoritative rulings (Dov).

<sup>212</sup> Raised platform in a synagogue used to read from the Torah scroll.

The re-engagement with Judaism often also meant looking for new spaces in which to live religion more fully. Beth, for instance, reported that after she transitioned she greatly missed *leyning*.<sup>213</sup> Fortunately, in the area where she lived she was able to join a women's *tefillah* group where she was able to *leyn* again. It is significant that the acceptability of women's *tefillah* groups is a contentious issue in the Orthodox world, with a considerable number of rabbis expressing disapproval (Israel-Cohen, 2012). Beth reported that her engagement with *tefillah* groups had nothing to do with the rabbinical criticism, namely, that women's *tefillah* groups had a covert feminist-egalitarian agenda. She mentioned joining those groups simply because she loved to *leyn*, but women's *tefillah* groups were still controversial in some quarters.

Finally, although Moshe did not consider himself Orthodox at the time of our meeting, he was still someone very much connected to Jewish life and tradition and the way he did so also denoted a wish to reconcile the re-engagement of religion with a fuller expression of his own self. He for instance reported having a tattoo on his upper arm with a slightly modified version of the 14<sup>th</sup> blessing from the *Amidah*.<sup>214</sup> The original verse reads:

Table 9.

Hebrew original	ולירושלים עירך ברחמים תשוב
Transliteration	<i>Ve-le-Yerushalaym yrekha be-rahamim tashuv.</i>
Translation	To Jerusalem, Your city, may You return in compassion. <sup>215</sup>

And Moshe's modified version for his tattoo was:

Table 10.

Hebrew original	ולי ירושלים עירך ברחמים תשוב
Transliteration	<i>Ve-li Yerushalaym yrekha be-rahamim tashuv</i>
Translation	And to me Jerusalem, Your city, may You return in compassion. <sup>216</sup>

Moshe mentioned in relation to the blessing that it reminded him of his love for Israel, where he hoped to make his home in the future, but the verse was also a reminder of his spiritual connection using a prayer that was part of his religious daily practice for many years.

The examples discussed above suggest that the process of transitioning had potential far-reaching effects on the participants' outlook of religion. In that

<sup>213</sup> To chant Torah according to a ritual cantillation.

<sup>214</sup> According to *halakha*, tattooing is not permitted since it contravenes the biblical commandment in Leviticus 19: 28.

<sup>215</sup> Sacks, 2009, p. 122.

<sup>216</sup> My translation.

process something seemed to have changed and their understanding and practice of Orthodoxy was not uncritical or devoid of personal expressivity. That certainly applied to those who did not self-identify as observant,<sup>217</sup> but also to those who did.<sup>218</sup>

The second important qualification concerns the role of gendered religious practices. Although certain gendered religious practices had the potential to provide a sense of validation and gender-affirmation (and that was indeed the case among several participants, as illustrated in the previous section), other religious practices fell in a rather gray area in terms of their gendering effects on the participants. *Negiah* was a case in point. The issue with *negiah* is that, ideally, those having physical contact read each other's gender as being the same. If only one does so, that might become a problem. Furthermore, how should transgender people interact with Orthodox people who abide by different *halakhic* understandings of gender than their own? We have already seen how Belinda felt that having physical contact with other women in the Orthodox LGBTQ event she attended felt gender-affirming. Other participants, however, reported different and often complicated relations to the issue of *negiah*. Noam, for instance, mentioned that in a group of Orthodox lesbian women where she used to be active everyone accepted her as female but some of the group members refrained from touching her because, *halakhically*, they believed that there was a possibility that she might still be considered male. Moshe also found himself in a similar situation in a few occasions:

Usually I am never the first one to put my hand out to shake [the hands of Orthodox men], because there has been a couple of times when I have and then I get embarrassed because they won't shake my hand. So usually I just try not to and if they put their hand out to me or try to give me a hug, I'll go with it. I try not to be the first one. I made that mistake with the rabbi here. He is a very accepting, wonderful rabbi in a lot of ways, but he will not touch me.

However, Moshe also reported that his status as FTM concerning *negiah* had its advantages:

[W]omen, especially women who were my good friends, they will ask me [if they have to observe *negiah* with me] and I say, listen, the rabbis you would listen to would classify me as a woman, so I am happy if you give me a hug. [...] I like hugs. I don't care what their belief system is that allows them to hug me.

In relation to this, James also expressed having thoughts about dropping *negiah* after his transition since he wanted to be able to continue showing affection with his female friends and, anyway, as a gay FTM man being physical with women was less of an issue for him. Finally, Ben had also thoughts about

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<sup>217</sup> Moshe, Noam and Yael.

<sup>218</sup> Ben, Beth, Dov and Yiscah.

*negiah*. At the *Chabad* synagogue where he had been going to, the rabbis stopped being physical with him once they knew about his background. On the other hand, his rabbi at the time of our meeting was aware of Ben's story and did not hesitate to shake his hand (see section 4.4.4). In spite of his rabbi's forthcomingness, Ben pondered that, given the fact that his *halakhic* gender was undetermined, that could put him at least in theory in an untenable position concerning *negiah*:

[T]echnically if you take the most stringent approach, I should neither touch men nor women [...] But, yeah, when I travel, when I go to an Orthodox *shul* or something, or to a *chasidic shul* somewhere, I act as a man and shake hands with men and, you know, if this is sexual temptation for them, then they are not being tempted by my feminine charms [*laughs*].

As the cases above suggest, *negiah* was one gendered religious practice that was not clearly gender-affirming or undermining; it revealed a grey area that depended very much on how the interaction with the other person(s) was resolved. Moreover, the fact that some participants were at times misgendered through *negiah* did not have, at least in Moshe's case, only detrimental effects. For Moshe, that also provided a way to show affection with old friends. In conclusion, the qualification that I wanted to introduce is that gendered religious practices after transition have shown to be often conducive to validation, but because of their gendering aspect they can also lead to misgendering, particularly when those practices are not performed individually but are negotiated in interaction with other Orthodox Jews who might have different understandings of gender, both socially and *halakhically*.

### **The Dina list**

The Dina list and the closely related webpages curated by Beth Orens were an important resource for several of the participants in their gender and religious journeys. As such, the Dina list itself cannot be squarely placed in the scheme of pre-transition, transition and post-transition. As a matter of fact, the list description itself makes a point that transitioning is no membership requirement.<sup>219</sup> The reason I discuss it here is because most of the list members I spoke to had learned about the list after their transition and, as a result, the role of the list in their lives was bound up with their experiences in the post-transitional period. Belinda was an exception in this regard, since she was already familiar with the list before beginning her transition. Belinda was also member of other transgender communities online, but for her, the Dina list had the unique added value of providing an Orthodox Jewish perspective. She explained it in the following way:

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<sup>219</sup> See <http://www.starways.net/beth/dina.html>.

The Jewish community is very quirky, has its own issues, has its own problems, has its own joys and advantages, and speaking with people who have gone through [transition] or who are struggling to go through that exercise from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism, which is an all-encompassing worldview that one sort of accepts upon oneself, it is extremely valuable.

For Belinda, the Dina list functioned as a support group, a view that also echoed Ben. In his case, the Dina list played a crucial role after he was kicked out from the *Chabad* synagogue. It helped him, among other things, to learn about relevant *halakhic* issues. That knowledge would help him later to carve a place for himself in the local Modern Orthodox community (see section 4.4). In that sense, it could be argued that the sharing of information and *halakhic* expertise provided an alternative source of authority in line with what was explored in section 4.2.2. Another way to think about authority is in terms of collectivity; as the saying goes, there is strength in numbers. One experience that several participants shared,<sup>220</sup> was feeling that they were the only person in the world going through such an ordeal, either because they were not aware of the existence of other transgender people or because they could not imagine that there were transgender people with an Orthodox background. As Beth put it, she felt at one point like “a minority of one.” The Dina list helped to end that feeling of isolation and, in the case of Dov, that was a major breakthrough:

The Dina list was life-changing. [...] It provided validation that this is a *bona fide* medical condition that has just gotta be, that the *frum* world does not know about, rather than if I am alone, it is easier to have my personal experience invalidated. [...] but when there is a bunch of people who all have the same thing, it gets harder to shake. [...] [S]ince I’ve been on the Dina list I’ve become a lot less dependent on rabbis for approval.

Dov, however, did not see the Dina list as an alternative source of authority. Rather, what the Dina list did for him, apart from showing that he was not alone in his journey, was to humanize the rabbis and to show that, unless they did the requisite research, including but not limited to getting to know people with the condition, they were not qualified to speak on the issue. Instead of claiming authority for itself, what the list did for him was question the competence of the rabbis to speak authoritatively on that particular issue.

A major exception concerning the way rabbis had handled the question of transgender in the Orthodox community was the Tzitz Eliezer’s ruling. The Dina list, again, played a major role in making that ruling available to several of the participants who had no previous knowledge of it.

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<sup>220</sup> Beth, Dov, Noam and Yiscah.

### *An opening in the halakha: the Tzitz Eliezer*

The existence of the Tzitz Eliezer's *psak* made a huge difference in the lives of the participants, particularly the MTFs in the group who had undergone bottom surgery and wished to become more observant after their transition. As Yiscah put it:

I felt that [the Tzitz Eliezer's *psak*] made me *kasher* in the Orthodox world. The fact that not everybody accepts it does not bother me, because there is no *psak* that everybody accepts.

Yiscah's feelings echoed Belinda's. Belinda—who, as opposed to Yiscah, did not learn about the Tzitz Eliezer through the Dina list—reported the following concerning the *psak*:

I was somehow relieved, because I could live with myself knowing that I had something to base the rest of my life on, I could say, here is a, as we say, a *gado*<sup>221</sup> with broad shoulders, a decisor of sufficient authority on which one could rely and say my actions have a basis in Jewish law according to this widely accepted scholar. Not everyone may accept him, but he is widely enough accepted that people will think twice before going up against him.

As Yiscah and Belinda suggested, the existence of such a ruling was a powerful resource to argue in favor of creating a space within Orthodox settings for at the very least, post-op transgender, using the inner logic and language of Orthodox rabbinical authority. In the case of Yael, the discovery of the *psak* affected her view of the Orthodox world in such a positive way that she went back into living an observant life for a few years. Taking all that into account, it can be argued that what empowered participants such as Yael and Yiscah to re-engage with an observant lifestyle was not only their transition but also the existence of an opening in Orthodox *halakhic* discourse for post-op transgender Jews.

### **Meaning of being Orthodox & transgender**

From the accounts of all participants, there was widespread agreement that being Orthodox and transgender was never an easy path. At times, it seemed something akin to an ordeal. However, as Yiscah would tell me more than once, according to her outlook on religion nothing happens by chance. *Hash-gacha pratit*<sup>222</sup> rules supreme in every facet of life, big or small. That, necessarily, included the question of being transgender. For Noam, coming from a different religious perspective, God had left the world to spin on its own and the fact that she was MTF was just a fact of life with no ulterior meaning. If

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<sup>221</sup> A 'great one,' a Torah scholar of great stature.

<sup>222</sup> Divine providence.



anything, God's message was that it was up to her to sort things out (see section 4.2.2). I often raised such questions of meaning with the participants, since my hunch was that religion might have impinged on their ways of making sense of such a crucial circumstance in their lives such as being transgender. Going back to Yiscah, for instance, she felt that being transgender *per se* had no particular meaning. In her case, being transgender and gathering the necessary strength to transition was part of the *tikkun*<sup>223</sup> that she needed to do in her life. What was meaningful was the *tikkun* itself, not under which guise it presented. Yiscah, although acquainted with the two-spirit tradition amongst Native American peoples (see Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997), was of the opinion that Judaism did not ascribe any particular meaning to being transgender. According to Yiscah, what made her story appealing to people from very different backgrounds was not that she transitioned, but rather her striving to live an authentic life, which was the essence of her *tikkun*.

In the case of Yael, when asked about the question of meaning of being Orthodox and transgender, she gave what she called a "very *litvish* [i.e. rational] answer." According to her, there was a perfectly logic explanation to why Orthodox transgender Jews seemed more prone to be God-centered. As her argument went, Orthodox transgender Jews did not neatly fit in the life plan laid out for them from an early age. That resulted in different kinds of trouble and often exclusion, which in turn made Orthodox transgender Jews more prone to cling to God as a source of strength and support (see section "Reversal stories: gendered religious practices and God" above). On a less abstract and more personal plane, Yael told me that the question of meaning or rather the unsolved interrogations it prompted, was something that deeply troubled her:

A lot of people who have gone through some unpleasant experiences, religious Jews, they have a long list of questions that when *Meshiach*<sup>224</sup> comes they have some serious questions to ask. Well, I have some very serious questions, too, you know, as soon as I get to the end of that queue, it will be probably quite a long queue, it is like what were You thinking, like, why, WHY did You do this to me? Why You did this to all of us? And I had one rabbi once, he said: "Probably the best answer you get is look at all the quality *tefillah* you did all those years as a consequence," but it's not, it's not an answer.

Yael felt dejected by her fate and pointed out that with all the energy she had put in coping with her situation as transgender and Orthodox, she could have written a whole new comment on the Talmud. Seeing Yael in distress, I probably committed the same mistake as the rabbi: I tried to hearten her by groping for some silver lining. I say 'probably' because only Yael knows if it was a mistake. Yael had told me how she had been leading an organization for

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<sup>223</sup> The spiritual mending of oneself and the world to hasten the coming of the Messiah.

<sup>224</sup> The Messiah.

transgender people and how under her watch there had been no suicides. I remembered a quote from the Talmud that says “whoever saves one soul of Israel, Scripture accounts it as if [s]he had saved a full world.”<sup>225</sup> I mentioned the quote to Yael and I told her that through her leadership at the transgender organization, she had saved many lives and therefore many worlds. Yael’s answer was that such lives should not have been in need of saving in the first place. She was completely right. I remember that when I had this exchange with Yael, I was vividly aware that I was stepping outside the safe area of my role as a researcher and venturing into much more uncertain territory, from an ethical perspective at the least. I came to the conclusion, though, that when the dilemma is between protecting the aseptic detachment of the researcher or showing empathy for a fellow human being in pain, even at the risk of saying something clumsy that could lead to losing that participant, the ethical thing to do was definitively not the former.

Dov was also one of the participants who pondered the question of meaning. He, like Yiscah, believed in divine providence as an all-encompassing principle. In general terms, Dov believed that people with the “Jorgensen’s condition” who persevered in being observant in spite of the difficulties were doing *kiddush Hashem*.<sup>226</sup> In his particular case, Dov felt that his own struggle with God and Torah, which he described as “mental agony,” prepared him to face his own childhood trauma and his troubled relationship with his father. Another consequence that he mentioned in a positive light was that his condition set him apart from the rest of the community, not the least in terms of socializing, and that allowed him to devote his energies more fully to God. That was a boon particularly in this time and age since, according to Dov, as a result of the “circling the wagons mentality” the Orthodox world had become much more conformist than in times past. That conformism, Dov elaborated, made people in the community more concerned about what other community members’ thought than what God thought. As he put it:

[I]t is a whole social thing when you get pulled in the social web of being an Orthodox Jew in an Orthodox community. It is a powerful vortex, it can be very hard to pull back.

Finally, although Dov was unequivocal concerning the amount of distress that his situation as a closeted Orthodox FTM had caused him, he also mentioned that “this issue of coming back to the Torah having this in my background has provided me with the most sublime experience a religious person could have of deep prayer and [devotion] to *Hashem*.”

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<sup>225</sup> M. Sanhedrin 4:5. Translated by R. Shmuel Himelstein (Kehati, 1994).

<sup>226</sup> ‘The sanctification of the (Holy) Name;’ acts of piety performed under duress, often associated with martyrdom.

Finally, among the participants Ben was the one who gave greater meaning to the fact of being transgender as something that, according to him, opened the possibility of a different access to God thus enriching the human experience of the divine (see section 4.4.5).

### 4.3 Views and experiences of religious change

The fact that all participants, to a greater or lesser extent, needed some form of dislocation to be able to transition suggests that the relationship between transgender Jews and the Orthodox world is still fraught with tensions. The question concerning whether the Orthodox world can be more inclusive of transgender Jews is a question that concerns—although is not limited to—religious change. In this section I want to explore both the participants’ views and experiences of religious change, that is, how they conceived religious change in the Orthodox community, and how their own experiences provide an insight into how such change may be taking place on the ground. An interesting finding is that most participants believed that change, in one way or another, towards more inclusivity or greater boundary policing, is almost unavoidable.

#### 4.3.1 Views of religious change

##### **Analysis of the current situation**

To better understand the different views expressed by some participants, it is useful first to briefly discuss their assessment of the current historical moment that the Orthodox world is going through. Their analysis of the situation provided a revealing snapshot of the Orthodox world as they understood it and the different forces either enabling or preventing change. It is interesting that Belinda and Dov, independently from each other, used the same expression to refer to the current situation, although with different nuances. Both of them spoke of a “circling the wagons mentality.”

According to Belinda, the Orthodox world at large, and the *charedi* communities in particular, were more focused on rejecting than welcoming and embracing people. She believed that if that hardline trend was to continue, it would affect the future sustainability of the communities involved. She predicted that Modern Orthodoxy would split in two and one part would join Open Orthodoxy and the other would integrate into the *charedi* world, which would become increasingly isolated.

Dov, on the other hand, spoke of a “circling the wagons mentality” in relation specifically to the rabbinical leadership. He traced that back to the split between *Haskalah* and Orthodoxy, which left Orthodox rabbis wary of anything perceived as an external influence. The “circling the wagons” metaphor illustrated the feeling that secular society, at least in the USA, was increasingly

encroaching and disrupting the Orthodox way of life. As a result, according to Dov, rabbis had become afraid of venturing into unfamiliar *halakhic* territory and were reluctant of issuing new rulings. That created what Dov called a “perfect storm” between (1) the unwillingness of rabbis to dwell on controversial topics, (2) the visceral discomfort that the FTM/MTF question aroused in many and (3) the fact that transitioning seemed, at face value, to clearly violate *halakha*. In spite of the adversities, Dov was optimistic that the growing visibility in Orthodox contexts of people suffering from “Jorgensen’s condition” would compel rabbis to engage with the topic and, eventually, realize the scientific basis on which it rested.

Of all the participants, Yael seemed to be the most pessimistic concerning the future acceptance of transgender in the Orthodox world. In her opinion, Orthodoxy as a whole had shifted towards what she called the “right-wing” of the religious spectrum. By right-wing, I understood that Yael and other participants who used that expression meant less inclusivity, a deeper entrenchment of gender roles and hierarchies, greater isolationism and stringency, etc. According to Yael, that trend ran counter to Judaism as she conceived of it, namely, a tradition that was not necessarily at odds with science and that had, as one of its highest ideals, the attempt to reconcile *halakha* with the needs and circumstances of well-meaning, devout Jews. In spite of her bleak outlook, Yael was heartened by what she perceived as the fast growth of the *datlash*<sup>227</sup> community in Israel. Yael reported that there was a very high rate of couples in which both partners were *datlashim* and she hoped that either those couples or their children would start a movement towards a new form of religiosity which would be both observant and progressive, similar in that sense to what *Conservadox* Jews were already practicing but with a much more distinctive Israeli character. At the same time, Yael described how the small number of egalitarian congregations of *Conservadox* Jews was growing and she expected that the trend would continue in the future, attracting those who wanted to live an observant life but whose politics were different from those of the mainstream Orthodox.

The accounts provided by participants concerning the current historical moment that Orthodoxy is going through had the perception that something is indeed changing in common. Gender and sexuality questions, including transgender Jews but also the role of women (Israel-Cohen, 2012), and the place of lesbians and gays in the community (Greenberg, 2004), are arguably at the forefront of that change.

### **Benefits and drawbacks of visibility**

One of the main topics when discussing the question of religious change was the issue of visibility. If Orthodox transgender Jews were to become more

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<sup>227</sup> Hebrew acronym for ‘*dati leshe’avar*’ or a formerly Orthodox person.

visible in their communities and the larger Orthodox world, would that contribute to foster inclusivity or would that trigger a backlash? A certain degree of visibility was necessary if the issue was to be acknowledged at all as something that concerned the Orthodox community as much as any other group in society. Yonatan, for instance, reported that once he attended an event with a panel of rabbis answering questions from an audience including lesbian and gay families who wanted to remain part of the community:

[People were asking] if the rabbis would be willing to have them do a *bar mitzvah* in the synagogues and if they would make a *kiddush* for two women who are having a baby or something like that and the rabbis were like lost, they were like, we don't know. [...] They agreed that there should be something to do about it, but they didn't know where to put the red line. [...] And then, one friend of mine who was religious at the time, she stood up and said: I want to ask the rabbi a question and what about transsexual religious people? And he said: There is no such thing. And that was the last question at the event. [...] That is still the case in the Israeli, religious, Hebrew-speaking community.

Yonatan's quote points out that lesbians and gays had become visible enough that they had drawn the attention of rabbis and could no longer be ignored or dismissed. The acknowledgement of their existence put the rabbis in a position in which they needed to start producing some answers. In Yonatan's experience, though, transgender Orthodox Jews were just beginning to crack the wall of silence around them.

Among the participants, the conversations about visibility often revolved around the cases of two prominent figures: Joy Ladin and Yiscah Smith. Joy Ladin, although never Orthodox herself, transitioned after receiving tenure at Yeshiva University, the main higher education institution for Modern Orthodoxy in the USA. She published a memoir about that period of her life (Ladin, 2012). Ladin's transition drew significant attention from the Orthodox world, not the least because it took several months until Yeshiva University decided to fully readmit Ladin both in her researching and teaching capacities.<sup>228</sup> Since her transition and the publication of her book, Ladin has been a frequent speaker at events for Orthodox LGBTQ in the USA. Yiscah Smith, one of the participants in this study, joined *Chabad* as a young adult and spent several years living among the *chasidim*. As mentioned above, Yiscah also wrote a memoir (Smith, 2014) about her own gender journey and her story has attracted considerable attention from the Israeli and international media.

The cases of Joy Ladin and Yiscah Smith were frequently mentioned in discussions about visibility. Most of the participants were positive to visibility, although this is a statement that needs some qualification. The general positive attitude towards visibility might be related to the fact that participants self-selected themselves and chose to speak with a researcher who, although

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<sup>228</sup> Personal communication with Joy Ladin.

promising confidentiality, was a complete stranger to them. It stands to reason that transgender people who thought that visibility was harmful would have been less inclined to meet me in the first place. That being said, the opinions over visibility were not unanimous. Dov, for instance, believed that the visibility of cases such as Joy Ladin's and Yiscah Smith's was causing some degree of backlash due to the novelty of the topic in Orthodox circles, but he believed that such initial backlash was a necessary evil in order for the topic to be acknowledged and discussed in the first place. According to Dov, the situation for Jews with the "Jorgensen's condition" in the Orthodox world would improve with time and the backlash was mostly part of a visceral reaction that would subdue as more knowledge about the "Jorgensen's condition" was made available.

Yael, on the other hand, was more apprehensive regarding the question of visibility. She felt that Joy Ladin's case had forced several prominent Orthodox rabbis in the USA to take a public stand concerning the place of transgender Jews in the Orthodox world and the positions they took were significantly harsher than the quiet tolerance previously practiced by other rabbis and communities. It is important to note, though, that Yael felt that the Orthodox world had shifted towards more intolerant positions in the last couple of decades or so. The reaction to Joy Ladin's case was a consequence rather than a cause for such development. In the case of Yael, the question of visibility was bound to how transgender people were perceived in their communities. In the past, she felt that a significant number of transgender people were able to live more or less quiet lives, tolerated as exceptional cases among their communities. After the Joy Ladin case, she feared that rabbis and communities began to see transgender people as part of a wider movement—including lesbians and gays—which was perceived as fundamentally hostile towards religion. The question of visibility, then, was not so much a question of becoming visible as such but how that visibility was framed.

Beth, for instance, felt that there had been no backlash among the members of her community (including the rabbi) who knew about her background. She considered, though, that the fact that she was perceived as a rather conservative person within the Orthodox spectrum and that she was the only MTF woman in her community could have eased her acceptance. She also felt that visibility was the only way to change people's attitudes in a given community, but she was aware of the dilemma inherent in that:

For the communities to be less vindictive they are going to have to meet more of us and more of us are going to have to be out, which is a catch 22 because who wants to be the canary in the coal mine? I know I don't.

As one of the main public speakers on the topic, Yiscah was unequivocally in favor of visibility as a way to further the inclusivity of transgender Jews in the Orthodox world. She was aware of the fact that there could be some backlash,

but she felt strongly that the *status quo* was not acceptable and that the Orthodox world had to become better in welcoming instead of expelling Jews who wanted a way in. In terms of transgender visibility, Yiscah pointed out that her background was only a small part of a larger whole:

My transition is part of something much bigger, that's why when I talk about it [...] people are very comfortable to talk about it with me, people are not uptight around me. Because they see me as a whole person, they do not see me as, 'Oh, Yiscah the transgender has moved into Nachlaot! What are we going to do? She sits in an Orthodox *shul* on the women's side, wow!' Because it is not Yiscah the transgender, it is Yiscah. It is also *safti*<sup>229</sup> Yiscah, is *morah*<sup>230</sup> Yiscah, is Yiscah *hamadrikha haruhani*<sup>231</sup>, is Yiscah our friend, Yiscah our neighbor, and she transitioned!

Yiscah's visibility, therefore, was not an isolated event but it was embedded in a much larger web of meanings and social relations. Furthermore, for Yiscah, being out was less a matter of advancing a particular cause than it was about being true to one of her core principles: living an authentic life.<sup>232</sup>

In the case of Belinda, she felt very positive towards visibility, although she believed that there was a high cost associated with being a pioneer and, as such, visibility was something that would primarily benefit those who would come after. She could see the transgender issue following in the footsteps of the lesbian and gay issue in the Orthodox world, slowly gaining recognition and acceptance, often predicated on a 'don't ask, don't tell' basis. But that would not happen until transgender people would show that they were determinate to transition and stay Orthodox. According to Belinda, although many transgender Jews would be rejected from their communities, they would also find other communities composed of "other disaffected" Orthodox Jews who had departed from the mainstream for their own reasons.

Finally, Ben was also in favor of visibility and he had even volunteered to be a public speaker on the topic, though he was aware that for him, being visible had a low risk since he was already out in his community and he had no family under his care who could suffer from transphobia by proxy. At the same time, he was aware that visibility had to be framed in a certain way or, as the graphically put it, "in the Orthodox world you cannot come with a bulldozer." Visibility had to be handled in a way that did not shift into "provocation" and that could be achieved partly by using a language that was attuned with the religious discourse. Ben spoke of "gently stretching the boundaries"

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<sup>229</sup> 'Granny' in Hebrew.

<sup>230</sup> 'Teacher' in Hebrew.

<sup>231</sup> 'The spiritual guide' in Hebrew.

<sup>232</sup> That's a paraphrase of Yiscah's book title. Authenticity was a topic to which Yiscah often came back to in the course of our interviews.

and that seemed to me a felicitous expression to illustrate the negotiation taking place between continuity and change, between performing Orthodoxy and slowly transforming it.

### *Role models*

I want to come back to something that was already mentioned in passing above but that, given its importance in relation to the questions of religious change and visibility, needs more careful examination. One of the insights raised above was that the way visibility was framed was as much or even more important than visibility itself. Role modeling was a way to frame visibility which operated at two different levels: by being exemplary in the eyes of the Orthodox community and by showing other transgender Jews that it was possible to be both observant and transgender. From the group of participants, Beth and Yiscah stood out as those who more closely resembled role models. In the case of Beth, the fact that she did not change her conservative views after transitioning and that she was committed to living an observant lifestyle helped her to gain the respect of her community. Her status, in turn, was helpful in creating a space for transgender Jews in the Orthodox world:

In my case, if somebody knows I am trans and then meets me, everything they know is colored by what they know about people who are trans. People who know me at first and learn to respect me and then find out, holy crap, she is trans! They start to think themselves, well, maybe not all trans people are anti-religious *scuzzbags*. [...] I do not see any practical solutions right now, except for being a good example for one person at a time. More of us staying *frum*, I think will help, even if we are closeted, because if someone does know, that is one more *frum* Jew who knows and realizes that we can be *frum*.

By being exemplary, Beth was defying the stereotypical boundaries between Orthodox and transgender. At the same time, her primary concern was not to educate the Orthodox community but to provide a positive example for struggling transgender Jews who wanted to live observant lives but were not sure if that would ever be possible. Beth felt strongly that if her example helped to encourage one single person to remain Orthodox, “[her] life [would have] been worth living.” Beth insisted, though, that she could be an example to others precisely for the reason that she was no one special. As she put it, “if I can do it, everybody can.”

In the case of Yiscah, her public role as author and speaker, as well as her vocational background as spiritual guide and teacher, meant that role modeling came naturally to her. As a matter of fact, Yiscah felt that being a role model for how to live a life “in the image of God”<sup>233</sup> was a religious duty in her belief system. As we have seen in the previous section, Yiscah succeeded in being both out and deeply involved in the life of her observant community

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<sup>233</sup> Genesis 1:27.



in Nachlaot. Although she was not shy in criticizing the *status quo*, Yiscah's stance was balanced by her commitment to *halakha* and community life. In doing so, Yiscah was embodying the ideal of change from within, which she further qualified by referring at times to the need of being humble, patient and compassionate with those in the Orthodox world who are unsympathetic to the plight of transgender people. Yiscah felt that the message of humility was particularly necessary in the US context, where she believed that many Jews had fallen under the influence of the dominant culture of consumerism and entitlement. According to Yiscah, those values were not only destructive in the long run but also antithetical to Judaism.

Beth's and Yiscah's cases suggest that their outspoken commitment to observance and community life raised their status and legitimacy in the Orthodox world, which in turn allowed them to stretch the boundaries of that which was acceptable.

### **Models of change**

Another important topic regarding religious change was the role of rabbis and communities, and the related question if change would come from the leadership, the grassroots or somewhere else. In terms of how change might take place, Beth, Yael and Yiscah believed in some sort of balance or compromise although they expressed themselves in different terms. Yiscah, for instance, spoke of "*flexigidity*," a word she had learnt during the Q&A at one of the readings of her memoir. She elaborated on the relation between flexibility and rigidity in a previous conversation:

There are two major opposite energies as to what people believe why Jewish people have made it 34 hundred years, one is rigidity and the other flexibility. It is fascinating because, really, they are both right. On one hand, the values we believe in are absolute, are non-negotiable. So we held on as a people to values, to a way to relating to the world and ourselves and God that is absolutely forever. However, the other side of that coin is how we express it. [...] And how the *halakha* has been able, like a willow tree, to always move with us as we always move through different communities, different times.

According to Yiscah, the question about the place of transgender Jews in the Orthodox world had to be dealt with in that framework of *flexigidity*, making some necessary adjustments without compromising core values. The question I asked, though, was: what were the red lines? What was essential and what could be negotiated, and who called the shots? Yiscah elaborated further:

[T]he rabbis provide for us the direction, as the rabbis' role is. Ultimately, it is the individual's decision. Only the individual can decide for oneself, really, what is the red line that won't go beyond. And if one studies history we see, regarding red lines, that when certain lines are crossed, we see after the fact that was a line that should not have been crossed. Or we see that was a line that could be pushed a little.

On the basis of Yiscah's view, it seemed that the tricky part about red lines was that there was no consensus about them (it was ultimately the individual's decision) and that they could only be recognized as such after the fact, in relation to the intended and unintended consequences that unfolded from crossing them. Yael also spoke of red lines in the task of creating acceptance for transgender Jews in Orthodox communities. In her case, though, the criterion for acceptability was commitment and considerations of *pikuach nefesh*:

I can tell you what I think the red lines should be and I think that, on one end of it, a person who is born Jewish and makes their best honest effort to be religious and everything else, society should be able to let them do so and they should not be asked to die for it or to go insane for it, on one side. And on the other side, I think that a community that has made a situation where a person can be comfortable, we sacrifice a certain amount of our self-expression and our freedom of expression to the *klal*,<sup>234</sup> and I think that is a reasonable expectation.

Finally, Beth spoke of another kind of compromise, not so much between the needs of transgender people and those of the community, but rather between different worldviews which were equally valid in the rabbinical tradition of multivocality. For that purpose, she drew on the Talmudic story of the ancient rivalry between the students of two prominent rabbis, Hillel and Shammai:

[T]here was a time [...] when *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai*<sup>235</sup> had different laws about *mamzers*,<sup>236</sup> and they would, rather than stand in ceremony and say no, this person of ours is not a *mamzer* and you don't have a right to treat him as one, they would specifically tell the others who was a *mamzer* by their standards so that they wouldn't do anything that was *assur*<sup>237</sup> by their standards because they respected the others even though they disagreed with them. [...] I talk with people on the Dina list [...] and I try to explain people that you can, on the one hand, you can say I am who I am and I demand that I not be prevented from following this *daat yachid* that allows me to live, and at the same time have respect for people who really disagree, not because they are obnoxious folks, but because they learnt the sources and in accordance to their knowledge, this is the answer.

Beth confessed that she had no success among her peers in advancing her views about learned disagreement. Regardless of that position, Beth believed that actual change on the ground would happen only through interaction with rabbis and community members, shifting perceptions one person at a time. Change would slowly come, in a decentralized manner, as a result of interpersonal contact. Belinda, on the other hand, introduced a generational element in her analysis of change. She believed that the younger generation would be

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<sup>234</sup> The Jewish community.

<sup>235</sup> The schools of Hillel and Shammai, comprising their students and followers.

<sup>236</sup> An illegitimate child or the child of another *mamzer*.

<sup>237</sup> Forbidden.

much more accepting of transgender Jews, particularly after a significant number of them had realized that lesbians and gays were not a threat to the continuity of Orthodox Judaism. James and Yonatan, in turn, also believed that the social and religious gains made in the last few years by lesbians and gays in the Orthodox world provided a useful model on how to effect change through awareness-raising and mobilization.

### *The role of the rabbis: lack of leadership*

Interestingly, none of the participants (with the possible exception of Beth<sup>238</sup>) had any faith in rabbis taking a significant role in the task of making Orthodox communities more welcoming to transgender people.<sup>239</sup> Seven out of eight transitioned participants,<sup>240</sup> though, mentioned positive interactions with Orthodox rabbis who were aware of their background. Four of them,<sup>241</sup> for instance, found at some point in their post-transition lives, Orthodox rabbis who welcomed them in their communities. In the case of Dov, he had four positive encounters with different rabbis. The first one, with a renowned *posken*, did not resolve his concerns but allowed him to continue learning in yeshiva and contributed to ease his religious and community life to a certain degree. In the second encounter, the rabbi did not have the necessary *halakhic* stature to make a ruling, but he treated Dov with kindness and advised him that, like any other Jew, he could strive in learning Torah and doing more *mitzvot*. In the third experience, Dov confided in a rabbi who often had him as a guest for *shabbes*. When Dov asked him if he was still welcome at his table, the rabbi said: “You are always welcome here. I admire you more now.” Furthermore, that rabbi took a personal interest in Dov’s well-being which led him to contact Dov’s doctor and to write a letter to the *Lubavitcher rebbe*<sup>242</sup> asking for a blessing for Dov. That same rabbi brought Dov to *shul* to meet his own rabbi who had been informed about Dov’s condition. When they arrived at the *shul*,

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<sup>238</sup> In the course of our meeting, Beth mentioned in relation to her rabbi at that time: “Our rabbi has learned a lot, he was always a cool person but he has told us on numerous occasions that he has a huge amount of respect for us. That’s cool. That’s great. So, that’s how things change.”

<sup>239</sup> The fieldwork was carried out from June 2014 to February 2016. Since then it seems that signs of change among the rabbinical leadership have slowly started to appear. See for instance the article in *The Times of Israel* “Orthodox rabbis wrestle with Jewish law and transgender issues” from April 8, 2016, in which no less than four Orthodox rabbis, two high profile rabbis from the establishment (R. Tzvi Hersch Weinreb, executive vice president emeritus of the Orthodox Union and R. Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Council of America) and two prominent rabbis associated with Open Orthodoxy (R. Jeffrey Fox, head at Yeshivat Maharat, and R. Asher Lopatin, president of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah) express views in favor of transgender inclusion. R. Jeffrey Fox has been advocating transgender inclusion for a while, so the news here is that high profile rabbis from the establishment are also taking a stand publicly. The article was retrieved from [http:// www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-rabbis-wrestle-with-jewish-law-and-transgender-issues](http://www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-rabbis-wrestle-with-jewish-law-and-transgender-issues).

<sup>240</sup> Ben, Beth, Dov, Moshe, Noam, Yael and Yiscah.

<sup>241</sup> Ben, Beth, Yael and Yiscah.

<sup>242</sup> Head of a *chasidic* dynasty and spiritual leader of a particular *chasidic* group (*Lubavitch*, aka *Chabad*, in this case).

the rabbi was in the midst of a conversation with a few men. When the rabbi saw Dov come in, he detached himself from the group with alacrity and came over to shake Dov's hand, thus signaling his acceptance.<sup>243</sup> In the case of Noam, she used to attend lectures at an Orthodox synagogue in Israel where the rabbi was aware of her background and was friendly to her. Finally, Moshe also had a positive and meaningful encounter with one of the rabbis who had known him from the time before his transition. During a visit to Israel, a friend told Moshe that his old ultra-Orthodox rabbi wanted to see him and, in spite of his disbelief, Moshe was persuaded to call him:

[The rabbi] picked up the phone and said: "Mosheeee!!!" And I was like, "do you know who this is?" I totally was not expecting that reception. And he said: "Yeah, of course I know who this is. Are you gonna come visit your old rabbi?" And I said: "Oh well, I was going to get some souvenirs and go to the Western Wall." And he said: "What is more important buying souvenirs or to come and see your old rabbi?" So he guilted me into it, so I said: "Okay, I'll come see you." So I went to see him, he opened his office door and just, you know, very welcoming stand, his physical stand was very welcoming and he looked at me up and down and he said: "I see you did the right thing. I don't know why God does this to people but I know you did the right thing and I can see that you are at peace now." Incredibly, it was an incredible moment for me, having his entire acceptance and his real sense like, not just his acceptance, oh I accept you as you are, but feeling like, no, that was the right thing to do.

That ultra-Orthodox rabbi was not the only one who accepted Moshe. In his hometown, the local Modern Orthodox rabbi was also accepting, though only to a certain extent. He would let Moshe *daven* on the men's side on the few occasions that he attended services at the Orthodox synagogue, but he would not shake his hand. On a similar note, Moshe once wanted to attend services at a synagogue run by a rabbi affiliated with Aish HaTorah.<sup>244</sup> Moshe was not sure if he would be welcome, so a friend of him called the rabbi and asked if it would be okay for Moshe to join services. The rabbi's response was that Moshe was welcome on the condition that he was not demonstrative. The rabbi's assumption that Moshe would go to services as some sort of transgender activist or spokesperson baffled Moshe, but that revealed both the concerns of the rabbi that being transgender was inextricably linked to a political agenda, as well as the tacit acceptance of a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy.

Moshe's experiences with the three aforementioned rabbis (from full to lukewarm acceptance) contrast with his own account of his encounter with a rabbi prior to his transition (see the section "Rabbis: seeking their counsel or

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<sup>243</sup> As Dov pointed out, the rabbi was showing his acceptance for Dov as a practicing Jew. After that first encounter, though, the rabbi told Dov that he would have advised him not to undergo the medical procedures that resulted in his physical changes and that he did not consider him *halakhically* male. That was no impediment for the rabbi to show sympathy for Dov's plight.

<sup>244</sup> A conservative Orthodox institution and *yeshivah* with headquarters at the Western Wall Plaza, Jerusalem.

staying away from them” above) and the rabbi at the Orthodox synagogue were he *davened* on the men’s side for the first time (see the section “The search for a place in the Orthodox world” above).

As for the rest of the participants, the accounts of their encounters with rabbis in the fullness of their identities showed similar mixed reactions. We have seen, for instance, how Yiscah’s former rabbi failed to stand up to a transphobic verbal assault by a member of his congregation or how Ben was kicked out from his synagogue once the rabbis got word of his background (see the section “The search for a place in the Orthodox world” above). In the case of Yael, we have seen how the same rabbi who welcomed her as *halakhically* female, later on retracted his ruling under fear of retaliation from other community members, and how two other rabbis she consulted with turned their backs on her (see the section “Asking a rabbi for a *psak*” above). To all those accounts, it should also be added that a rabbi that used to be very warm and friendly to Dov became distant and uncomfortable once Dov told him about his background. Furthermore, that rabbi turned out to be stricter than the *posek* Dov had consulted on the question of receiving *aliyah*<sup>245</sup> (the *posek* condoned it, the rabbi did not). The sternness of the rabbi, added to his obvious discomfort around Dov, were particularly hurtful for the latter.

As the examples above suggest, the participants encountered both understanding and unsympathetic rabbis. There was no question that individual rabbis could be supportive, but there was a widespread feeling among the participants that rabbis, as an institution, were not up to the task. Several participants<sup>246</sup> would often bemoan what they perceived as the rabbis’ lack of leadership in this issue, that is, their reluctance or inability to look deep into the transgender question and find a way for transgender Jews to live Orthodox lives. The lack of leadership also extended to the rabbis’ unwillingness to bring the ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer into the mainstream of *halakhic* thought. Particularly dismaying were the cases of several prominent rabbis who, either through direct experience of the participants,<sup>247</sup> or through the reports they heard from others,<sup>248</sup> reversed rulings given in private once they were forced to take a stand in public. Whereas those rulings given privately usually followed the line of reasoning of the Tzitz Eliezer, once they were asked to put those rulings in writing or to give testimony in a rabbinical court, the rabbis in question either changed their opinion or denied ever giving any *psak* in private. The reason for such a change of heart was apparently the fear of those rabbis losing their standing among their peers and communities.

In relation to the lack of rabbinical leadership, Beth brought up a dictum from the Talmud that reads *pnei hador kipnei kelev*, that is, “the face of the

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<sup>245</sup> Plural of *aliyah*, the occasion in which a male congregant is called up to the *bimah* to read from the Torah during synagogue services.

<sup>246</sup> Amichai, Belinda, Beth, Dov, Moshe, Yael and Yiscah.

<sup>247</sup> Beth and Yael.

<sup>248</sup> Again Beth and Yael.

generation will be like the face of a dog.”<sup>249</sup> Beth’s explanation of this dictum, based on what she remembered from R. Israel Salanter’s interpretation, was that if it were the first time you saw someone walking a dog you would think that the dog is in charge because it walks in the front, but actually it is the master who has the dog on a leash and who is in control. Similarly, Beth argued, rabbis should keep their communities on the leash and make room in their midst for transgender members even if such measures would prove unpopular. The problem, according to Beth, was that a lot of rabbis today “are unwilling to stand up to their own communities, let alone to other rabbis.”

Finally, Yisciah contextualized the lack of rabbinical leadership in a much larger picture of events in which the boundaries of the Orthodox community were being challenged and redefined:

[The rabbis] have been faced with challenges now that they haven’t been faced by this volume- They are loud challenges, and they are also very essential challenges to the future of where we go as Jewish people [...]. But there are a lot of them. And many of them, if not all of them or most of them, have to do with inclusivity and the old guard is beginning to lose ground, because it cannot longer be sustained. Judaism was never designed to be a people that excludes. Rather it is designed as a people that includes. And you have all different types of people now that are no longer going to tolerate being told that they have to be excluded. And this is a big challenge for the rabbis. [...] So one example would be transgender Jews.

#### 4.3.2 Experiences of religious change

Finally, the participants’ experiences in Orthodox settings provided an insight of how change in attitudes towards transgender people might be taking place on the ground. Yisciah, for instance, reported:

I remember, I had come out of the bathroom, I was walking back into the women's section, and [a woman] walked by me and we said “*shabbat shalom*,” and she said: “Yisciah, I just need to say something to you.” And she said: “please forgive me if I hurt your feelings, I do not intend to hurt your feelings. I look at you and I see, you are so polite and you are so nice, you are so sweet, and what I am going to say is that I am acknowledging the problem is with me. I so want to invite you over for *shabbat* and I cannot, because I cannot deal with your transition, I just cannot deal with it, it totally freaks me out. And I know that what you did, you believed you needed to do for you to be here today, and I just cannot wrap my mind around it, and I had to tell you that the reason I never invited you over for *shabbat* is cause I have a problem. It’s not you, I really have the problem.”

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<sup>249</sup> Sanhedrin 97a. The translation has been taken from the ArtScroll Talmud (Dicker, Elias, Katz, & Schorr, 2005).

What this episode suggests is that change can occur by being in a place where one is not expected to be, that is, by challenging the boundaries of what belongs to an Orthodox setting. The presence of Yiscah in the religious life of that community was creating a wave of ripple effects, a good deal of which she was probably not even aware of. Without visibility, those ripple effects would not have occurred. The price for Yiscah's visibility, though, was considerable taking into account that she faced verbal abuse in one occasion and had to put up with the unwillingness of the local rabbi to take action. Beth's rabbi, on the other hand, was key to her acceptance in her community. After another community member had outed Beth to the rabbi, he consulted with a more senior rabbi and the latter told him that Beth should sit on whatever side of the *mechitzah* seemed more appropriate. When Beth was told this story by her rabbi, she asked if the more senior rabbi had added something else. Her rabbi's answer was "I got the answer I wanted, I wasn't gonna dig." Beth felt pleased by that answer since it meant that her rabbi wanted her to stay from the beginning. Beth's theory of gradual change, one person at a time, was based on this kind of direct experiences with community members who, once they became aware of her background, continued to accept her.

Yael reported a different experience regarding how her community related to her prior to the events in 2007 that led to her feeling no longer welcome (see the section "Asking a rabbi for a *psak*" above). In her case, Yael mentioned that the community members chose to forget that she was a MTF woman. People who had known her from the time before her transition even urged her to find a husband and to start having biological children, even if that was physiologically impossible. Interestingly enough, the main pushback that Yael experience from the community was not due to her MTF background but because she was in a relationship with another woman. Once the community turned against her and the rabbi retracted the ruling that she was *halakhically* female, her MTF background became the center of attention. As a result, Yael experienced change but—contrary to the accounts by Yiscah and Beth—the change she went through was from a position in which being a MTF woman was not an issue to one in which she felt no longer welcome in her community for that very reason.

Another participant who reported experiencing a shift in attitudes towards transgender was Ben. In his case, he went from being expelled from a *Chabad* synagogue to finding a welcoming Modern Orthodox rabbi who, according to Ben's best guess, never before had encountered a transgender person among his congregants. During my visit with Ben, I had a fleeting chance to see how those changes might be slowly taking place. Ben's rabbi invited us for *shabbat* lunch with his family and, after the meal, we sat in the living room and the *rebbetzin* asked me about my research. I answered in generic terms, mentioning the words Orthodox and transgender, and the *rebbetzin* quickly changed topic. That was particularly relevant in relation to another episode reported by Ben which occurred two weeks before. On that occasion, the *rebbetzin* and

Ben were in the kitchen while the rabbi was not home yet. She then told Ben that she had heard something about transgender in the radio. In the course of the ensuing conversation, she asked Ben a remarkably pointed question, namely, how a FTM can know that he is a man rather than a masculine woman or a woman who likes to do male things. According to Ben, that was the first time the *rebbetzin* had raised the topic. She also mentioned that prior to becoming Orthodox she had lived in a rather gay-friendly milieu, but at that time she had not been exposed to transgender issues. During my visit the topic was raised for a second time, but the circumstances were very different, since I was a stranger and her husband was also in the room. There is no point in speculating about the *rebbetzin*'s motivations in asking me about my research only to change topic a minute later. What transpired, in any case, was that something was bubbling beneath the surface: a desire to know more about transgender that was eliciting highly sophisticated questions but which also was kept in check by a sense of caution and modesty. Apart from his community rabbi, Ben also reported that as a result of his *giur*<sup>250</sup> the head of the *beit din*<sup>251</sup> had become interested in transgender issues and had even been lecturing on the topic. Ben's impact also went beyond rabbinical and community settings. He reported, for instance, that a person with a leadership position at an Orthodox LGBTQ organization had repeatedly told him that he had been instrumental in raising trans awareness in an organization dominated, numerically speaking, by Orthodox lesbian and gay affiliates.

Moshe also reported some personal experiences after his transition in which he perceived a shift or change in an Orthodox setting, even though he was not observant himself. He mentioned, for instance, that a member of the Orthodox congregation in the town where he lived was outing him to other people in the community. Moshe had ambivalent feelings about that, since he was not sure if that person was just gossiping around or trying to expand other people's horizons. In any case, as a result of that person's efforts, Moshe was approached by a member of the Orthodox *chevra kadisha* who had questions about the proper burial for a transgender person. He also interacted with several rabbis, both those who rejected and accepted him (see previous section). Finally, the fact that his family remained ultra-Orthodox and that Moshe resumed the relationship with them also created ripple effects in his former Orthodox community. Moshe mentioned, for instance, that while taking walks with his mother they would bump into family's friends and acquaintances who would have known Moshe from before his transition. In this way, although not Orthodox himself, Moshe was very much a visible presence in the community. Once again, it is an open question how and to what extent, if any, the views and attitudes of the people in the Orthodox community changed as a result of their interactions with Moshe.

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<sup>250</sup> Religious conversion.

<sup>251</sup> Rabbinical court of three in charge of conversions, among other things.



## 4.4 A non-binary perspective

In this final section I would like to take a closer look at the experiences of Ben, the only participant in the study whose gender identity was not binary in the usual sense. Other participants such as Moshe sympathized with non-binary gender identities, but Ben was the only who, although functioning in binary terms, was not keen on fully inhabiting either of the two positions of the gender binary. In our written communication, Ben alternatively referred to that as “gender incoherence” or “divested gender identity” (in contrast to the “invested gender identity” of those who want to inhabit a “real” or “authentic” gender). As we will see below, what made Ben’s gender identity non-binary was that he understood his gender as indeterminate, not contained in conventional ideas of maleness or femaleness. In the context of Orthodox Judaism in particular, the chasm between those who espouse gender binarism and those who don’t is deep enough to justify devoting a section to explore a non-binary perspective. In spite of the merits of the concept of genderqueer, I hesitate to use it in relation to Ben for two reasons. The first one is that Ben himself was not fond of this label. An added reason is that Ben, although sympathetic with those who self-identified as genderqueer, was living outwardly according to the extant gender norms.

In the course of the following pages, I will strive whenever possible to relate to the structure of section 4.2 mostly devoted to participants who aligned themselves with the gender binary.<sup>252</sup> However, given the particularities of Ben’s story, there is no easy match between his experiences and the structure of major themes introduced in the previous chapter. The main purpose to include this chapter is to broaden the scope of perspectives through an account of a non-binary gender identity. Representativeness is therefore not a concern here.

### 4.4.1 A non-binary Orthodox Judaism?

As the sections 4.2 and 4.3 should have made sufficiently clear, Orthodox Judaism is a considerably gendered religion. As a result, challenges to the division of roles mapped according to the gender binary are bound to encounter resistance, as shown in the case for egalitarianism advanced by a stream of feminist Orthodox women (Israel-Cohen, 2012).

As Ben mentioned in one of our interviews, although the possible outlook of a non-binary Orthodoxy remains uncharted territory, a move towards egalitarianism in a number of *kehillot*<sup>253</sup> has the potential to provide an opening for gender nonconformists. This is so because in egalitarian contexts, the role of the congregants’ gender in relation to their religious practice is irrelevant or at

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<sup>252</sup> Ben also appears in that section, but he is the exception.

<sup>253</sup> Plural of *kehillah*, a Jewish community or congregation.

the very least less salient. By equating women to men and removing the *mechitzah*,<sup>254</sup> the gender binary does not necessarily disappear (the goal is still to reach gender balance, not to move *beyond* gender). But once gender ceases to be enforced as a criterion for religious practice, that can provide an opening for a gender neutral space in which gender nonconformists can function. In the case of Ben, though, there was no egalitarian and *halakhically* observant synagogue in the town where he lived.

The Orthodox synagogue he attended adhered to the principle of gender separation and, in order to be able to function in that setting, Ben felt compelled to adhere to male gender norms. Living outwardly as an Orthodox man gave Ben access to aspects of Orthodox Judaism that he cherished and that were accessible only to men, but that came at the price of setting limits to his gender expression. Ben reported, for instance, that “[he] would like to wear skirts here and there [and] be more playful with gender” but society in general and Orthodox Judaism in particular discouraged that kind of behavior. He added, somewhat cryptically, that “[he had] enough troubles” due to what I concluded was his somehow vulnerable standing as an out-of-the-closet transman in an Orthodox community. It seemed that publicly engaging in gender-bending would be pushing the envelope too far.

#### 4.4.2 A few things about Ben

Ben’s experience was not only set apart from the rest of the participants by the fact that his gender identity was non-binary. Together with Dov, he was the only participant who became Orthodox after his transition.<sup>255</sup> Furthermore, although several other participants were born to non-Orthodox families and became Orthodox in the course of their lives, Ben was the only one who reported undergoing an Orthodox conversion ceremony.<sup>256</sup> Taking all that into account, the sections devoted to pre-transition and transition in the previous pages do not correlate with Ben’s experience since he was not Orthodox during those periods of his life.

As mentioned in section 3.4.2, at the time of our meeting Ben had been associate professor of Jewish history at University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, for several years. The reason why that is relevant in the context of this study is that Ben perceived that his position as professor, paired with his age, gave him

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<sup>254</sup> Egalitarianism can also follow the formula of separate but equal by keeping the *mechitzah* in place. The maintenance of the *mechitzah*, though, is at odds with the inclusion of gender-queers.

<sup>255</sup> I use the term ‘transition’ here in reference to Ben. In Dov’s case, that term would be inappropriate since he did not consider that he transitioned in any way but that he received treatment for a medical condition.

<sup>256</sup> Ben’s father is Jewish, but his mother was not. Orthodox Judaism only acknowledges matrilineal descent. The fact that Ben’s father is a Holocaust survivor greatly shaped Ben’s Jewish identity from early childhood.

a status that made it more challenging for eventual detractors in the local Jewish community to dismiss him.

As mentioned above, Ben presented as male in the Orthodox community he was part of. One of the main reasons why he chose to present as male was that, in his own words, “the maleness is a deeper layer [of selfhood] than the femaleness”. Maleness, therefore, did not cancel or supersede femaleness, but it was perceived by Ben as a more primordial identity. Ben also reported having a feminist activist background and feeling conflicted about masculinity at the initial stages of his transition. According to Ben, this conflict was resolved after one year of conversations with two Jewish cis-male friends who told him about their own feelings of ambivalence towards masculinity and male privilege. Ben referred to that form of masculinity as a “queer Jewish masculinity” which, given how it departed from normative masculinity, he felt comfortable enough to inhabit. Finally, like all other post-transitioned men in the study, Ben was regularly taking hormones but the way he read his body and how he handled the anatomical aspects of transition singled him out from other FTM participants. Although I made a point not to ask any of the participants about medical procedures, several of them volunteered that information anyway. Among the FTM participants in this study, several of them reported that they had undergone or were planning to undergo top surgery. That medical procedure was seen as an essential step towards embodying a male body. Ben, on the other hand, had a different understanding of how gender and body configurations related to each other:

I resist this, I mean, there is nothing wrong with my body, and for myself, I don't accept that people read breasts as female. I am just not giving into this reading [...] I love living in this body as a man. I think it is a delightful act of... of subversion, of mischief. Of, you know, yeah, insubordination to the gender order. I refuse to submit to the rules and streamline my body to what a man is supposed to look like.

In our written communication, Ben also expressed a related thought concerning the problems of reducing gender to anatomy. Apropos this, he wrote: “my body is a text that needs to be read against the grain.”

#### 4.4.3 A gender neutral conversion ceremony

Ben's journey into Orthodoxy was a long process which, at an important juncture, included undergoing an Orthodox conversion ceremony. For that purpose, Ben was put in touch with a sympathetic rabbi who would act as the head of the *beit din*. By that time, Ben had considerable knowledge of Orthodoxy and was already keeping *kashrut* and *shabbat*. As a result, the time that it took for him to go through the conversion process was relatively short. Concerning the ceremony itself, the rabbi told Ben that his *halakhic* gender status

was of no concern to what the *beit din* needed to give witness for, that is, that Ben had sufficient knowledge of Judaism, that he had accepted the *mitzvot* and immersed himself in the *mikvah*. Those are elements of an Orthodox conversion process which are common to both female and male prospective converts. It is significant that issues relating to exclusively male procedures, such as circumcision or *hatafat dam brit*,<sup>257</sup> were not raised. The main obstacle to performing a non-gendered conversion turned out to be how to write the conversion certificate in Hebrew in such a way that would leave Ben's gender unaddressed. As I mentioned in section 4.2.1, Hebrew is a gendered language with only two grammatical genders, female and male. The way the rabbi got round that was to write the conversion certificate using the passive voice and referring to Ben solely by his name, without adding any of the gender markers *bat*<sup>258</sup> or *ben*.<sup>259</sup> In this way, the three rabbis in the *beit din* who signed the conversion certificate avoided having to rule on Ben's *halakhic* gender status. In our written communication, Ben reported that in the period leading to his conversion he had expected the head of the *beit din* to rule him either female or male as part of the ceremony and that he was willing to submit to whatever the rabbi decided. Actually, before the conversion Ben had already attempted to get an Orthodox rabbi to rule on his *halakhic* gender. After a while he realized that given the multivocal nature of rabbinical Judaism, upon examination of the same facts different Torah scholars would reach different conclusions, all of which would be legitimate. He came to the conclusion that it was possible to choose a *posek* depending on what was the preferred outcome, but by that time he had already come to embrace his indeterminacy and had no desire to ask for a ruling.

Another remarkable feature of Ben's conversion ceremony was that the rabbi overseeing it made a point to honor Ben as a transgender person. He felt that neither the head rabbi nor his other two colleagues in the *beit din* were merely tolerating him, but that they were actively celebrating him in an Orthodox context, validating and acknowledging the special space that he occupied as transgender and the unusual access to God that went along with it. As Ben mentioned in our written communication, although initially he had expected a ruling on his gender, and he had prepared himself to accept whatever may come, the fact that the head of the *beit din* chose to honor him as transgender "encouraged [him] to cultivate this place of *halakhic* indeterminacy."

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<sup>257</sup> The letting of a drop of blood, a ritual performed on male prospective converts who are already circumcised as a substitute for circumcision.

<sup>258</sup> 'Daughter of', used between two proper names to call congregants in ritual contexts. Ex: Leah bat Sarah (Leah daughter of Sarah).

<sup>259</sup> 'Son of,' used between two proper names to call congregants in ritual contexts. Ex: David ben Yakov (David son of Jacob).

#### 4.4.4 A non-binary reading of Orthodox religious practices

As section 4.2 has showed, Orthodox religious practices frequently include a gender component. One of the main conclusions there was that, prior to transition, those religious practices which underscored the gender assigned at birth were often detrimental to the acceptance and affirmation of the participants' gender identity. However, in the post-transitional period, gendered religious practices had the potential of providing a deep sense of validation. As I will explain, Ben's account from a non-binary perspective expands and complicates that picture.

##### Counting in the *minyan* as a case

Before his Orthodox conversion, Ben already sought to join the Modern Orthodox synagogue in his town. Once Ben disclosed his personal circumstances to the local rabbi, the latter made a point to shake his hand—in effect waiving any concerns for *negiah*—and welcomed Ben to join his congregation. However, when the rabbi had to decide on the implications of Ben's status for his religious practice, he had to take into account that Ben was presenting as male but that no *posek* had actually ruled on his *halakhic* gender. The rabbi concluded that Ben's gender was undetermined and decided on the spot that Ben would be able to pray on the men's side. After some consultation with other colleagues, he ruled that Ben could also receive *aliyot*,<sup>260</sup> but he would not be counted in the *minyan*. That is in line with what Dov was told by an eminent *litvish posek*. According to Dov, that *posek* told him that he could receive *aliyot* but not be counted in the *minyan*. The reasons for that, according to the different accounts provided by Ben and Dov, had to do with the fact that certain laws relating to *tzniut*,<sup>261</sup> such as *kol ishah*,<sup>262</sup> did not apply to them. Similarly, if the rationale for separating women from men at synagogue was that doing otherwise would get men sexually aroused by the sight of women, that would not apply either. The case of being counted in a *minyan* was different since the criterion in Orthodox Judaism referred explicitly to adult Jewish males.<sup>263</sup> According to Ben, the principle applied here was that, in case of doubt concerning someone's *halakhic* gender status, it was necessary to follow the course that incurred in fewer chances for transgression. For instance,

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<sup>260</sup> Interestingly enough, when I attended one *shabbat* service with Ben at his local synagogue, he was given an *aliyah* and he was called by the name “*Benyamin ben Shmuel*,” precisely the formula that was avoided in his conversion ceremony in order to leave his *halakhic* gender unaddressed. Arguably, in the context of being given an *aliyah*, the use of a gender identity marker such as *ben* did not carry any legal weight and was used in accordance with the gender identity in which Ben presented.

<sup>261</sup> Modesty.

<sup>262</sup> A prohibition that prevents women from singing in the presence of men.

<sup>263</sup> See Shulchan Arukh O.C. 55 “We say *kaddish* but we do not say it with less than ten free grown males [זכרים] that have grown at least two pubic hairs and this is also the law for the *kedusha* and the *barchu* which we also do not say with less than ten.”

if a piece of food is *kosher* but its status is unknown, one refrains from eating it. In case of doubt, not counting in the *minyan* someone who is male would result in less of a transgression than counting someone who isn't. Although I am not familiar with the subtleties of *halakha*, I concluded that the rules that did not apply to Ben and Dov were those that had to do with how someone is perceived (through the voice or looks) whereas the law that was enforced (counting in the *minyan*) was not concerned with perceptions but solely with the *halakhic* status of the person in question.

As the cases of Ben and Dov illustrate, the guidelines they received from two different rabbis allowed for a degree of participation without reaching full inclusion. In the case of Dov, the fact that he kept his condition to himself and that he was not allowed to let himself be counted in a *minyan* put a significant strain on him, since in the life of an Orthodox man the occasions in which a *minyan* is required are many. *Minyanim* are not only necessary in order to celebrate the full version of religious services three times a day, but also to mark other occasions such as mourning, weddings and *seudot*.<sup>264</sup> It is not always possible to predict when a *minyan* is going to be required, and that put Dov "in a position where [he] often [had] to pull disappearing acts," which frequently caused a degree of social awkwardness. The *posek* who spoke with Dov provided him with a way to attenuate the impact of his exclusion by telling him that if a *minyan* was formed around him when he was in *shul*, he did not need to leave since he held that the Torah scroll would count as the 10<sup>th</sup> member. However, Dov did not want to overly rely on this leniency and, anyway, he knew that not everybody held the same opinion as the *posek*'s. The challenges of avoiding potential occasions in which Dov could be counted in a *minyan*, without being able to explain the reasons for his sudden absences, were a significant factor that contributed to Dov's partial withdrawal from community life, which he came to see as something positive because it prevented him from falling into a practice of Judaism more focused on the social dynamics than *Hashem* (see the section "Meaning of being Orthodox & transgender" above). At the time of our meeting, Dov said that he had come to terms with the fact that he could not be counted in a *minyan*, but in the beginning he had been upset since he wished that the *posek* would have looked more deeply into his case to find a solution.

From Ben's non-binary perspective, what had been a source of distress for Dov took a different turn. Ben was actually pleased to be looked upon as man in some ways (pray on the men's side, receive *aliyot*) and not others (not counting in the *minyan*). While Ben acknowledged that he loved having the possibility of being close to the Torah scroll during the *aliyah*, as a feminist

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<sup>264</sup> See M. Megillah 4:3 for a full list of occasions requiring a *minyan*. *Seudah* (pl. *seudot*) is an obligatory festive meal celebrated in connection with an important life event (circumcision, *bar mitzvah*, wedding, etc.) or religious holiday.

he also recognized that it was a male privilege. For him, not being counted in a *minyan* was a way to mitigate that privilege and was a reminder of his bond with those who were being excluded, i.e. women:

I love not being counted when women are not being counted, there is a piece of humility, it keeps me from taking on the hubris of the male space, you know, the male superiority business.

Ben's non-binary understanding of gender allowed him to inhabit those different spaces, enjoying some of the male privileges while keeping a bond of solidarity with those who are excluded from them. Such fluctuation of status could also happen in one and the same practice, as for instance with the recitation of *zimun*.<sup>265</sup>

I can be counted in a regular *zimun*. I can count as a man when you need three men. But I cannot be counted for saying the additional words, when ten men are needed, because that is like a *minyan*, and that's where I am not counted. I love this! I am counted here, and I am not counted there.

Ben did not feel disparaged by his shifting status; on the contrary. He seemed to enjoy the flexibility of *halakha* which enabled him to live up, within its boundaries, his own playfulness and fluidity regarding gender. Ben's non-binary understanding of gender, although probably unorthodox in both senses of the word, seemed surprisingly much more attuned to what the *halakha* could currently offer, at least for transgender people not considering bottom surgery. Failing to provide a framework for full inclusion, the spaces carved by sympathetic Orthodox rabbis could potentially feel second-rate for those who were invested in the binary.<sup>266</sup> For Ben, on the other hand, the creation of the spaces and unusual configurations derived from the indeterminacy of his *halakhic* gender was an opportunity to infuse them with new meanings such as humility and solidarity with the excluded.<sup>267</sup> The counterintuitive conclu-

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<sup>265</sup> Prayer recited before *birkat hamazon* when 3 or more men eat bread together. On occasion, a single male youngster who has not reached *bar mitzvah* age can be counted. When the gathering includes 10 or more eligible members, the text of the prayer changes slightly adding the Hebrew word *Elokeinu* (Our God).

<sup>266</sup> That was not Dov's case, as he pointed out in our written communication, given that he came to see his partial withdrawal from the community as a blessing. Furthermore, he enjoyed the fact that, since he was not bound by the *mitzvo*t that apply to men, such as praying three times a day with a *minyan* or studying Torah, he could live his life at a quieter pace. His *halakhic* status also allowed him to do things that were convenient, such as using razors to shave his beard, something that was prohibited to *halakhically* male but did not apply to *halakhically* female even if they, for whatever reason, happened to grow a beard. It is reasonable to think, though, that other Jews who were not fully included according to their own understanding of their gender identity might have struggled as a result.

<sup>267</sup> In our written communication, Dov compared his *halakhic* status previous to the ruling by the *posek* to Schrödinger's cat, who is neither alive nor dead until someone opens the box. As

sion of Ben's experience seems to be that, although his non-binary stance appeared more subversive than binarism in its premises, in its implementation it aligned more smoothly with the *halakha* as currently interpreted by a number of sympathetic rabbis. In relation to this, I do not wish to imply that a non-binary outlook such as Ben's is either more or less desirable. Such a question would completely miss the point. To the extent that being positioned within or outside the binary is tied up with gender identity, it is not generally seen as a matter of choice or preference.

Finally, in the previous chapter I argued that gendered religious practices in the post-transitional period had the potential to provide a deep sense of validation. The case of Ben, coming from a non-binary perspective, adds an important difference. As mentioned before in section 4.4.2, Ben was initially conflicted about claiming a share in the male space, so from the beginning the kind of affirmation that he sought was of a different sort. Presenting as male allowed Ben to function in his community according to the deeper layer of his gender identity and to gain access to practices that he cherished and that were available only to Jewish adult males. On the other hand, having his masculinity questioned by not counting in the *minyan* resulted in an opening towards other meanings that linked him with his feminist history and the solidarity he felt towards the excluded. Gendered religious practices were therefore conducive to gender affirmation but in a non-binary framework which expanded the repertoire of possibilities for meaning-making to include also those instances in which masculinity was disputed.

#### 4.4.5 A trans theology

As already mentioned in section 4.4.3, the rabbis in charge of Ben's conversion ceremony made a point of celebrating him as transgender. The theme of being transgender as an opening to the possibility of a different access to God, thus enriching the human experience of the divine, became one of the main threads in Ben's new life as Orthodox. In his case, that connection to God took the form of a special access to light. Ben referred to light sometimes as a lived religious experience of heightened luminosity and sometimes as a metaphor for divine presence. Concerning the latter, he said:

There is the most light in the spaces before the ruling, when things are open. The status of indeterminacy is the place of the most light.

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opposed to Ben, Dov did not regard his current *halakhic* status as indeterminate. By posing his question to the *posek*, the latter had to 'open the box' and he reluctantly and implicitly ruled Dov's *halakhic* gender as female. In relation to the ruling, Dov also likened it to opening 'a can of worms,' that is, something that the *posek* knew it was better left unopened so as to spare Dov the awkwardness of certain situations in which his *halakhic* gender would make a difference.



As Ben and I discussed in our written communication, the fact that no rabbi had pronounced on his *halakhic* gender not only confirmed his sense of being neither truly female nor completely male, but it also helped him to develop a theological interpretation of his religious experience. He came to understand his being transgender as an aspect of his spiritual journey. As pointed out in the previous section, for Ben the indeterminacy of his *halakhic* gender was a source of meaning rather than a burden. In this, Ben was aware that he was an exception:

There are not many people who [...] have a similar position that I have and actually don't want to be taken as man or woman after the transition. Yes, so I don't know any other post-transition *frum* trans person who is... who joyfully inhabits the place of *halakhic* indeterminacy.

Ben's understanding of being trans as an "opening" or a "spiritual opportunity" went beyond the personal and had broader implications for the LGBTQ politics in the Orthodox world. Ben pointed out that the way Eshel approached the issue of LGBTQ inclusion in the Orthodox world was through a discourse of compassion and understanding. He agreed with Eshel that the secular discourse of pride and rights embraced by the larger LGBTQ movement would not lead anywhere in the Orthodox context, but he felt that there was a different way to raise awareness about LGBTQ in the Orthodox world than to appeal to feelings of compassion for the less fortunate:

So the issue would really be [...] reframing trans as a particular way of relating to God that can, that has something to teach, that is not only about being the object of compassion.

From this perspective, being transgender was not primarily understood as a medical condition in need of treatment (a view that aligned with the discourse of compassion) but rather as a source of new religious insights. Ben's celebratory approach was however punctuated by a lack of vainglory. An important feature of his outlook on Orthodoxy was how the latter had resisted the project of the modern western self, characterized by the self-determined individual engaged in rational inquiry. For Ben, Orthodox Judaism offered an alternative ethos based on surrendering to God. Ben described finding himself in a dance between those different and often antithetical worldviews. His reading of gender and the place of trans in the Orthodox world could also be interpreted as part of that dance. While feminism and gender theory had been two significant influences in the development of his thought and scholarly career, his religious experiences with light and his falling in love with Torah, *halakha* and *tefillah* seemed to touch a deeper layer of being.

#### 4.4.6 Rabbis' responses: from flat to multi-leveled binarism

In this last section before the closing remarks I wanted to slightly shift the focus from Ben's account to the responses of different rabbis as reported by several participants. The responses considered here addressed the practical and *halakhic* implications of living as a *frum* transgender person. This shift of focus does not entail a major departure since Ben's experiences and the gender binary issue continue to figure prominently.

In section 4.4.4, I reached the somehow counterintuitive conclusion that a non-binary approach as Ben's seemed more attuned to the currently available Orthodox interpretations of the *halakha* for transgender Jews not considering bottom surgery. This conclusion begs the question if Orthodox Judaism is, after all, as entrenched in the binary as it seems. As has been mentioned before (see section 4.2.1) *chazal* already recognized a plurality of body configurations such as *androgynos* and *tumtum*. The case of the *androgynos* in particular posed a remarkable challenge to the gender binary espoused by the rabbis. *Mishnah Androgynos*, in the tractate *Bikurim*, makes a rather strenuous effort to fit intersex people in either category of female or male. For most social and religious purposes, the *androgynos* was considered a male: they had to dress as a male, they were only allowed to marry women and they had to fulfil most of the positive commandments. At the same time, the law of *niddah*<sup>268</sup> applied to them during menstrual periods. The rabbis ruled which were the laws that applied to the *androgynos* in all the social and religious situations in which a possible conflict could appear. In this way, the majority opinion managed to uphold the gender binary. However, the minority opinion expressed by R. Yose was that *androgynos* was a category of their own, neither woman nor man.

What the stories of Ben and Dov point out is that the complexities of gender in an Orthodox context extend well beyond the case of intersex people. In the answers they got from two different authorities, a *litvish posek* and a Modern Orthodox rabbi, there was an implicit understanding that the question of gender was not solved by one *mechitzah* alone, there were at least two *mechitzot*. There was a ritual *mechitzah* which for certain practices such as counting in the *minyan* relied on the *halakhic* gender status of the worshipper. But below that ritual *mechitzah*, there was also a social *mechitzah* which was drawn according to mores of gender expression. The reason why I argue that the social *mechitzah* was secondary to the ritual *mechitzah* is that, when push came to shove, the doubts about the correct *halakhic* gender trumped gender identity and expression (otherwise both *mechitzot* would have completely merged and their differences would not be visible). In spite of the subordination of the social to the ritual, there were plenty of places where they overlapped, i.e. in those areas of Orthodox Jewish life and practice where the *halakhic* gender

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<sup>268</sup> Term referring to a menstruating woman who has not immersed herself yet in the *mikvah*. During *niddah* a wife is forbidden to have sexual relations with her husband.

status was not a decisive factor. The rabbis' responses suggested an awareness of the importance of letting Ben and Dov function socially as men as much as possible, while sticking to what they considered were the limits of stretchability for the *halakha* (i.e. counting in the *minyan*). A similar pattern could be seen in the cases reported by Yael and Yiscah concerning *Chabad* rabbis who, while letting MTFs pray on the women's side at synagogue, also advised them to put *tefillin* in the privacy of their homes (see the section "Asking a rabbi for a *psak*" above). The rationale of those rabbis was that MTFs might still be considered men in the eyes of God and therefore possibly obligated to don *tefillin*. In doing so, those *Chabad* rabbis introduced a distinction between the implications of gender for the public and the private domains that resonates with the stories of Ben and Dov. These two different sets of cases suggest that, although the rabbis in question did not articulate themselves in those terms, they had some degree of awareness about the complicated ways in which gender identity, gender expression and *halakhic* gender are different and yet interrelated. Moreover, particularly in the case of the *Chabad* rabbis, they also showed an understanding of how those three levels of gender might play out differently in public and private domains.

Given the qualitative design of this research, there is no way that I can satisfactorily answer the question posed at the beginning of this section.<sup>269</sup> However, from the cases explored above it is clear that a number of rabbis coming from three different streams of Orthodoxy<sup>270</sup> were grappling with complexities of gender that went beyond deciding on someone's *halakhic* status. The approach of those rabbis was not always echoed by their peers, as the quote from Amichai illustrated (see the section "Dislocation of authority" above). Those Orthodox rabbis who were unable to break gender into its different components could simply not deal with the questions posed by transgender Jews. Their understanding of the gender binary was one-dimensional: when someone's *halakhic* gender status did not align with gender expression their models collapsed. But the focus of this section has been those rabbis who showed a more nuanced understanding of gender, as in the cases reported by Ben, Dov, Yael and Yiscah. I have no reasons to conclude that those rabbis did not uphold the gender binary. Who stood at one or the other side of a given *mechitzah* was still a matter of their highest concern, but in their answers they seemed to acknowledge that in those domains where *halakhic* gender was not a decisive factor, there was room for an overlap between the ritual and the social *mechitzah* carved according to mores of gender expression. As a result, their understanding of the gender binary was not flat as in the case of the rabbis' referred by Amichai, but rather multi-leveled. On each of these multiple levels there was a *mechitzah* and transgender people were placed in the unusual position of inhabiting different sides of the divide. In the seamlessness of lived

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<sup>269</sup> How entrenched is the binary in Orthodox Judaism?

<sup>270</sup> Modern Orthodoxy, *yeshivish* and *chasidim*.

experience, where categories such as the ritual and the social dissolve, the inhabiting of those spaces was not something happening in linear alternation but rather simultaneously. At the same time that Ben was on one side of the *mechitzah* praying with the men and standing close to the Torah, he was also on the other side with those not being counted in the *minyan*. Like a photon in quantum physics, he was able to occupy two different spaces at once.

#### 4.4.7 Closing remarks

In the course of these pages I have endeavored to complement the previous chapter with a non-binary perspective based largely on Ben's experiences. As mentioned in section 4.4.2, Ben became Orthodox after transitioning, so the sections devoted to pre-transition and transition in the previous chapter do not correlate with his personal journey. Anyhow, the main purpose with this chapter has not been to establish a comparison but rather to add richness to the account of Orthodox transgender themes. In this sense, this chapter has reached some significant conclusions.

Ben's story suggests that his successful integration in an Orthodox community was the result, in no small measure, of his ability to function as a man. It remains an open question how those who either do not want or are not able to function according to the extant gender norms—i.e. genderqueers—would have negotiated their religious practices and their belonging to an Orthodox community. In the case of Ben, he mentioned that the fact that he was a professor of Jewish history and that at 50 plus, he had reached a mature age, gave him a status in the community, particularly in a town such as Winnipeg where there are very few Jewish studies scholars. Arguably, his status made an eventual backlash from the community on the basis of his transgender background less likely and more socially exacting.<sup>271</sup> Again, it is a reasonable question to ask if someone with less life experience and in a less prestigious position would have been met with the same level of acceptance.

In the course of this chapter I have also discussed how, from his non-binary standpoint, Ben was able to positively resignify not only practices of inclusion (praying on the men's side, receiving *aliyot*) but also those of exclusion (not counting in the *minyan*). Echoing the findings from the previous chapter, those gendered religious practices allowed Ben to affirm his non-binary gender identity, but they did so in a paradoxical way, in spite of the fact that those practices were originally conceived according to a gender binary logic which they in turn contributed to uphold. This was related to another seeming para-

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<sup>271</sup> That was at least the case for the scarcely (just a few families) observant community in the Modern Orthodox synagogue where he was affiliated to at the time of our meeting. In the *Chabad* synagogue that he had previously attended, his status as professor did not prevent his expulsion once his transgender background became known (see the section "The search for a place in the Orthodox world" above).

dox, or at least a counterintuitive conclusion, that Ben's non-binary standpoint, although more subversive in its premises, it aligned more smoothly in its implementation with the *halakha* as currently interpreted by a number of sympathetic rabbis in relation to transgender Jews not considering bottom surgery. That resulted in greater satisfaction for Ben since he could give expression to his own gender fluidity and playfulness through a resignification of those practices. However, there were limits to that expression. As Ben said, he would love to wear skirts now and then, but he refrained from doing so. The *halakha* was thus both an enabling and a constraining framework for the expression of his gender fluidity.

Last but not least, Ben's success in inhabiting a non-binary gender identity through the *halakha* has led me to question the assumption that Orthodox Judaism is as entrenched in the binary as it seems. Although I am in no position to provide a definitive answer given the scope and characteristics of this study, through the reports of a number of rabbis' responses we have seen that binarism continues to be a major structuring principle. The main insight from that discussion, though, has been to realize that there is not a monolithic binarism. As a matter of fact, more nuanced understandings of the complexities of gender among rabbis ranging from Modern Orthodoxy to *charedi* are giving way to a form of multi-leveled binarism which echoes the *chazalic* debates over *androgynos*.

## 5. Theoretical discussion of the results

### 5.1 Introduction: two questions

In this chapter, I would like to discuss my results with the help of different theories. The purpose is to examine the results and theories in light of each other and, in this way, to generate valuable insights regarding the intersection of religion and gender as well as the extant conceptualizations of religious change. In order to do so, I will not only consider theories either developed or fruitfully put to work in the sociology of religion. The transdisciplinary character of this study requires expanding the range of theories into other disciplines, most notably feminist studies.

The previous analysis & results chapter can be read in two, not mutually exclusive, ways. Using language borrowed from cinematography, we could say that the results can be seen either as a long shot, providing an overview of relevant sociological themes for transgender Jews with an Orthodox background, or as a close-up, making a specific intervention in two topics (gendered religious practices and religious change). This chapter will be devoted to the latter reading centered on those topics. In order to approach them, in the course of this chapter I will articulate possible answers to the following two questions:

1. What do the participants' negotiations of gendered religious practices contribute to the theorization of agency in religious settings, particularly among feminist scholars?
2. How can religious change be co-theorized in dialogue with the participants' views and experiences, as well as other theories?

### 5.2 Question 1: rethinking agency

Before I approach this question, it is important to acknowledge that there is an uneasy match between feminist theory and the material of this dissertation. One major point of tension is that feminist scholarship has primarily focused on the experiences of (cisgender) women, leaving MTF women in some sort of limbo and erasing the ways in which FTM were objectified as women prior

(and on occasion also after) their transitions. This omission is particularly conspicuous when scholars are willing to include sexual minorities in the feminist fold, while entrenching transgender invisibility (see Reilly, 2014, p. 7 for an example). Another important objection is that feminism, as Mahmood made clear, is both an “*analytical and politically prescriptive project*”<sup>272</sup> (2005, p. 10). It is the latter aspect that poses a challenge for the study of traditionalist religions.<sup>273</sup> As research has shown, women<sup>274</sup> in traditionalist religions such as Orthodox Judaism, even those with an egalitarian agenda, are reluctant to self-identify as feminists (Israel-Cohen, 2012, p. 12). Although participants such as Ben and Noam described themselves as feminists, most participants did not report such affiliation and, as a result, to use feminist theory and its prescriptive baggage to elucidate the ways they negotiated religious practices is fraught with potential difficulties. The reluctance in traditionalist circles to self-identify as a feminist is not surprising if we take into account that a significant number of (liberal) feminist scholars have linked feminism with secularism (Reilly, 2014, p. 11). Elizabeth Castelli, for instance, bemoaned the difficulties she encountered in dialogue with feminist activists and academics who understood religion solely in negative terms as a form of “false consciousness” (2001, p. 5). More specifically to the topic of this chapter, gendered religious practices have been viewed as one of the main religious sites in need of feminist scrutiny:

Mainstream (liberal) feminist thinking [...], [e]specially in the West, has tended to occupy a default “secularist” position, viewing gendered religious practices, especially non-western, with suspicion and inevitably at odds with women’s equality. (Reilly & Scriver 2014, p. 284)

The “non-western” caveat in the quote is important and needs some elaboration. Interestingly enough, the alignment of (liberal) feminism with secularism made an exception for the case of women of color and women in the Global South (Reilly, 2011, p. 7). In those cases, religion was reassessed as potentially empowering or as a “nuanced site of contestation” (Reilly, 2011, p. 7).

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<sup>272</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>273</sup> Israel-Cohen refers to Orthodox Judaism as a “conservative” religion as opposed to a “traditional” religion. Israel-Cohen resists the concept “traditional” since, according to her, that suggests an idealized form of religion that has remained static and pristine, unaffected by the encounter with modernity. I agree with Israel-Cohen’s analysis but I consider the term ‘conservative’ too politically normative, particularly taking into account that sections of the Orthodox world, most clearly in the case of Open Orthodoxy, have significant overlaps with progressive agendas. I have therefore chosen the term ‘traditionalist’ which suggests that tradition is not a given, an object of the past delivered in the fullness of its form, but rather a performative doing. Tradition is constantly being (re)enacted and, therefore, traditionalized.

<sup>274</sup> That religious men can also self-identify as feminists is a possibility that has attracted much less attention from feminist scholars. Israel-Cohen mentions that she interviewed Orthodox men who were sympathetic to egalitarianism, but it is not until the fourth and final part of her study that men’s accounts are included (2012, p. 105).

The question to what extent (liberal) feminist scholars would place Orthodox Judaism among the western religions in need of the “default secularist” treatment or among the sheltered group of oppressed minorities’ and postcolonial religions is probably a tough and uncomfortable one that the rise of the State of Israel—with the subsequent disruption of diasporic and subaltern narratives—has just made even harder to address.

In response to the negative bias of (liberal) feminist scholars against religion, but also in an effort to disentangle feminism from the dynamics of islamophobia in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and rising state regulation of Muslim women’s bodies, feminist scholars such as Butler (2008), Mahmood (2005) and Joan Scott (2007) successfully challenged and deconstructed the linkage between feminism and secularism. This opened the possibility for “non-oppressive feminism(s)” (Reilly, 2011, p. 6) which were more attuned to religious and cultural difference.

As explained in the previous paragraphs, the erasure of transgender lives from mainstream feminist scholarship as well as the hostility of (liberal) feminism towards religion, not to mention that most participants in this study were not avowed feminists, ask for a measure of caution in the deployment of feminist theory as a lens to discuss the accounts of transgender Jews with an Orthodox background. However, given the focus of feminist scholars on the workings of gender, and the wealth of theory resulting thereof, feminist theory and scholarship seem to offer the most promising of the available alternatives. This is particularly the case since feminist scholars, much more than queer and transgender theorists,<sup>275</sup> have long been engaged with religious questions. Furthermore, feminist scholars have engaged, as we have seen, in a critical deconstruction of the linkage between feminism and secularism, thus opening a space for the reassessment of the intersections of gender and religion.

In what follows, I will discuss three theorizations of agency in the works of Yael Israel-Cohen (2012), Mahmood (2005) and Karen Barad (1998-2015<sup>276</sup>). As we progress, the results and material for this study will be increasingly woven into the discussion. The relevance of the theoretical perspectives explored will also build up until reaching the work of new materialist feminist scholar Barad, who is the theorist with whom this study aligns most closely.

### 5.2.1 Deconstructing a taxonomy

The work by Israel-Cohen (2012) offers a promising starting point for discussion since it focuses on the same religious community as this study. Early on,

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<sup>275</sup> To the extent that feminist, queer and transgender studies share a body of work and theory, I am not suggesting that those are mutually exclusive theoretical perspectives. The opposite is rather the case, as the career of Judith Butler illustrates.

<sup>276</sup> The works considered for this study were those written between the period 1998-2015 and that seemed relevant to the research topic.



Israel-Cohen provides two references (Eisenstadt, 1999; Ben Rafael & Sternberg, 2001) claiming that the notion of human agency is key to modernity in all its forms and to introduce, without explicitly mentioning it, the concept of ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt, 2002). By way of those authors, she seems to arrive at a similar conclusion as Mahmood (2005); namely, that agency is not intrinsically linked to any social or political agenda in particular. This opens the possibility of a fruitful reading of ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt, 2002) in light of Mahmood (2005) and vice versa, but this is not an avenue that Israel-Cohen pursues or that at this point I will pursue in her stead. Unfortunately, Israel-Cohen’s insight about the open-endedness of agency does not get much traction in her study. That is probably related to the fact that egalitarianism is the shared and overarching goal of the women at the center of her study. That influences the ways in which Israel-Cohen conceives women’s agency, since whatever does not advance the egalitarian agenda is sidelined. In a literature review of women with egalitarian sympathies in traditionalist<sup>277</sup> religions, Israel-Cohen condenses the available scholarship into two schools of thought, the first of which she considers to be dominant: passive and active resistance (2012, pp. 9-10). Passive resistance is characterized by a pragmatic approach that seeks to make change whenever possible while avoiding challenges to the system or its symbolic economy (Israel-Cohen, 2012, p. 9). According to Israel-Cohen, one important reason for the bias of the existing literature towards passive resistance as an explicatory model is that previous research focused on converts (2012, pp. 10-11). As Israel-Cohen puts it “one generally does not seek membership to a group in order to then quickly turn around and challenge group boundaries” (2012, p. 11). At face value, that seems to be a relevant insight to reflect on the accounts of the five participants who became Orthodox as adults.<sup>278</sup> However, as the quote by Israel-Cohen highlights, her objection applies only to the recently converted. Once one has been a member of a group for 10, 20, 30 years or more, the limitations that Israel-Cohen mentions may have been significantly weakened or outright cancelled by a sense of seniority and acquired insider status.<sup>279</sup> Regarding active resistance, Israel-Cohen makes clear that it is not necessarily synonymous with a break with the tradition (2012, p. 10). Rather, one of the ways to exert active resistance would be to challenge the *status quo* through a search of alternative interpretations of religious texts that would open spaces for women’s participation (Israel-Cohen, 2012, p. 10). Concerning her own findings, Israel-Cohen concludes that the agency exerted by the Orthodox

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<sup>277</sup> Read “conservative” in Israel-Cohen’s account. See section 5.2 above for details.

<sup>278</sup> Belinda, Ben, Beth, Dov and Yiscah.

<sup>279</sup> Ben was the only of the five participants who had been living as Orthodox for less than 10 years. The figure is tentative, since there is no way to decide in advance and in absence of context what counts as seniority. In any case, the fact that Ben’s *giur* was relatively recent was no major obstacle for his outspokenness, as his choice to waive confidentiality suggests.

women she studied showed both instances of passive and active forms of resistance and that “an interconnected and at times highly ambiguous web of resistance lies between them” (2012, p. 12). In this way, Israel-Cohen managed to broaden the repertoire of possibilities for agency but she still operates according to the passive/active binary within the monadic mode of resistance.

Mahmood’s (2005) work represents a much welcome breakthrough in relation to previous ways of conceiving the agency of women in traditionalist religions. At the core of Mahmood’s project is the ambition to overcome the “agonistic and dualistic framework” through which much of feminist scholarship has conceived of agency and the lack thereof in terms of the binary resistance/subordination (2005, p. 23). Mahmood questions the naturalizing and universalizing assumption of the desire for freedom that underpins liberal feminism and, on that basis, she argues that agency is not only exerted by challenging norms but also by upholding them (2005, p. 5). In this way, Mahmood overcomes the reduction of agency to resistance that is still operative in Israel-Cohen (2012). Mahmood calls here for a decoupling of agency from the goals of progressive politics (2005, p. 34), so that agency and its accompanying ethics can be reappraised in their situationality (2005, p. 28). Other authors have used the term “embedded agency” (Korteweg, 2008) to designate a similar call to reappraise women’s agency from within their own cultural and religious frame of reference. Mahmood’s contribution, however, goes beyond the resignification of subordination as a possible site for agency. Mahmood complicates the picture of subordination through a rearticulation of “docility” as a path towards “mastery” (2015, p. 29). Docility is the “malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge—a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement” (Mahmood, 2015, p. 29). Such a reading blurs the boundaries between subordination and empowerment, revealing how liberal feminist preconceptions can crucially fail in capturing the nuances of complex religious and cultural situations. Mahmood’s elaborations on the complexity of practices of seeming subordination find a clear counterpart in the material for this study. We have seen, for instance, how Yael negotiated the fourth of the morning blessings prior to her transition (see section 4.2.1). As Yael’s account made clear, at the same time that she was performing the *mitzvah* aloud in its normative form—something that would fall within the logics of subordination—she was also subverting the meaning of that blessing with her inner voice—what would be interpreted as an act of resistance. In the case of Yonatan prior to his transition he was reciting both blessings, the one for men and the one for women (see section 4.2.1). Again, it could be argued that he engaged in consecutive practices of resistance and subordination, but that would be misguided. Even the blessing for women he recited—the alleged site of submission—was reinterpreted by him as meaning that his creation emphatically reflected God’s will but not his own sense of gender identity. My point here is that Yael’s and Yonatan’s practices cannot be neatly dissected in terms of

subordination and resistance. In the case of Yael, we encountered a relation of simultaneity between the two blessings she was reciting. Concerning Yonatan, his re-reading of the verse for women made it impossible to mark the boundary where subordination ended and resistance started. Instead of deploying a binary taxonomy, it would be more accurate to describe the ways they negotiated the fourth of the morning blessings as entanglement (see discussion of Barad's work below). In relation to that, it is worth adding that the ambivalence featured in the heading that summarized the first part of the results (see heading for section 4.2), was to a large extent a function of such entanglement. That is not to mean that none of the practices accounted by the participants could fit in the binary model of resistance/subordination. Beth, for instance, expressed an unambiguous joy and relief when she stopped donning *tefillin* which suggested a strong resistance to that practice (see the section "Other gendered religious practices" above). I am reluctant, though, to use such isolated instances in the material in an attempt to redeem the resistance/subordination binary. As Mahmood points out, the problem with those tropes are not that they are completely wrong, but rather that they are reductionist in a way that obscures key elements of the phenomena they purport to study (2015, p. 24).

Going back to Mahmood's (2015) elaboration of docility and mastery, she illustrates her argument through the example of a virtuoso pianist:

who submits herself to the often painful regime of disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability—the requisite agency—to play the instrument with mastery. (Mahmood 2015, p. 29)

The example of the virtuoso presents certain parallelism with the way I discussed Beth and Yiscah as role models (see section 4.3.1). In the latter case, the ability to frame their visibility as role models enhanced their agency within the Orthodox world. However, what emerged from their accounts was not Beth's and Yiscah's malleability to achieve mastery, but rather a commitment to observance and community life that contributed to raise their status and legitimacy, thus enabling them to "gently stretch the boundaries"—to use Ben's felicitous expression—without breaking them. In this sense, Beth and Yiscah's role would seem to align more closely with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (1972/1977). The problem with applying Bourdieu's concept here is that *habitus* is usually deployed in the context of a network of power relations in which different kinds of capital (social, cultural and economic) are symbolically mediated to advance the interests of the individual. In the case of Beth and Yiscah's role modeling, I am reluctant to apply such a reading since that would be tantamount to reducing their commitment to observance and community life to instrumental calculations, discounting in the process personal convictions, emotional attachments and issues of self-image as well as identity

that resist rationalization. Entanglement, once more, seems a much more suitable conceptualization.

Another of Mahmood's major contributions, besides decoupling agency from progressive politics and exploring the complex ways in which agency is exerted through seeming subordination, is to reveal other possible sites for agency beyond the resistance/subordination binary. Mahmood crucially draws attention to other forms of relating to norms (2015, p. 15). In her own words: "Norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, [...] but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways" (Mahmood, 2015, p. 22). Among the three last verbs in the sentence, Mahmood seems to favor 'inhabit' as the concept that subsumes the other two (2015, p. 15). Like in the case of *sharia*, the concept of 'inhabited norms' captures one of the fundamental aspects of *halakha*; namely, that religiosity is lived and expressed in every facet of life through embodied practices rather than just belief. In a way, Orthodoxy is a misnomer; Orthopraxy would be much more to the point. On top of the examples by Yael and Yonatan mentioned above, it would also be fitting here to recall how Moshe started to wear exclusively white shirts and black skirts on *shabbat*, as a way to still honor the *mitzvah* while infusing it with cues about his gender identity (see the section "Other gendered religious practices" above). That kind of bending of a gendered religious practice with a strong embodied component is an illustration of how it was inhabited by Moshe. The thing about bending is that it defies dichotomies; any attempt to map it in terms of resistance or subordination is doomed to failure. However, for the staunch advocate of those tropes it could still be argued that they are and have always been analytical categories and, in consequence, all the breast-beating about nuance, context and situation would have been misplaced. For such proponents, to understand resistance and subordination as exclusive categories would be erroneous since they would rather represent analytical constructions on each end of agency's spectrum in traditionalist religions. The claim here would be, of course, that the spectrum manages to capture the phenomena in its complexity. The examples reviewed by Yael, Yonatan and Moshe would fall then, according to such line of thought, in some sort of gray area between the poles.

There is no doubt that a move from hermetically sealed binaries to spectrums would signify major progress, but that would still not be enough. One of the main contributions of this study has been to show how for transgender Jews with an Orthodox background there was at least one more mode to enact agency in relation to gendered religious practices: affirmation. Whereas validation is a passive occurrence (one receives or is denied validation by third parties), affirmation falls fully within the field of agency. As we have seen in the section "Reversal stories: gendered religious practices and God" above, the fact that religious practice in Orthodox Judaism is significantly gendered opened the potential for such practices to provide a deep sense of validation (what I referred to as 'cosmic validation') in the post-transitional period of the

participants lives. That potential for validation was actualized by how participants affirmed their gender identities through those practices, as the accounts by Moshe (see the section “The search for a place in the Orthodox world” above), Belinda, Yiscah, Beth and Yonatan (see the section “Reversal stories: gendered religious practices and God above) amply illustrated. If we were to map previous theorizing attempts of agency into a transgender geography, it would become apparent that they only contemplated invalidating practices in which a resistance/subordination approach would make sense. Their blind spot was that they did not consider the validating potential of gendered religious practices for the reason that they took cisgender notions of gender for granted. The introduction of affirmation into the repertoire of agencies of gender subalterns (women–MTF and otherwise–sexual minorities and transgender<sup>280</sup>) in situated contexts of traditionalist religion poses a strong case to move away from conceptualizations in terms of binaries and spectrums. To create new, all-encompassing theoretical models in the shape of triangles or ternary configurations would just perpetuate the error. If we found a third mode for agency, who is to say that there is not a fourth, a fifth a twentieth? My project is not to revamp a taxonomy, but to move past it. To elevate ‘affirmation’ to a new category would again obscure the complex ways in which gendered religious practices such as *negiah* played out (see the section “Two qualifications: re-engaging on their own terms & grey areas” above). As Moshe’s case illustrated, *negiah* could serve both to validate and invalidate his gender identity. At face value, having one’s gender identity invalidated would seem to be the most undesirable outcome. The picture presented by Moshe, however, had greater complexity. In relation to his observant female friends, the fact that *negiah* invalidated his gender identity in their eyes was less important to Moshe than the possibilities that it opened to continue expressing physical affection with them. As Moshe put it, “I like hugs, I don’t care what their belief system is that allows them to hug me.” In that case, an invalidating resolution of a gendered religious practice opened rather than foreclosed the possibilities for agency.

The ways in which *negiah* bent pre-established notions of desirability suggest that common sense might not be the best compass to orientate ourselves at the intersections of gender and religion. That applies not only to the accounts of the participants themselves, but also to Orthodox Judaism. Both Orthodox Jews and outside observers would probably agree that the gender binary is one of the main organizing principles of Orthodox Judaism. The division of religious joys and labors between women and men has been increasingly contested by egalitarian agendas (Israel-Cohen, 2012), but it still remains one of the main pillars. It would seem, therefore, that in a traditionalist

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<sup>280</sup> Here transgender also includes MTF women. The reason is that MTF women can be discriminated on both counts, as women and as transgender.

religion such as Orthodox Judaism, non-binary gender identities would be utterly unlivable. Ben's case, however, illustrated the opposite (see section 4.4). The fact that certain sympathetic rabbis, within the confines of their interpretation of *halakha*, were able to carve some spaces for Ben on the men's side of the *mechitzah* without granting him full inclusion, enabled rather than foreclosed his ability to live a non-binary gender identity. That is far from saying that such situation is ideal or suitable for every transgender Jew—clearly it is not, but that is not the point either. What I am arguing for is that the same complexity and nuance that is granted to actors should also be extended to religions which, in the final analysis, are not abstract entities but communities enlivened by those same actors. The counterintuitive conclusion that I drew in Ben's case—that a non-binary stance which appeared more subversive than binarism in its premises, turned out to align more smoothly with the *halakha* in its implementation—is a cautionary tale for those scholars who presume that the enactments of religious life can be deduced from firmly established principles and common sense.

### 5.2.2 Fasten your seatbelts: sociology meets quantum physics

At this point, I feel that I can no longer postpone bringing Barad's work into the conversation. The repeated references to entanglement in the previous paragraphs demand an explanation. Doing so, however, will require nothing short of a radical shift of theoretical gears. In order to understand Barad's work, we will need to leave behind the familiar worldview of Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry and to start looking at the world through quantum physics. For the remainder of this study, I am asking the reader not acquainted with quantum physics to suspend their "belief in a world populated by independently existing things with determinate boundaries and properties that move around in a container called 'space' in step with a linear sequence of moments called 'time'" (Barad, 2012a, p. 43). As someone with no previous background in quantum physics, I am aware that making such a shift can feel disconcerting given how classical notions of "agency, causality, space, time, [and] matter" (Barad, 2012a, p. 46) are often ingrained in so-called commonsensical understandings of reality. For that reason, my intention is to begin by providing a summary of Barad's main points and then proceed with the discussion of the results in light of those.

Before I start, though, I would like to preemptively address the criticism of those who would consider it methodologically improper to engage in such a profound shift of theoretical perspective in the chapter before last of this study. My immediate response would be that doing so is in line with the inductive leanings of this study. Furthermore, the decision made during the early stages of this project to let theory take center stage *after* rather than *before* the results was precisely to allow for that kind of opening. Finally, it is worth considering

the tension between consistency and accountability when adherence to the former requires nothing short of concealing the traces of previous theoretical frameworks. If theories are what we claim them to be, then they are inextricably intertwined with the methods applied and the results achieved. To doctor those accounts, in an attempt to conceal the traces of no longer favored theoretical frameworks, would be problematic to say the least. Similarly, to continue using a theoretical framework that one has come to regard as flawed just for the sake of consistency would call into question any notion of intellectual integrity. It seems to me that the preferable course is not to erase the past but neither to let it dictate the future. With that I am not saying that coherence and consistency have no place in academia—they clearly do—but what seems adequate for articles and monographs by trained scholars might not always be appropriate for a report accounting for a training process typically extending over four years of a person's life.

Without further ado, I will now proceed with an introduction of Barad's work followed by a discussion of the results in light of the former. Concerning Barad's work, most of her claims appear repeatedly in different texts but for the sake of readability I just give one of the several possible references for each.

### **Agential realism**

Barad has been considered one of the leading feminist scholars in the emerging field of new materialism (Benavente, 2010). Philosophers Rosi Braidotti and Manuel DeLanda, independently from one another, coined the term 'new materialism' in the second half of the 1990s to refer to a cultural theory that critically deconstructs some of the key dualisms in modernist thought (nature/culture, matter/mind, human/nonhuman<sup>281</sup>) while at the same time focusing on questions of materiality and materialization (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 93). In that sense, the term 'new materialism' is closely linked to Donna Haraway's (2003) concept of "naturecultures" and Latour's (2005) concept of "collectives" (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 93).<sup>282</sup> Barad's highly innovative intervention in the field of new materialism is characterized by bridging the gap between the natural sciences and the social sciences & humanities. While grounded in Bohrian quantum physics, Barad's work rethinks and expands it through the insights drawn from poststructuralist, feminist and queer theories, thus also extending and reworking those theoretical bodies. That methodology, referred to by Barad as "diffractive readings," consists in:

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<sup>281</sup> Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (1992, p. 93) use the term "inhuman" but I changed it to nonhuman since, as we will see in due time, those concepts are not synonymous in Barad's work.

<sup>282</sup> To this list, I would add Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's (1980/1987) notion of "assemblages".

reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that there intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. (Barad, 2012c, p. 50)

Central to Barad's project is the claim that quantum physics does not apply exclusively to the description of particles and subatomic phenomena (e.g. atoms) but also to a macroscopic world (Barad, 2007, p. 85), thus making its insights relevant for social theory. "Agential realism" is the term chosen by Barad to refer to her theoretical approach as a whole (2007, pp. 132-185). In order to understand agential realism, we will need first to become acquainted with some of the tenets of Niels Bohr's<sup>283</sup> interpretation of quantum physics.<sup>284</sup> One key finding of the group of scientists led by Bohr and Werner Heisenberg<sup>285</sup> was that light could present particle or wave behavior depending on which apparatus was used for its measurement (Barad, 2007, p. 29). A similar pattern also applied to matter, since electrons could equally behave like particles or waves depending on which apparatus was used for their observation (Barad, 2007, p. 29). What is remarkable of such behavior is that waves and particles present incommensurable properties (i.e. belong to different ontological categories). While particles, for instance, cannot occupy the same point in space, waves do not take any space at all and can therefore overlap (Barad, 2007, p. 76). Whereas Heisenberg concluded from those experiments that an epistemological uncertainty lay at the root of our understanding of the world, Bohr took a bolder stance in interpreting the results as proof for a fundamental ontological indeterminacy. In other words, Bohr reached the conclusion that things "do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties" (Barad, 2003, p. 813), and it is the practice of measuring through specific apparatuses that enacts boundaries and properties.

From Bohr's conclusion, it follows that there is no such thing as independent objects. What we call independent objects actually arise as part of a phenomenon that Barad describes with the neologism "intra-action" (2007, pp. 132-185). Whereas interaction presupposes a relation between two previously

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<sup>283</sup> Niels Bohr (1885-1962) was a renowned Danish physicist and one of the fathers of quantum physics. He received the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1922. Although baptized as a Christian, Bohr was forced to flee into Sweden during the Nazi occupation of Denmark due to his mother's Jewish ancestry. Sources retrieved from: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Bohr.html> and [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/physics/laureates/1922/bohr-bio.html](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1922/bohr-bio.html).

<sup>284</sup> For a crash course on the topic, see Barad (2012b, pp. 59-68). Here I will just give a very brief summary of the main points, but for a fuller understanding the reader is advised to have a look at Barad's text. The text belongs to an open source book, freely accessible online at <http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/new-materialism>.

<sup>285</sup> Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) was a German physicist best known for the uncertainty principle. He was awarded the 1932 Nobel Prize for Physics. His involvement in the efforts to develop an atomic bomb for Nazi Germany during World War II has been the source of much debate and controversy (see Rose, 1998).



existing entities, intra-action describes a relation that is co-constitutive of its components (Barad, 2003, p. 812). It is precisely through intra-action that ontological indeterminacy is locally resolved through the co-constitution of boundaries and properties (Barad, 2003, p. 815). In the case of intra-action, entities do not precede their relations, on the contrary, they are *relata* which come into being through the relations themselves (Barad, 2003, p. 815). As the name itself suggests, intra-actions do not occur in a relation of exteriority to the world but as part of the world in its becoming. Intra-action, therefore, changes in radical ways how we think about causality (Barad, 2007, p. 33).

Also key to the understanding of intra-action are Barad's notions of "agential cut" (2012a, p. 32) and "agential separability" (2008, p. 326). In contrast to the Cartesian cut—the belief, following René Descartes, that subject and object are ontologically different entities—what agential cuts enact are local resolutions within phenomena (Barad, 2012a, p. 32). Those local resolutions are in fact a form of differentiation which allows to distinguish or separate, once the phenomenon has been resolved, its intra-acting components. As we can see, then, the components of a particular intra-action do not pre-exist their relation (they are co-constituted by it) but once the agential cut has been enacted, we can distinguish between them. The notions of agential cut and agential separability, however, are not a more sophisticated way to revert to a *de facto* Cartesian dualist ontology. Central here is the concept of entanglement, that is, how the same movement that enacts agential separability through exclusions and differentiation (resolving a photon as a particle and not a wave, for instance) also binds together the different intra-acting components. Following the previous example, the fact that a photon presents particle instead of wave properties is entangled with the apparatus used for its measurement (i.e. a different apparatus with the appropriate design would have resolved the photon as a wave).<sup>286</sup> As Barad (2012a, p. 32) puts it, intra-actions "cut things together-apart (as one movement)" both enacting entanglements as well as boundaries and exclusions. Entanglements problematize the notion of agency as "something that someone or something has" (Barad, 2007, p. 178). Agency only emerges in intra-action and for that reason it cannot be located in the so-called subject or object. In offering a theory of agency without agents—of agency as a verb rather than a noun or attribute that someone has—Barad is aware that her argument could be misinterpreted as suggesting that there is no such thing as power (2012c, p. 55). But in rejecting the notion of the subject in her theorization of agency, what Barad is trying to do away with is the concept of intentionality not power. For Barad, agency is a matter of ethicality rather than volition—in one word, responsibility—the ability to respond for the cuts we make, for the entangled Other, for the exclusions we enact (Barad,

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<sup>286</sup> I do not enter here into a description of the different apparatuses (two-slit experiments) used by Bohr and how their design with fixed or movable parts affected measurements. See Barad (2007, pp. 71-94) for details.

2010, p. 265). In that sense, agency means being alert and alive to the intra-activity of the world. For Barad, then, power is a matter of imbalances or, in my own reading, power is a refusal to take responsibility, to be in a position in which someone or something can afford to indulge in the illusion of autonomy. This argument, however, presents certain important tensions, not the least with the title of this study, to which I will attend below.<sup>287</sup>

In relation to the notion of the agential cut, it is also important to point out that intra-actions are open-ended but not random. Prior to its measurement, the properties of the photon are indeterminate, but that does not mean that everything is possible in terms of how the photon will be resolved. According to the current scientific understanding—and the current state of the art of measuring apparatuses—quanta must either present wave or particle properties. Bohr referred to that as the complementarity principle (Barad, 2007, p. 70). Although Barad seems to distance herself from Bohr's principle (2007, p. 70), arguably to avoid being trapped in a new set of categorical binaries that have an uncanny structural resemblance to other dualisms, she insists that intra-actions are “constraining but not determining” (2007, p. 177). In Barad's (2015a) words:

Not everything is possible given a particular intra-action but an infinite number of possibilities exist. (Barad, 2015a, p. 399)

As the quote above suggests, intra-actions have particular constraints but their resolution is not limited to a set of binaries mirroring the primordial wave-particle duality. Intra-actions are not resolved in a random way, as if anything and everything would be possible, but the range of what is possible is infinite.<sup>288</sup>

Given the materialist emphasis of Barad's work, another important question is how matter comes to matter, that is, how the world is constantly in the making through iterative intra-actions. That means, among other things, that intra-actions leave traces and do not happen in a void. Rather, intra-actions become enfolded or sedimented into the fabric of the world, a process that Barad describes as “memory” (2014, p. 182). Intra-actions leave marks on bodies, not unlike the marks left by photons on a plate in the process of being instantiated as wave or particle-like entities. Those marks, a physical record of the world's intra-activity, provide the conditions for objectivity and accountability (Barad, 2007, p. 52). From that, however, it does not follow that intra-actions take place in linear time in a container called space. Rather, space time and matter form one indissoluble unit (“spacetime-mattering” in Barad's (2007, p. 179) terminology). As the ill-named quantum eraser experiment has

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<sup>287</sup> See the section ‘The entanglements of gender and religion.’

<sup>288</sup> A mathematical example might provide some clarity here. The amount of natural numbers divisible by 2 is infinite, but that clearly does not include all natural numbers. There are constraints to which numbers fit the description, but the figure of possible numbers is infinite.

shown (see chapter 7 in Barad, 2007, for details), the advances in laser technology have made it possible to observe photons at the very moment in which they are resolved as either presenting wave or particle properties. The act of observation, as Bohr predicted, makes that the photon behaves like a particle but if the data containing those observations is deleted, the marks created by the impact of the photons change from a particle to a wave pattern. What that means is that the ontology of the photon can be retroactively changed. That is however not a form of erasure since the wave pattern that emerges contains faint traces—the ghostlike presence, if you like—of the previous particle pattern (Barad, 2010). Intra-actions cannot be erased, they are enfolded into the fabric of the world, but that enfoldment is a function of the marks on bodies, not of a time that does not exist independently of matter and space.

Finally, in her most recent writings Barad (2012c; 2015a; 2015b) has been thinking about quantum field theory (QFT) and its implications for theorizing the void. In that process, Barad has started to explore the notion of the inhuman as a property of the void that can help us expand our understanding of the human and nonhuman, both aspects of worldliness. With this I just wanted to make a final note on Barad's current interests, without dwelling on them in any detail. Given that Barad's elaboration of QFT is still a work in progress (with a book on the topic already announced) in the following pages I will just make passing references.

### *Poststructuralist, feminist and queer theories*

Although Barad's agential realism is nurtured both by the insights from quantum physics and poststructuralist, feminist and queer theories, in the previous section I have focused mostly on the quantum physics side of the argument. In this section I intend to make explicit a few important contributions of poststructuralist, feminist and queer theories that informed the previous explanation. Given the focus and scope of this study, I will not look into the work of the theorists that have influenced Barad's work. My aim here is only to point to those other sources. I will then conclude the introduction to Barad's work by providing some illustrations of agential realism through concrete examples. In this way, I hope the argument will become increasingly clear as well as approachable from a sociological perspective.

For starters, it is important to mention that agential realism distances itself from classical realism, Kantian transcendentalism and linguistic monism (Barad, 1998, p. 104). In doing so, though, Barad is not interested in introducing a new materialist or agential realist 'turn' in the sense of "turning away from" or "moving beyond" (Barad, 2012d, p. 12). Rather, Barad's approach consists in acknowledging her indebtedness to previous theories, deconstructing those aspects that she finds wanting while also building on those insights that keep all of their relevance (2012d, pp. 14-16). In that spirit, Barad has written about the linguistic turn and its shortcomings in taking matter seriously (2003, p. 801). In particular, Barad argues that feminist and queer studies have

struggled to come to terms with the “weightiness of the world” (2003, p. 827). While part of the critical and emancipatory agendas of feminist and queer studies has been to reclaim matter from its subordinated status in relation to mind, the linguistic turn embraced by those disciplines has undermined that project. At the same time, Barad has productively built on Butler’s (1990; 1993) notion of performativity through iterative citationality by developing her own concept of iterative intra-activity (1998, p. 106). As we have seen in the previous section, intra-actions are enfolded into the fabric of the world and it is through their iteration that spacetime-mattering can be continuously re-worked and reconfigured. Barad engages in a similar exercise of “dis/continuity” (neither continuous nor discontinuous, acknowledging indebtedness while allowing for creativity) in her rethinking of Bohr’s concept of apparatus (2012d, p. 16). As I have discussed in the previous section, the concept of apparatus is central to Barad’s account of agential realism. Barad, however, considers that Bohr’s understanding of the apparatus is undertheorized (2012d, p. 11). According to Barad, Bohr did not define the outer boundaries of apparatuses, nor what apparatuses can be (1998, pp. 98-103). For that purpose, Barad turns to Foucault (1975/1995) and recasts Bohr’s notion of apparatus as larger material-discursive practices (1998, pp. 98-103).

A further example of how Barad diffractively reads insights from poststructuralist theory into quantum physics (2010, p. 260), is her claim that the quantum eraser experiment (see previous section) provides empirical evidence for Derrida’s (1993) “*hauntology*,” a term aptly described by the Wikipedia entry of the same name as:

a portmanteau of *haunting* and *ontology* [...] refers to a state of temporal, historical, and ontological disjunction in which presence is replaced by a deferred non-origin, represented by “the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive.”<sup>289</sup>

Butler, Foucault and Derrida are just a few of the thinkers to which Barad is indebted. Other major influences in Barad’s work have been the writings of Haraway and the philosopher of science Joseph Rouse. Although it would be beyond the scope of this study to trace all its intellectual influences, the previous discussion has hopefully given the reader not familiar with Barad’s work a taste of her theoretical project straddling the gap between the natural sciences and the social sciences & humanities. In the following section I will provide a few examples of how agential realism has been productively put to work in the study of empirical cases.

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<sup>289</sup> The citation in quotation marks is taken from the literary review in *The Guardian* “Hauntology: A not-so-new critical manifestation” from June 17, 2011, retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/17/hauntology-critical>. The Wikipedia entry was retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hauntology>.

Barad's work is populated by a host of creatures—including *inter alia* brittlestars, dinoflagellates, lightning bolts, frog embryos and academics—that illustrate in their embodied intra-actions the workings of agential realism. Among those creatures, once referred to by Barad as her "queer co-workers" (2012a, pp. 29, 33), I will focus on the first two. The idea is not that agential realism is limited to those creatures but rather that it applies to all intra-actions, human and nonhuman, that make our world. The following examples are conceived as "living testimonies" (Barad, 2007, p. 380), meant as thinking aides in the process of making the shift towards agential realism.

In the case of brittlestars, Barad discusses how the view of the scientific community concerning those organisms radically changed (2007, pp. 369-384). Once regarded as "brainless and eyeless creatures" (Barad, 2007, p. 369), new studies showed that brittlestars were complex beings with a skeleton consisting of thousands of crystals which collectively functioned like a sophisticated visual system (Barad, 2007, p. 369-370). As a reporter in the *New York Times* put it, "Eyeless creature turns out to be all eyes."<sup>291</sup> The brittlestar is a being of embodied cognition that challenges Cartesian dualisms. In Barad's words:

[T]he brittlestar does not have a lens serving as the line of separation, the mediator between the mind of the knowing subject and the materiality of the outside world. [...] The brittlestar is a living, breathing, metamorphosing optical system. For a brittlestar, being and knowing, materiality and intelligibility, substance and form, entail one another. Its morphology—its intertwined skeletal and diffuse nervous systems, its very structure and form—entails the visualizing system that it is. This is an animal without a brain. There is no *res cogitans* agonizing about the postulated gap (of its own making) between itself and *res extensa*. There is no optics of mediation, no noumena-phenomena distinction, no question of representation. (Barad, 2007, p. 375)

The brittlestar cannot indulge in the illusion of complete separation, in the belief that its true self is neatly demarcated and removed from the very materiality that makes it possible. The opposite is true, "[k]nowing is a distributed practice that includes the larger material arrangement" (Barad, 2007, p. 379). Furthermore, as Barad points out, brittlestars have the capacity to break one of their body parts if need be (hence their name) (2007, p. 265). That strategy can be used to escape from a predator but also to reproduce, since brittlestars can regrow body parts as well as develop into full blown creatures from previously jettisoned limbs. Barad's question then, is, are broken limbs part of

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<sup>290</sup> A word of thanks goes to Samuel Douglas, at the department of linguistics and philology at Uppsala University, for his help with the Latin.

<sup>291</sup> Article referred to by Barad (2007, p. 369). The article was published on September 4, 2001, retrieved from: [http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/04/science/eyeless-creature-turns-out-to-be-all-eyes.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/04/science/eyeless-creature-turns-out-to-be-all-eyes.html?_r=0).

the environment or rather organisms in their own right? (2007, p. 377). The brittlestar's indeterminacy destabilizes the usual boundaries between mind and body, self and other, knowing and being, organic and inorganic. If we think along the lines of agential realism, though, we can overcome the deadlock imposed by the deployment of those categories. Brittlestars are not *in* the ocean but *of* the ocean, they intra-act with their environment. Barad goes as far as claiming that the brittlestar's "boundary-drawing practices by which it differentiates itself from the environment with which it intra-acts and by which it makes sense of its world" are a form of material-discursive practices (2007, p. 375). Furthermore, the differentiation between self and other is not fixed and already given but continuously reworked through new agential cuts, in such a way that limbs can at times be resolved as belonging to the environment or as full-fledged organisms. As we see, each of those resolutions of the brittlestar's intra-actions involves exclusions. The examples mentioned above concerning reproduction and flight from predators remind us also that the different ways brittlestars respond matter. There are life and death stakes in how brittlestars intra-act with their environment (Barad, 2007, p. 380). Intra-actions are therefore entwined with questions of responsibility, of how matter comes to matter, what responses are enacted and at which cost.<sup>292</sup>

The case of the second "living testimony" (Barad, 2007, p. 380) involves a dinoflagellate known as *Pfiesteria piscicida*. In her discussion of *Pfiesteria*, Barad builds on the work of one of her former students, Astrid Schrader, who has published on the subject (Schrader, 2010). Those dinoflagellates with a sinister Latin name (*piscicida* stands for 'fish killer') made big news in the 1990s when they were blamed for the death of scores of fish in the east coast of the USA (Barad, 2012a, p. 37). Something remarkable about those dinoflagellates is that after more than two decades of research, scientists have not been able to identify their basic characteristics (Barad, 2012a, p. 37). The reason is that *Pfiesteria* develop differently in different environments. When *Pfiesteria* grow in the absence of fish, they prey on algae and cannot be made to attack fish later on. However, when *Pfiesteria* grow surrounded by fish they earn their much dreaded name *piscicida*. As a result, Schrader argues that the species being of *Pfiesteria* is actually indeterminate (Barad, 2012a, p. 37). The necessary conclusion is that *Pfiesteria* cannot be grasped in isolation, they are inseparable from their environment both in time and space. Or, as Schrader (2010) puts it:

[T]he questions "who *Pfiesteria piscicida* are" and "what *toxic Pfiesteria* do" are inseparably entangled. *Pfiesteria*'s beings and doings are complementary in the Bohrian sense, that is, mutually exclusive and simultaneously necessary to assess *Pfiesteria* as fish killers. (Schrader, 2010, p. 283)

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<sup>292</sup> In terms of exclusions as well as the markings of particular bodies.

Brittlestars and *Pfiesteria* confound Cartesian dualisms still operative in sociological thinking such as subject/object and agency/structure. Agential realism provides a theoretical framework to account for such complex phenomena without falling back into the same categorical traps. For the purposes of this study, I am particularly interested in the concept of entanglement, which is consubstantial with the concept of agential separability (as we have seen, agential cuts are those that cut things together-apart, in one move; Barad, 2012a, p. 32). Entanglements and boundaries are enacted as part of one and the same intra-action, but I have chosen to focus on the former to better rebut extant notions of separateness and autonomy. We have seen how brittlestars are entangled with their environment, repeatedly redrawing the boundaries between self and other, but also how their very identity—their being—was entangled with their knowing. Similarly, *Pfiesteria* could not be abstracted from their environment, which defined in profound ways if those dinoflagellates were harmless or toxic for fish, not to mention the impact of those entanglements on the multibillion dollar fishing industry. For *Pfiesteria*, being and doing, identity and action, were entangled in ways that cannot be described as interaction but rather as intra-action. In the next section I hope to put those insights to work in my diffractive reading of Barad's agential realism and the results of this study.

### **The entanglements of gender and religion**

Before I begin, I would like to make clear that my purpose here is not to use Barad's work as a metaphor or as a source of inspiration. My aim is rather to take Barad's claim seriously that agential realism is equally appropriate to describe microscopic as well as macroscopic phenomena, including the social world (Barad, 2011, p. 447). That does not mean that questions of scale are a moot point, but before they are deployed it is necessary to attend to the ways in which topological boundaries are created and stabilized (Barad, 2007, p. 244; Barad, 2012a, p. 51). Fortunately, my attempt to diffractively read the social world (Barad, 2001) and gender issues (Barad, 2014; 2015a) through agential realism has several precedents in Barad's work itself. In a recent paper, for instance, Barad diffractively reads Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) writings on gender suggesting that the indeterminacy of electrons (both particles and waves, as well as neither of those) is akin to the genderqueerness of Anzaldúa's semi-autobiographical persona (2014, p. 173). In a similar vein, Barad (2015a) has recently offered a diffractive reading of a poem by transgender activist and scholar Susan Stryker (1994), thus creating an opening to discuss transgender politics through an agential realist account. In both those instances, Barad is explicit about her embracing of a genderqueer politics. In a previous paper, Barad went as far as equating agential intra-activity with queer performativity (2012a, p. 33). Such a view is at odds with the understanding of gender espoused by a majority of the participants in this study. I will attend to that and other discrepancies between the subject matter of this

study and Barad's work later in this section. For the time being, I will explore the areas of "constructive interference" (Barad, 2007, p. 77) in which agential realism offers productive ways to interpret the results.

For starters, I would like to distance myself from a concept that was central to my first research question and that informed much of my analysis and results. I am referring to the concept of intersection, which is rooted in black feminism (see section 1.4). From the beginning, I was aware that intersectional theory does not postulate an additive approach in which a handful of categories follow different trajectories which intersect here and there. The point with intersectionality has been that categories of analysis are not independent but "enmeshed and constructed by each other" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 205). However, as Barad has argued, intersectionality has frequently been misappropriated and used in ways that are detached from its larger body of work in black feminism, thus falling into an "Euclideanization pathology" that regards gender, race, class, etc. as separate characteristics which are only relevant to particular bodies (gender for women, race for people of color, class for workers, etc.) (2001, p. 98). Although I believe that my use of the concept of intersection has avoided those pitfalls, the origins of the term in geometry haunt it in inextricable ways. For that reason, I rather distance myself from the concept of intersection and, in line with Barad's work, use the concept of entanglement, which not only sparks the desired associations but also it is theorized within an agential realist account that resonates with the results of this study. Entanglement is a suitable description for the ways in which gender and religion intra-acted in the lives of the participants. Gender and religion could not be reduced to each other but neither fully separated. In using the concept of entanglement, though, I do not want to imply that the analysis is completed by virtue of invoking that term. Neither is my intention to suggest that once we cease in the attempt to construct a taxonomy (see section 5.2.1) precision is no longer possible and all becomes vague and muddled. Rather, the point is to describe entanglements in detail, how matter and meaning were co-constituted, how the participants and their environments intra-acted in specific ways, which bodies were marked and by what or whom, what exclusions were enacted and what new possibilities were materialized and reconfigured. It is through such a meticulous process of description and accountability that entanglements are mapped as part of the "topological dynamics" of intra-activity (Barad, 2001, p. 98). Even if my engagement with agential realism comes *a posteriori* in the dissertation's outline, I would argue that a similar project to trace the nuanced and complex ways in which gender and religion were entangled in the accounts of the participants infuses the analysis & results chapter.

Perusing through the previous chapter, the first observation that comes to mind is how Orthodox Judaism in general and its religious practices in particular are apparatuses (i.e. material-discursive practices) which, among other things, enact a particular cut called gender. That is what I previously referred



to as the (mis)gendering aspects of religious practice (see section 4.2). As in the case of Bohr's experiments, it seems that the ways those practices resolved gender were binary and mutually exclusive, as either female or male. That, however, did not necessarily reflect an ontological commitment on the part of *chazal* (or at the very least the lack of a minority opinion including non-binary understandings of gender) as the discussion in section 4.4.6 has made clear. In the experience of most participants,<sup>293</sup> though, the subtleties of Talmudic debates did not trickle down to the daily life of their communities, which operated according to an exclusive binary logic. In that context, specific religious practices (particularly dressing up for *shabbat* among FTMs and the morning blessings among MTFs) worked as apparatuses for the imprinting of gender (it is worth mentioning here that lab measurements are neither passive nor neutral). It is remarkable how the participants' sense of gender identity showed an extraordinary resilience to those repeated intra-actions, something that I interpret as indicative of the failings of social constructionism to account for transgender subjectivities (see section 6.3). That resilience seems closely related to Barad's notion of memory, that is, the process by which intra-actions become sedimented and enfolded into the fabric of the world (Barad, 2014, p. 182). To all intents and purposes, the core of the participants' gender identity seemed to be rooted in a different set of intra-actions (call them organic matter/biology, divine providence or a combination of different nonsocial factors) which had left their marks on their bodies and which, following Barad, could not be erased or superseded by the intra-actions brought about by particular gendered religious practices. That does not mean that those religious practices were inconsequential; on the contrary. Their cuts mattered a great deal to the extent that they abetted gender dysphoria. Here it seems relevant to read the following quote from Barad (1998) in light of the previous discussion:

Perhaps the most immediate question is whether Butler's notion of materialization is robust enough to extend her theory to considerations beyond the realm of the human body. [...] Does it adequately account for the processes by which human bodies materialize as sexed? Could a physicist's understanding of matter and scientific practices usefully intervene in feminist reconceptualizations of materiality so that it becomes possible to understand not only how bodily contours are constituted through psychic processes, but how even the very atoms that make up the biological body come to matter, and more generally how *matter makes itself felt*?<sup>294</sup> (Barad, 1998, pp. 105-106)

As Barad has repeatedly stated, "materiality is not a passive blank surface awaiting the imprint of culture or history" (2008, p. 325). Matter makes itself felt and it is tempting to interpret the resilience of the participants' gender identities as connected to matter's intra-active agency, to the ways in which

<sup>293</sup> Ben, and to a certain extent Beth, Dov and Yiscah, are the most obvious exceptions here.

<sup>294</sup> My emphasis.

“the world kicks back” (Barad, 1998, p. 112). In doing that interpretation, I agree with Barad that it is crucial to come to terms with materiality without lapsing back into gender essentialisms (1998, p. 106). Serano’s holistic model of gender seems able of doing precisely that and for that reason I consider it more accurate and inclusive than a genderqueer account (see section 6.3.1 for details on Serano’s model) (2013, p. 138-168). Furthermore, Serano’s (2013) model seems to be predicated on the very principle of “constraining but not determining” (Barad, 2007, p. 177) relations that singles out intra-actions. Finally, while I agree with Barad that it takes political courage to live as genderqueer, I would argue that living as transsexual demands no less (2014, p. 177). As Serano (2013) puts it through her own experiences:

When I come out as transsexual to straight mainstream folks, I have never once had someone say, “Thank you Julia for reinforcing our gender binary! You’re such an outstanding gendered citizen, thank you for being you!” In fact, quite the opposite happens: People often become bothered, or confused, or disturbed. (Serano, 2013, p. 121)

### *Back to agency*

Similar to what I have carried out in the previous section, I would claim that it is possible to reformulate the whole chapter 4 through an agential realist account. My main purpose here, though, is not to revise the results through a more compelling framework but to push forward the theoretical discussion of agency started in section 5.2 through the insights drawn from agential realism. In my previous discussion of Mahmood’s (2005) work (see section 5.2.1), I made the point that the ways several participants negotiated particular gendered religious practices could not be mapped into the binary resistance/subordination understood as the two primary modes of agency. The cases I discussed of Yael and Yonatan in relation to the recitation of the fourth morning blessing prior to their transitions suggested that resistance and subordination were mutually enfolded. Similarly, I argued that to read Yiscah’s and Beth’s role modeling as *habitus* would erase the ways in which instrumental calculations are entangled with personal convictions, emotional attachments and issues of self-image as well as identity. Furthermore, the discussion of affirmation as a possible third mode of agency questioned not only the accuracy of the binary resistance/subordination model but also the desirability of taxonomies. While boundaries and properties—following Barad—are locally enacted through intra-actions and are susceptible to unexpected reconfigurations, taxonomies reify those same boundaries and properties. My point, therefore, is that mutually exclusive binaries such as secular/religious, active/passive and resistance/subordination are actually instantiations of the entanglement-quality of all phenomena. The cases I just mentioned involving the participants had the virtue of making those entanglements readily apparent, whereas in other cases they would be hidden by the exclusions enacted and therefore

harder to trace. As Barad's (2014) writings on the work of Anzaldúa (1987) suggest, one of the features of non-heteronormative genders seems to be their ability to bridge the chasm between worlds of female and male experience, inhabiting biographies which have developed in a broader register of what we call being human. It is in that broader register that entanglements become readily apparent in this study since resistance, subordination and affirmation are bound with a variety of inheritances and attachments including, but not limited to, gender assignment at birth, love of Judaism and transition.

As careful readers have probably realized, the way agency was conceptualized in the analysis & results chapter, as well as in the previous paragraph, seems at odds with Barad's account. An agential realist critique of my concept of agency would point out that it remains attached to a humanist orbit and, therefore, to a foundational separation between subject and object. It is my understanding that the question of the participants' agency is inseparable from the question of intentionality. The title of this study (*According to whose will*) is not only a reference to the fourth morning blessing for women and the gendering account it inscribes according to which it is God who makes people in a particular gender. It is equally relevant that the title refers to some of the turning points in the biographies of the participants. Transition is probably the epitome of those turning points and, in the absence of a supportive *psak*, the question of 'according to whose will shall I or shall I not transition' was of central importance for those participants who still felt an attachment to Orthodox Judaism. Finally, the concept of *kavanah*, with deep roots in Jewish religious thought, suggests that questions of intentionality are not intrinsically linked to Cartesian or modernist assumptions. So what are we supposed to do with all of that? Let's try to trace some of the entanglements.

#### *Agency, intentionality, responsibility*

In Barad's work, the question of intentionality is bound up with responsibility, as the following quote illustrates:

In my agential realist account of mattering, responsibility is not an obligation that the subject chooses, but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness. Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world's ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. (Barad, 2012b, p. 81)

Reading the quote above, I would argue that Barad's conceptualization blurs the boundaries between intentionality, choice and control. Furthermore, if we disentangle intentionality from the other two concepts we may agree that it is not always necessarily bound with matters of calculation but that it can also enable personal and political imaginations. It is in that latter sense that I would use it in relation to the participants. Intentionality, as I conceive it, is not the belief that the world is endlessly malleable at will or that there are a number

of clearly defined choices available for consumption. Rather, the way I understand intentionality suggests that the world has the capacity to respond when summoned, that calls for change, healing and justice do not just fade into a cooling, indifferent universe. That is not to say that intentionality is grounded in an autonomous subject. Intentionality must be understood within conditions of agential separability, in the sense that intra-actions are prior to and formative of the subject and thus also of intentionality. But questions of origin are not equal to questions of substance. In a similar way, to say that something is constructed is not to say that something is unreal, the claim that intentionality is not grounded in a metaphysical autonomous subject does not render intentionality a figment of the mind.

There is a danger that the previous discussion revolves mostly around semantics since Barad (2007; 2010) has also written extensively on the importance of responsibility (as ability to respond) and justice. However, given the centrality of matters of intention in this study, not the least in its very title, I thought it was important to address those concerns. That, of course, is not just a philosophical digression but it dovetails with the different conceptualizations of agency which I mentioned before. When I say that resistance, subordination and affirmation are different modes of agency enacted by the participants I do not intend to reify agency as an attribute that the participants had in abstraction by virtue of being autonomous subjects. Resistance and subordination were entangled in such a way that makes a taxonomic approach untenable. Such notion of entanglement is inherently irreconcilable with any attempt to restore the autonomous subject. Affirmation seems to pose a greater challenge, but I do not believe it to be insurmountable. I have no problem in accepting the claim that affirmation implies the existence of someone or something who affirms, but in conditions of agential separability that should not be an issue. To put it in the starkest terms possible, the problem here is the metaphysics of autonomy rather than the agentially separated entity that we usually call 'subject'.<sup>295</sup> I would argue that this elucidation is necessary in order to find a language that does not reify the same old Cartesian dualisms, from the back door as it were, at the same time that it resonates with the world as experienced by the participants. This last point is particularly important since considerations regarding the human and the nonhuman should not only include the inhuman (Barad, 2012c; 2015a; 2015b), but also the dehuman (see Serano, 2013, p. 136), that is, the ways in which transgender subjectivities have historically been erased or explained away, not the least by scholars from Garfinkel to Butler (Namaste, 2000).<sup>296</sup> Furthermore, a sensitivity towards the

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<sup>295</sup> In a similar vein, when it comes to differentiation in conditions of agential separability the problem are not boundaries, but their reification, the claim that they are ontologically fixed.

<sup>296</sup> Although in the context of this study I focus on the case of transgender, this call against the erasure of subjectivities is extensible to any disenfranchised collective which, in an extractionist tradition of doing research, would include any 'informants' (see section 2.7).

dehumanizing potential of research and other practices acts as a powerful anchor to prevent posthumanism from drifting towards anti-humanist positions<sup>297</sup> (see section 6.3).

A good example of how intentionality does not preclude the open-endedness of intra-actions and the ways in which differentiation is enacted are the cases of how *negiah* played out during the post-transitional period (see the section “Two qualifications: re-engaging on their own terms & grey areas” above). The account provided by Moshe suggested that in the enactment of *negiah* the gender he was assigned, *halakhic* or otherwise, was reconfigured by different intra-actions bringing to bear different entanglements, in such a way that the outcome of a particular situation involving *negiah* could not be predicted in advance. Furthermore, both the enactment of being correctly gendered and being misgendered through *negiah* opened its own set of constraints and possibilities (as illustrated by the fact that misgendering enabled Moshe to show physical affection towards his observant female friends). In a similar way, Ben reported how his ability to be counted as a man shifted in one and the same gendered religious practice depending on the number of men needed for the recitation of *zimun*. Like with the wave-particle duality, the *halakhic* import of Ben’s gender depended on the apparatus that was enacted. Prior to any ‘measurement’ by a gendered religious practice, Ben’s *halakhic* gender was indeterminate and the indeterminacy was only locally and temporarily resolved in intra-action with those gendered religious practices. This could also happen in a relation of simultaneity, allowing Ben to occupy two different positions at the same time, as his inclusion among men (praying and standing close to the Torah) and among women (not counting in the minyan) showed (see section 4.4.4). As with the case of the brittlestar, Ben’s very identity was open to new cuts in intra-action with his environment. Different religious practices, or even different performances within the same religious practice as with the recitation of *zimun*, enacted particular cuts which resolved his *halakhic* gender as male or female and although he was not able to jettison one of his limbs like a brittlestar, he had another seeming superpower: to occupy two different positions at once.

### *Transitioning as disentanglement*

The previous discussion on Barad’s notion of entanglement and its theoretical implications for the conceptualization of agency in this study, leaves open the question whether disentanglements are possible. The notion of constraining but not determining material-discursive practices, seems to pave the way for such considerations. In the context of this study, the fact that certain gendered

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<sup>297</sup> In keeping with my previous comment regarding transgender erasures, I believe that the line with anti-humanist positions is crossed when human subjectivity is denied any cogency. Barad’s ongoing preoccupation with ethics, responsibility and justice places her work in an intellectual landscape far removed from anti-humanism and, yet, I would claim that her critique of intentionality is vulnerable to anti-humanist misinterpretation.

religious practices were a recurrent site of gender negotiations (most notably the morning blessings for MTFs and dressing up for *shabbat* for FTMs) suggests that they instantiated particular constraints without precluding the participants' possibilities to enact different entangled attachments such as their commitment to *halakha* and the expression of their gender identities. I would therefore argue that the enactment of entanglements also opens for the possibility of enacting disentanglements. As the results illustrated, a great deal of the work with transitioning without giving up on Orthodox Judaism was to figure out how to disentangle some of the knots created by material-discursive practices in general and gendered religious practices in particular. Although I consider entanglement an existential condition, resulting from the co-constitutive dynamics of reality, there are certain entanglements that can lead to strangulation or dismemberment.<sup>298</sup> Transitioning was a way to disentangle some of those knots, by aligning gender expression with gender identity, and enacting new possibilities, such as the potential for gendered religious practices to become gender affirmative.

Barad (1998; 2010; 2015a) does not explicitly mention the possibility of disentanglement but makes numerous references to the intra-active potential for reworking and reconfiguring reality (Barad, 1998; 2010; 2015a). Those reworkings can take the form of "subversion, resistance, opposition and revolution" (Barad, 1998, p. 116) as well as "the changes in practices enacted by enfolding the material instantiation of subversive resignifications" (Barad, 1998, p. 117). The latter resonates with the ways in which participants negotiated particular gendered religious practices, but it remains in the defensive mode of resistance and disruption whereas my understanding of disentanglement is much more assertive and transformative. Much closer to the subject of this study, Barad referred to gender transition as "not necessarily a matter of discovering a past that was already there or remaking a past through the lens of the present but a reconfiguring" (2015a, p. 422, footnote 64). That brings to the fore an important element of disentanglement, which should not be confused with an erasure of the past. As the quantum eraser experiment has shown,<sup>299</sup> the past can be reconfigured but not fully erased since it always leaves particular marks on bodies (Barad, 2010, p. 266). As Barad (2010) has written:

There can never be complete redemption, but spacetime-matter can be productively reconfigured, as im/possibilities are reworked. Reconfigurings don't erase marks on bodies—the sedimenting material effects of these very reconfigurings—memories/re-member-ings—are written into the flesh of the world. (Barad, 2010, p. 266)

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<sup>298</sup> The latter is an option that, except for brittlestars, earthworms and a few other wondrous creatures, usually has fatal consequences.

<sup>299</sup> See the section 'Agential realism' above for details.

The disentanglement of transition is certainly not complete redemption, neither absolute erasure. Top and bottom surgeries, which many transgender consider an indispensable part of their transitions, are particular intra-actions meant to enact disentanglement but they do not fully erase previous bodies, as the presence of scars and other lasting body marks indicate. At the same time, my conceptualization of disentanglement acknowledges that there are unlivable entanglements, that for some among us “memories/re-member-ings” (Barad, 2010, p. 266) can fatally take the form of strangulation or dismemberment. Under such circumstances, the potential to enact disentanglements, partial as they may be, becomes a matter of life and death for transgender politics.

### **Concluding remarks**

In the previous sections I have attempted to provide an introduction to the work of new materialist feminist scholar Karen Barad. As I have mentioned, Barad’s work builds on insights drawn from Bohr’s interpretation of quantum physics as well as poststructuralist, feminist and queer theories. Of particular relevance for her theoretical approach, known as agential realism, is Bohr’s interpretation of the wave-particle duality as providing proof for ontological indeterminacy.

Concerning agential realism, I have explained its core idea of intra-action (i.e. the claim that entities do not pre-exist their interaction but are rather co-constituted as such through relation) as well as the accompanying concepts of agential cut, agential separability and entanglement. I have then proceeded to discuss the results of this study through an agential realist account, paying particular attention to the concept of entanglement. In that spirit, I have distanced myself from my previous use of the concept of ‘intersection’ and I have argued to reframe it as entanglement. My theoretical discussion of entanglement through examples from the analysis & results chapter has led me to ponder questions of agency, intentionality and responsibility. In contrast to Barad, I have claimed that the concept of intentionality is not only compatible with an agential realist account but it is also important for the articulation of a transgender politics. In a similar vein, I have attempted to further develop agential realism by suggesting the notion of disentanglement and offering gender transition as an example.

## **5.3 Question 2: co-theorizing religious change**

In this section I seek to expand the previous discussion from considerations of agency and its entanglements to matters of religious change. In the course of this section I will attempt to relate Barad’s conceptual toolbox to the participants’ as well as my own theories of religious change in the Orthodox world. In doing so, I intend to follow through on the methodological promise of including the participants as co-theorizers. Such a move is motivated by a desire

to democratize the research process, but also by the conviction that participants themselves are often the most capable in identifying and articulating the larger trends and factors that impinge on their situation.

For starters, it is important to stress that this section does not aim at providing an empirically grounded account of religious change in Orthodox communities in relation to transgender issues. That would require a longitudinal study involving several communities and the inclusion in the group of participants of not only transgender Jews but also relatives, rabbis and other community members. A project of such ambition was clearly beyond my scope. The value of the following discussion, therefore, is to offer different theoretical models and perspectives for how religious change might be taking place on the ground. It is also important to take into account that the amount of the material to elaborate on this second question was significantly less than the material available for the first question (see section 5.2). As a result, my response here is more tentative and less extensive than my discussion on the first question.

As I mentioned above, my purpose is to fulfil my methodological promise of including the participants as co-theorizers as well as to suggest new avenues in the conceptualization of religious change. Before I attend to that, though, I will provide a very brief sample of some of the models suggested by other scholars to account for religious change in the Orthodox world.

### 5.3.1 Previous research on religious change in Orthodox contexts

The topic of religious change in the Orthodox world is certainly not new. In this introductory section I would like to provide three alternative models offered by other scholars. Lynn Davidman (1990), for instance, described the responses to modernity of a Modern Orthodox group and a *Chabad* community as accommodation and resistance, respectively. Although Davidman may have succeeded in capturing the adaptable ethos of a particular Modern Orthodox group, the embrace of the internet by *Chabad* as a means to reach out to unaffiliated Jews (Golan & Stadler 2016), problematizes Davidman's claim concerning the group's alleged resistance to modernity, as well as the ways in which modernity is construed (Poveda, 2014). Furthermore, Davidman's taxonomy is reminiscent of the binary models discussed in section 5.2 devoted to religious women's agency. As those models, it privileges the analytical neatness of categories and taxonomies over the messier and arduous task of tracing the multiple entanglements of religious phenomena.

Susan Sered (1997) also deploys a binary model to explain the role of women in religious change among Orthodox communities in Israel. Drawing on the work of social anthropologist Max Gluckman (1955), Sered distinguishes between two different attempts at religious change: rebellion and revolution. According to Sered (1997, pp. 2-3), the main difference between rebellion and revolution is that the former aims at reforming certain aspects



without changing the outlook of that particular religion whereas the latter attempts to introduce deep changes in the structures and institutions. Following her argument, proponents of religious change have a vested interest in presenting themselves as rebels while their detractors will tend to see them as revolutionaries. According to Sered, the fact that a particular attempt at religious change comes across as the one or the other has to do with three factors: 1) the symbolic value of the issue under dispute; 2) the social locations of those involved (insider-outsider status, class, etc.); and 3) the kind of rhetoric used to package or frame the proposed change (1997, p. 3). Those three factors are relevant to this study and played a significant role in the attempts at achieving greater transgender inclusivity in the Orthodox world. As mentioned before (see section “Gendered religious practices before transition” above), transgender questions touch on the function and conceptualization of gender, which is one of the main organizing principle for Orthodox communities, and as such have a large symbolic value. Furthermore, the efforts of participants such as Beth and Yiscah to show a commitment to community and *halakha* and to adapt their language and behavior to Orthodox expectations of modesty and exemplarity, suggest—borrowing Sered’s (1997) language—the importance of cultivating a desirable social location and a suitable rhetoric. In spite of those interesting parallels, Sered’s (1997) binary model suffers from the same problems as Davidman’s (1990).

In the case of Israel-Cohen (2012) the term she chooses to describe religious change in Israeli Modern Orthodoxy is hybridity, described as:

A useful concept towards understanding the mixing of ideologies, values and even theologies into *existing* religious frameworks, thereby breaking religious boundaries and creating new manifestations of religion.<sup>300</sup> (Israel-Cohen, 2012, p. 103)

According to Israel-Cohen, the two main areas in which hybridity is taking place are the “changing attitudes towards the hierarchy of religious authority and [the] breaking of religious boundaries with denominationalisms” (2012, pp. 105-106). Both aspects, particularly the shift of attitudes concerning religious authority, resonate with the accounts of the participants. At the same time, the emphasis on breakage and innovation reveals a political impetus that may be at home in feminism but that would misrepresent a more gradualist approach embraced by participants such as Belinda, Ben, Beth and Yiscah. On a different level, the concept of hybridity resonates with Yiscah’s notion of *flexigidity* (see next section) and the blurring of the boundaries between the binary of continuity and change. Furthermore, the study conducted by Israel-Cohen (2012) points out that transgender inclusion is not an isolated issue but

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<sup>300</sup> Emphasis in the original.

part of a much larger wave of change focused on questions of gender and sexuality that have the potential to redraw community boundaries and dissolve the already fragile cohesiveness of the Orthodox world.

### 5.3.2 Participants' models of religious change

Previously (see the section "Models of change" above) we have seen how several participants presented different though complementary models of religious change. One shared feature between the models provided by Beth, Yael and Yiscah was the notion of a certain balance or conciliation between forces pulling in different directions. At face value, it seemed that the vitality of religious life, as opposed to stagnation and decline, depended on the ability to inhabit the creative tension between continuity and change. For Yael that meant that *halakhic* considerations over *pikuach nefesh* should provide the basis for a mutual accommodation between communities, on one hand, and committed transgender Jews, on the other. While communities should make room in their midst for transgender Jews, the latter should be ready to limit their freedom and self-expression for the sake of communal cohesiveness. Such mutual accommodation on the basis of an ancient and venerable Jewish principle such as *pikuach nefesh* was a way in which the tension between continuity and change was productively resolved.

Similarly, Beth's vision of inclusion also relied on a much revered principle with deep roots in the Talmud: the multivocality of authority and revelation. Her notion of learned disagreement allowed for different understandings regarding the *halakhic* import of being transgender and undergoing surgery to co-exist within the same tent, since one may not abide by the same *halakha* as someone else's but both are obliged to respect it. Beth's appeal to the notion of multivocality put the focus back on the undogmatic character of Rabbinical Judaism and its bending of the binary between continuity and change through an outpour of alternative canonical interpretations.

Whereas Yael and Beth's models rested on idiosyncratically Jewish principles such as *pikuach nefesh* and the multivocality of the canonical texts, Yiscah's model of *flexigidity* seemed appropriate also for other traditionalist religions. Furthermore, in building their models Yael and Beth seemed more interested in normative questions, offering a path within the framework of the *halakha* for how things ought to be, while Yiscah's approach was much more descriptive and historical. Her borrowed notion of *flexigidity* (see the section "Models of change" above) seemed to take the dynamic relationship between continuity and change one step further by transcending it: continuity *is* change. Elaborating on the concept of *flexigidity*, Yiscah distinguished between the absoluteness of Jewish values and the contextual character, according to time and place, of their expression. That notion was indebted to the historical experience of diaspora, that is, to the challenge of maintaining thriving communities under non-Jewish rule by accommodating certain aspects of the majority

society without fully assimilating. Another understanding of *flexigidity* was as a way to describe the encounter between Orthodoxy and modernity, a perspective which had become more salient for religious Zionists such as Yiscah for whom the creation of the State of Israel made life in diaspora unnecessary.

### 5.3.3 Ripple effects: an hypothesis for religious change

In this section I will finally present my own hypothesis of religious change in relation to the subject matter of this study; namely, the possibility that the Orthodox world becomes significantly more or less inclusive of transgender Jews in the foreseeable future. In doing so, I will draw both from participants' accounts as well as from central notions of Barad's agential realism.

For starters, it is important to consider the conditions of possibility for religious change as I have defined it. Following agential realism, if the intra-actions that we collectively call Orthodox Judaism used to exclude a particular cut (i.e. being Orthodox and openly transgender), we may say that the possibility for religious change became available once that exclusion could no longer be taken for granted. By being partially or totally open about their backgrounds in their communities, participants such as Ben, Beth and Yiscah re-configured their local instantiation of Orthodox Judaism in such a way that being Orthodox and openly transgender was no longer systematically excluded. Those intra-actions became irreversibly enfolded into the fabric of the Orthodox world and the question now is if they will get enough traction to bring about a more widespread change. But let's pause for a moment to consider those intra-actions in greater detail.

Apart from her more normative model of religious change (see previous section), Beth also reported about her own experience and efforts to change the Orthodox community from within through personal encounters, one person at a time. On the basis of Beth's account and also the testimonies of other participants such as Yiscah (see the section "The search for a place in the Orthodox world" above) and Moshe (see the section "The role of the rabbis: lack of leadership" above), I would like to advance the hypothesis that religious change in the case of this study might be best conceptualized as a multitude of ripple effects. Those ripple effects were often initiated by the encounters of the participants with Orthodox Jews who learned about their background. The latter contributed to spread the ripple effects by acting in particular ways (staying friendly with the participants or freezing them out, for instance) and discussing those encounters or transgender related issues with other members of the community, who in turn continued spreading the ripples and so on and so forth. To understand this notion of ripple effects there are a couple of things that are important to take into account. The first one is that, although in my example above I focused on human encounters, the ripple effects I described were also affected by nonhuman forms of agency such as the radio the *rebbezin* in Ben's community was listening to (see section 4.3.2), or the phone

Moshe used to call his old rabbi (see the section “The role of the rabbis: lack of leadership” above). Each and every encounter in that network made of humans and nonhumans was an intra-action in itself with an open-ended resolution. Those intra-actions did not just relay the same ripples as passive transmitters but rather they diffracted those ripples by creating areas of constructive and destructive interference. Although I did not know at the time when the model of ripple effects started to form in my mind, after reading Barad’s work I realized that the notion of diffraction is central to her work. According to Barad (2007):

[D]iffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction. (Barad, 2007, p. 74)

Barad explains how ripples, like other wave phenomena, can interfere with each other creating areas of intensification (“constructive interference”) and areas of attenuation (“destructive interference”) (2007, p. 77). At their most intense, constructive interferences are formed by the overlapping of the crests of two waves while destructive interferences are caused by the meeting of the crest of one wave with the trough of another. Similarly, when ripples or other wave phenomena encounter an obstacle, they bend and spread in new waves. The ripple effects I describe in my model seem to follow a similar behavior, bouncing on obstacles and forming interferences that could either intensify, potentially bringing forth change, or cancel each other out. The flux of social energy seemed to follow diffractive patterns rather than more linear or mechanistic models. As Barad points out, the reference to diffraction is not to be understood as a metaphor. After all, diffractive patterns are all around us when we start looking for them or, as Barad puts it, they belong to “the fundamental constituents that make up the world” (Barad 2007, p. 72).

As I mentioned above, at the core of my model of ripple effects is the open-endedness of intra-actions, their ontological indeterminacy. Such ontological indeterminacy was often experienced by the participants as a lack of control, that is, as the inability to determine how the encounters with people who just learned about them would play out. For that reason, to change the community from within (in conditions, therefore, of agential separability) required to accept a great deal of uncertainty and vulnerability or, as Beth put it, to become the equivalent of “the canary in the coal mine.” Highly social and close-knit communities such as the Orthodox ones seem particularly ripe for those kind of ripple effects, which proliferate under the surface until an incident such as the one reported by Yiscah make them noticeable (see section 4.3.2). Instances of visibility through encounters had the potential to unleash such ripple effects with unforeseeable consequences. The lack of control built into those situations was probably no small factor contributing to the stress placed by participants such as Beth and Yiscah on the importance of role modeling, thus

claiming at least a degree of control over their self-presentation. It is also worth pointing out that my interventions as a researcher and this text itself also add a few more ripples to the pond.

The hypothesis of ripple effects does not deny the salience of larger processes and structures but it underlines the importance of the personal encounter and the role of empathy in processes of social and religious change. To think in terms of encounter and intra-action opens for a different sociological imagination than that which is indebted either to individualistic forms of agency or deterministic notions of structure. As with the case with Moshe and his negotiations of *negiah* discussed above, personal encounters can be described as intra-actions with restraining and yet not determining conditions which result both in the emergence of patterns as well as creativity. There is no question that other factors beyond the personal encounter play a significant role. Media events, for instance, such as the coverage given to the Joy Ladin case at Yeshiva University (see the section “Benefits and drawbacks of visibility”) can act as accelerators for already existing trends. Similarly, the increasing acceptance towards transgender in the majority society, particularly in the USA, can function both as a boost or a hurdle for transgender inclusion in Orthodox contexts. The more porous the boundary with the majority society is, as with sections of Modern Orthodoxy, the more likely it is that tolerant attitudes will affect positively, especially if arguments in favor of transgender inclusion are presented as ‘scientific’ and along the ‘born-this-way’ narrative as opposed to matters of choice and lifestyle. On the other hand, the more the group’s identity is predicated on the basis of differences with the majority society, the likelier it is that the transgender question is used as a means to police the boundary with the outer world. Those projections, though, do not exclude the possibility that unexpected events occur, changing the course of events in any direction and among any group. The ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer would belong to that category of unexpected events which have the potential to shift the field. In any case, given the decentralized and fragmented character of the Orthodox world, it is unlikely that sweeping changes concerning the place of transgender Jews will happen across the board any time soon, either towards inclusion or greater discrimination. Under such circumstances, the hypothesis of ripple effects attempts to capture a process in which change builds up slowly and painstakingly, one person at a time, through personal encounters. Ripples are unleashed, bounced back and forth, relayed, intensified, weakened, canceled, and that flux of social energies happens in conditions of ontological indeterminacy. Ultimately, social and religious change within a model of ripple effects materializes or fails to do so if “memory” (Barad, 2014, p. 182) reaches a critical mass, that is, if the ongoing enfoldment of intra-actions into the fabric of the world makes a significant difference for transgender inclusion.

As mentioned above, the hypothesis of ripple effects does not deny the importance of larger processes and structures but it focuses on the primacy of

personal encounters. As a thought experiment, it would be worth considering what would have happened in Orthodox communities if no transgender Jew had ever come forward. Without the personal encounter, increased media coverage of transgender issues or greater tolerance in the majority society would probably have been noticed, celebrated by some and decried by others, but for the daily life of the community itself it would have made precious little difference. The argument could be made in a different way, namely, that it was the increasing buzz in the majority society concerning transgender issues that trickled down into Orthodox communities and empowered transgender Jews to break the wall of silence around them. There is no question that many factors are contributing to the incipient willingness of the participants to raise awareness of transgender issues through visibility, but from what could be surmised from the fieldwork, the main elements enabling that transformation were not just mirroring larger social trends. Rather, the main forces for change were already entangled with the Orthodox world itself, through the discovery of a community of like-minded people such as the Dina list, the sharing of empowering *halakhic* expertise such as the Tzitz Eliezer's ruling and the lessons learned from the struggle of lesbians and gays to gain acceptance in the Orthodox world.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

It is said that the mark of a fine book is that, by the time you reach the end, it has managed to change how you see the world. If that is true of reading a book, it should apply even more so to writing one, particularly if the piece of writing in question is a dissertation which has spanned over four years of the author's life. In this concluding chapter I would like to gradually lift the level of abstraction a few notches without leaving the empirical material behind. On the basis of two different critiques to the sociology of religion (Porpora 2006; Vásquez 2012) whose preoccupations echo several of the questions that have emerged in the course of this study, I will attempt to position myself in the field and to reflect from that perspective on the contribution of the previous chapters. In doing so, it is my purpose to connect the findings of this study with larger debates within the sociology of religion.

In the final part of this study, I will strive to critically engage with what I took as a disciplinary premise, i.e. social constructionism. I will do so through an account of the three sites of resistance to social constructionism (religion, gender and quantum physics) that I have encountered in the course of my research. Those resistances have both stimulated and plagued me, forcing me to reexamine my initial commitments. I finally conclude exploring posthumanism as an alternative to social constructionism and outlining some of the possibilities for future research that would derive from such a paradigmatic shift.

Although the following two sections of this concluding chapter are thematically distinct, I hope the reader will be able to recognize the threads linking them, not the least in the shared epistemological concerns (with Porpora's 2006 article providing the bridge) as well as with the ways in which the research around the topic of this study has informed both discussions. Furthermore, although the first section deals specifically with the sociology of religion and the second one lifts the level of abstraction to a paradigm such as social constructionism that is in vogue across the social sciences, there is no question that given the seminal role of Peter Berger<sup>301</sup> both in defining social

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<sup>301</sup> Although Berger's most well-known work about social constructionism is the book co-authored with Thomas Luckmann *The social construction of reality* (1966), Porpora (2006, p. 62) argues that the book co-authored by Luckmann limits its scope to social reality whereas Berger's later works, particularly *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), are much more ambitious and extend social constructionism to reality as a whole. Following Porpora (2006), I will deal with Berger's

constructionism as well as in shaping the sociology of religion, any critical reassessment of the former is also an explicit exercise in disciplinary positioning.

## 6.2 The sociology of religion: an assessment

### 6.2.1 Two critiques

In order to position myself in the field, I take my point of departure in the criticism formulated by Douglas Porpora (2006) and Manuel Vásquez (2012). At the core of the contributions by both authors, is a preoccupation with the epistemological commitments of the sociology of religion. In the case of Vásquez's (2012) book chapter, one of the central arguments is what he perceives as a mismatch between sociology's pledge to 'explaining the social by the social' (Durkheim, 1982) and its attachment to the "unencumbered self" (Vásquez 2012, p. 29). Vásquez acknowledges a double genealogy to the notion of the unencumbered self, the first one related to the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism (see Taylor's, 2007, p. 38, "buffered self"), and the second one, which he prioritizes, inherited from Modern and Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes and Immanuel Kant. Vásquez defines the unencumbered self as the notion of:

a stable and unified self with an unchanging core grounded on suprahistorical a priori of pure reason, practical reason (ethics), and aesthetic judgment. (Vásquez, 2012, p. 30)

Vásquez argues that sociologists have applied the notion of the unencumbered self both to themselves in the role of researchers (Vásquez 2012, p. 38), as well as to religious actors (Vásquez 2012, p.30, following Paul Lichterman in the same volume). As Vásquez convincingly points out, "[s]uch a point of view militates against sociology's task of explaining the social by the social, thwarting the embedding of the self in the sociological and cultural processes that constitute it" (2012, p. 30). Vásquez thus calls for a "relational sociology" (Vásquez 2012, p. 36) that re-embeds both self and religion in those and other processes, paying particular attention to the material, embodied and collective dimensions of religion. In this way, according to Vásquez (2012), sociology would remove the contradiction between sociology's stated goals and its epistemological commitments at the same time that it would move sociology beyond the tautological aim of explaining the social by the social. Vásquez's (2012) call for a relational sociology would not limit itself to sociological ex-

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more ambitious program since arguably it has had a more lasting impact on the sociology of religion through methodological atheism.



planations but rather embrace interdisciplinarity—including neurophysiological and ecological approaches (Vásquez 2012, p. 36)—while keeping its focus on how social dynamics interact with other processes (Vásquez 2012, p. 35).

Vásquez's conclusion contrasts with the opening discussion of his chapter in which he criticizes sociology's construction of religion as an "epistemological 'Other'" (Vásquez 2012, p. 23) through a process of denied coevalness similar to that applied by colonialism to non-western cultures. Borrowing his concepts from Edward Said (1978), Vásquez (2012, p. 27) argues that sociology posited religion "as its primitive, traditional, supernatural, enchanted, and sentimental other, against which it would have a 'positional superiority'." As Vásquez himself shows, though, such denial of coevalness is first effected by the epistemological othering of religion, that is, by sociology's embrace of rationality and empirical observation as its basis for truth claims in opposition to theology's dogma and revelation (2012, p. 24-25). In this context, Vásquez's choice of words seems relevant in terms of how religion is framed as theology, dogma and revelation. Furthermore, Vásquez does not hesitate to call such exercise in epistemological othering a form of "epistemic violence" (2012, p. 26). Similarly, he favorably quotes Robert Orsi's (2005) notion of "domesticated Christianity" to apply it to sociology's treatment of religion. Orsi's point, as the quote reproduced by Vásquez makes clear (2012, p. 31), is that the domestication of Christianity carried out by American scholars had to do with social norms as much as epistemological claims. Whereas 'good religion' contributed to social cohesion and did not challenge reason, 'bad religion' was disruptive and irrational. Sociology's "epistemic violence," therefore, was part and parcel of the domestication of religion. Taking all that into account, it seems rather counterintuitive that Vásquez's critical thrust focuses on the epistemology of the self rather than on sociology's and religion's conflicting epistemological claims. If anything, Vásquez's position concerning the latter needs to be inferred by his position concerning the former. By expunging the notion of the self from its idealist vestiges, with roots both in Christianity and the Enlightenment, and offering a purely relational account for it, Vásquez (2012) anchors the self even more firmly in the "immanentist view of human action"<sup>302</sup> (Vásquez 2012, p. 23) that he initially seemed to criticize. If the self is neither grounded in an immortal soul nor in the "suprahistorical a priori of [...] reason" (Vásquez, 2012, p. 30), then Vásquez's criticism of immanentism seems misplaced. On a related note, Vásquez remains silent about the conflicting epistemological claims between sociology and religion, but his call for a relational account of religion in which the self is fully re-embedded in "history, society and nature" (Vásquez 2012, p. 38)

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<sup>302</sup> Vásquez's immanentism seems to be compatible with Jane Bennett's "enchanted materialism" (2001, p. 80; see section 6.3.3 below), but at odds with more ancient and conventional forms of enchantment as well as with all kinds of transcendentalist religions and spiritualities. In that sense, an immanentist view forecloses a priori the full scope of possible religious sensibilities.

suggests that he subscribes to sociology's abolishment of the numinous as a valid source for any truth claims or human experiences. Here Vásquez's choice of words in characterizing religion's epistemological claims (theology, dogma, revelation) might shed some light in his seeming validation of what he previously deemed epistemic violence (2012, p. 24-25). It might be of some relevance that the category 'religious experience' is missing from his treatment of religion's epistemology.

In contrast to Vásquez (2012), religious experience is a central concern in Porpora's (2006) discussion of epistemology and his criticism of Berger's (1967) prescription of "methodological atheism" as the gold standard for the sociology of religion. As methodological atheism it is generally understood the principle according to which the social scientific study of religion must bracket any supernatural<sup>303</sup> elements. According to Porpora, methodological atheism does not offer a neutral methodology as it purports to do, but rather it entrenches naturalism by ruling out the supernatural as a possible explanation (2006, p. 58). The bracketing involved in methodological atheism, then, is not mere suspension of belief but rather an "a priori exclusion from sociological consideration of an entire class of explanation" (Porpora 2006, p. 62), i.e. the supernatural. Porpora is careful in pointing out that methodological atheism does not make ontological claims concerning the existence of the supernatural, but instead it asserts that human beings have no access to it (2006, p. 64). By doing so, methodological atheism is taking sides in the epistemological controversy between religion and its critics. Porpora (2006) traces the flaws of methodological atheism to Berger's social constructionism, a topic on which I will elaborate in section 6.3 below. Important to Porpora's argument is his distinction between truth claims from propositions of belief and truth claims from religious experiences (2006, p. 61). Whereas the former may often add no explicatory value, Porpora cautions sociologists against dismissing religious experiences. As he points out:

In the case of religious experience, religious truth claims are simultaneously explanations—and very direct explanations—of the phenomenon in question. If one thinks one has experienced God, then certainly one possible explanation of this experience is that God truly is there to be experienced. (Porpora, 2006, p. 61)

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<sup>303</sup> Since here I am presenting an account of Porpora's (2006) argument, I follow him in the use of the concept "supernatural." I have my reservations with the use of that term since it excludes immanentist religions and spiritualities. As a matter of fact, there is a lack of a satisfactory word to generically refer to such category of phenomena. Berger (1979) uses the term *metahuman*. I referred previously to the numinous (Otto, 1917/1958).

In order to correct the imbalances inherent in methodological atheism, Porpora calls for a methodological agnosticism,<sup>304</sup> which consists in being open to supernatural explanations as one possibility among others, without privileging nor dismissing them out of hand (2006, p. 58). Porpora's (2006) methodological agnosticism should not be confused with methodological relativism as in 'anything goes.' His argument is not that sociologists must presuppose supernatural realities, but rather "that such assessment should be an empirical conclusion rather than an a priori disciplinary assumption, which as such forever remains equally beyond either support or contestation" (Porpora 2006, p. 59). It seems unclear to me how that empirical investigation into supernatural realities should go about, if in other words what Porpora calls for is that sociologists of religion actively seek out religious experiences themselves,<sup>305</sup> but at a minimum honoring methodological agnosticism entails accurately reporting the actors' accounts of their religious experiences instead of effacing them or supplanting them by instrumental reasons (Porpora 2006, p. 70-71; see also Mahmood's 2005, p. 16 criticism of what she calls "sociological causality"). Finally, Porpora attempts to allay the fears of his peer sociologists who would regard his position as heterodox by pointing out that methodological agnosticism is not unprecedented in the scholarly world (2006, p. 71-72). A similar view has already gained acceptance in psychology, a field which can trace that position at least as far back as William James (1902/1982).

## 6.2.2 The sociology of religion: an exercise in liminality

In spite of my criticism of what seems to me is an inconsistency in Vásquez (2012), his call for a relational sociology of religion is compelling and it certainly offers a path for the discipline's renewal. Likewise, Porpora's (2006) methodological agnosticism touches a nerve and makes a crucial intervention towards greater balance and epistemic humility in the study of religion. The problem, however, is that the epistemological commitments of Vásquez (2012) and Porpora (2006) seem to be at odds with each other. Whereas Vásquez's relational sociology requires a thorough immersion in "history, society and nature" that forecloses any consideration of the supernatural (Vásquez, 2012, p. 38), Porpora's (2006) methodological agnosticism is predicated on that very possibility.<sup>306</sup> So is a synthesis possible? At face value, the answer

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<sup>304</sup> See Furseth & Repstad, 2006, pp. 197-208, for a similar argument criticizing methodological atheism and suggesting methodological agnosticism.

<sup>305</sup> Concerning the possibility of including the mystical experiences of the researcher as part of the research, see the work of Jeffrey Kripal (1995; 2001). A word of thanks goes to Paul Odyneec for pointing this out to me.

<sup>306</sup> Although at face value Barad's agential realism seems to better align with Vásquez's (2012) relational sociology, Barad is actually rather silent concerning her religious views. Notwithstanding that, Barad has toyed with ideas of transcendence (Barad, 2012b, p. 16) and enchantment (Barad, 2014, p. 174). In the latter case, for instance, Barad (2014, p. 174) favorably

seems to be negative but even if a synthesis would be possible, it is unclear whether it would be desirable. An attempt at synthesis would typically downplay the differences and smooth the edges, when what is probably more productive is to learn to live and study in that tension. In my reading, that is a tension that is inherent to the sociology of religion from the get-go, whenever the discipline is doing its job rather than trying to ‘domesticate’ religion. Taking his cue from Pierre Bourdieu (2001/2004), Vásquez calls religion the “repressed underside” of sociology (2012, p. 23). Sociology and religion are therefore posited as mirror images of each other, each trying to explain the world in its own terms. Narrowly understood then, the term ‘sociology of religion’ is a whole program consisting in reducing religion to a dependent variable, that is, to explain away religion through sociological reasoning (for a similar critique see Repstad & Nilsson, 2007). Such zeal in subordinating religion to sociology could be called, borrowing the term from Albert Salomon (1949), the “religion of sociology,” understood as the aprioristic bracketing of the supernatural in favor of naturalistic explanations, that Porpora (2006) so well describes. It is sociology’s apriorism which would make it resemble a religion, since its commitment to an “immanentist view of human action” (Vásquez 2012, p. 23) is a matter of faith or preference, not warranted by observation.

A reappraisal of the task of the sociology of religion should avoid both its tendency to reduce religion to sociology as well as to turn sociology into a religion. The conundrum of the discipline was arguably that it was claiming to explain the social by the social when in fact it was explaining the religious by the social.<sup>307</sup> Arguably, the sociology of religion should consider shedding any ambition of explaining away religion and devote itself instead to relating the religious to the social as entangled phenomena. That could be accomplished through a process of translation that acknowledges that certain words are untranslatable and are better left in their vernacular religious language. Furthermore, sociologists of religion could follow the cue of leading scholars in science and technology studies (STS) in using their subdiscipline as a springboard for a larger project that aims at rethinking sociology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Latour explains, he and his colleagues in STS also started out by attempting to provide narrow social constructionist accounts to their object of study, but after a while they realized that scientists and scientific phenomena

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quotes Anzaldúa (1987) writing “I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit.”

<sup>307</sup> In a similar vein, Latour (2005, p. 7) wrote “Religion does not have to be ‘accounted for’ by social forces because in its very definition—indeed, in its very name—it links together entities which are not part of the social order.” His statement, however, is problematic in at least three counts: 1) it seems to confuse the phenomenon ‘religion’ with its etymology; 2) it is oblivious of at least one more possible etymology for the word ‘religion’ suggested by Cicero as *relegere* meaning “*to go through or over again in reading, speech or thought*” (Hoyt 1912, p.127; emphasis in the original); and 3) it seems to consider religious people as not belonging to the social order.

could not be pinned down by sociology's usual toolkit and, what is more, scientists had both the status and the position to challenge sociologists' findings and exert their power in academic institutions (2005, p. 98). Perhaps the sociology of religion is slowly facing its own rebellion of religious actors and religious phenomena. The fall out of grace of the secularization paradigm seems to indicate so (see Davie, 2014, p. 31). My point here is that subdisciplines like the sociology of religion or STS, which have to relate to 'epistemological others' (religion and natural sciences), are placed in a privileged position to inquire into their own taken-for-granted commitments and reach new insights once they give up on their temptation to subdue their object of study through epistemic violence. It is precisely that liminality between different epistemologies, and their ability to inhabit that tension, that makes those disciplines particularly interesting and which gives them the enormous potential and productivity that STS has already tapped into. If my analysis is correct, the time seems ripe for the sociology of religion to drop its pretense to explain the religious by the social and to explore the possibility of questioning the social by the religious, as for instance, taking religion and its complexities as its point of departure to interrogate sociology, showing the limits of sociology in its ability to grasp the world, opening sociology to other ontologies and forms of cognition (see for instance John Law's 2004, p. 152, concept of "multiple realities").

An added benefit of the project outlined above is that it would help the sociology of religion to get through its current impasse. As Vásquez (2012, p. 23) points out, sociology's "othering" of religion partly explains why the discipline became so attached to the secularization thesis. That emphasis on secularization has been enormously productive for the sociology of religion, but it has also brought downsides that we are now in a position to assess. For one, the focus on secularization has isolated the discipline from much theoretical work conducted in the humanities and social sciences, including but not limited to poststructuralism and, more recently, new materialism. The crisis of classical secularization theory (see chapter 1) has left a theoretical vacuum at the heart of the sociology of religion that we are now struggling to fill. The experience of the past with the secularization paradigm cautions us about the dangers of staking everything on one card. On the other hand, the lack of a clear research agenda may be corrosive to the discipline's sense of identity and purpose which runs the risk of evacuating itself into neighboring fields such as anthropology, psychology and religious studies. If the case of STS is in any way illustrative, though, the current impasse does clear the way for a rethinking of the discipline that bears much promise.

### 6.2.3 This study in the previous discussion

To end this section, it is worth considering in which ways the present study is attuned to the position outlined above. Similar to what I argued in relation to

Barad's scholarship before in section 5.2.2 above, my thinking on the topics above has developed simultaneously and in constant dialogue with my research. It would therefore be a logical impossibility to expect that what has emerged as an outcome of my research would have informed it from the beginning. Nevertheless, there are several important features of this study that speak directly to the points I made before. Even before I became acquainted with Porpora's (2006) article, I was already practicing methodological agnosticism. That can easily be gleaned from the results in chapter 4, where I explore the social ramifications of the participants' entanglements of gender and religion at the same time that I give them the space to explain several religious experiences (i.e. encounters with God in the case of Noam, Yael and Yiscah or the awareness of a numinous light in the case of Ben) that they perceived as particularly meaningful in the shaping of their journeys. Even before Porpora (2006), I owe that approach to the scholarship in the body of work collectively known as lived religion that I already mentioned in chapter 1. Where lived religion was not helpful in my case was in offering theoretical lenses through which I could discuss the experiences of my participants. As with most studies in lived religion, this one is also more robust in its empirical findings than in its theoretical elaborations. Nevertheless, a modest contribution of this study has been to introduce the work of Barad (1998-2015) and her new materialist perspective into the sociological study of religion. In this way I hope to be able to add my grain of sand to the ongoing effort carried out by a number of scholars (see for instance Bender *et al.* 2013a; Lövheim 2013; Nynäs, Lassander & Utriainen, 2012) in overcoming the discipline's theoretical isolation.

Besides the scholarship on lived religion, this study should also be located within the growing field of LGBTQ religiosity. As mentioned before (see section 1.3) previous research has tended to conflate transgender issues with those of the other communities to the advantage of gays and lesbians, who usually have been at the center of the research agenda. Furthermore, concerning the issue of religious practices there has been an almost exclusive focus on Christianity (Yip, 2010, p. 47). Such state of affairs has brought leading scholars in the field such as Yip to call for the need to expand and diversify the research agenda (Yip, 2010, p. 45). This study has aimed at alleviating such dearth of research by producing the first study in its kind of transgender religiosity. With the benefit of hindsight, we are now in the position to see both the overlaps and discontinuities between the previous research on LGBTQ religiosity and the present study. This study, for example, helps to further nuance one of the findings most often brought up by commentators, namely, the subjectivization of religious authority (Hunt & Yip, 2012, p. 272) or, more precisely,

what Yip observed among LGBTQI<sup>308</sup> Christians concerning a shift of authority from official religious representatives to lived experiences and a personal connection with God. A similar process was also apparent in the stories of some participants, clearly so in the cases of Yiscah and Noam, but such shift was modulated by the reassurance that the ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer provided. As Yiscah put it, “I felt that [the Tzitz Eliezer’s *psak*] made me *kasher* in the Orthodox world.” That suggests that the multivocality of Orthodox *halakha* allowed for a shift within a variety of authoritative opinions, a model of religious authority that differs significantly from the official church dogma facing LGBTQ Christians in traditionalist denominations. Last but not least, this study also presents a different picture of LBT<sup>309</sup> women’s religiosity from the one described by Melissa Wilcox (2009) in her study of 29 women in the Los Angeles area including 3 transgender participants and 2 participants with a Jewish background (neither of which were transgender). Wilcox (2009) describes the religiosity of those women as a form of “religious individualism” which is indebted to *Sheilaism*<sup>310</sup> (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985) but that in contrast to *Sheilaism* it is not necessarily anti-institutional. Rather, as Wilcox puts it, religious individualism among the women she researched “draws on institutions as resources that can provide tools and materials from which the self can be cobbled together in a kind of existential ‘found art’” (2009, p. 3). In her later work, Wilcox (2012) described that form of religious individualism in terms of “contestation” and “reinscription.” According to Wilcox (2012), the LBT women she studied were contesting the pressure to conform to religious expectations in institutional settings (seeing religion as a customizable, self-reflective project, as opposed to a “package deal”; Wilcox, 2012, p. 310) at the same time that they were reinscribing “a neoliberal model of the self as unique and isolated, disengaged from broader networks of power” (Wilcox, 2012, p. 312). In this study there were instances of religious individualism by necessity in the different kinds of dislocations described (see section 4.2.2.) but the overall picture was remarkably different from that presented by Wilcox (2009; 2012). One important finding was that among the participants who had already transitioned and who felt the need to leave Orthodox Judaism either during or in the process leading to transition, all of them<sup>311</sup> attempted to return to an observant life after transition. With the possible exception of Noam, inherent to that return to observancy was also the search for welcoming Orthodox communities. That indicates the enormous

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<sup>308</sup> Yip (2010) adds I for intersex to the LGBTQ acronym. Since I am reporting on his findings, I follow him on his choice of terminology.

<sup>309</sup> Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender.

<sup>310</sup> Following the research of Robert Bellah *et al.* (1985) in *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life* in which they described the case of Sheila Larson, a nurse who had her own personal religion based on being loving and gentle, and which the researchers derogatorily characterized as lacking in depth and elaboration.

<sup>311</sup> Moshe, Noam, Yael and Yiscah.

thirst for community that the participants expressed in their accounts, something that is most likely related to the religious specificity of Orthodox Judaism as a community-based religion not amenable to practice in isolation.

In this study it has been also my ambition to pay heed to the increasing attention among religious scholars to matters of embodiment and materiality which Vásquez (2012) also places highly in his research agenda. In that regard, the task to conduct a thorough ethnographic study revealed itself to be too ambitious for the conditions of possibility of this study, in which participants were difficult to find and far-apart from each other. Instead, what I strived to capture have been the notions of embodiment and materiality that emerge from the participants' accounts. Given the centrality of *halakha* as daily embodied practice in Orthodox Judaism and the special attention to matters of the body among transgender, questions of embodiment have figured prominently in the results. Materiality has also been a salient aspect, often in connection to embodied religious practices, since gendered religious items such as *shabbat* dresses, *tefillin*, *tallit* and *kippot*, to mention just a few, were important sites in which gendered religious identities were negotiated, reimagined and affirmed. The extent of material culture relevant to the participants' journeys was not limited to religious items since the electronic media that made possible the Dina list or the medical technologies that enabled physical transition were integral parts of those biographies, too. As with the religious items, those technologies were equally relevant to the participants' religious journeys: the Dina list offered an invaluable safe space<sup>312</sup> to be transgender and Orthodox, while for Belinda, Beth, Yael and Yiscah, their *halakhic* standing following the ruling of the Tzitz Eliezer depended on the bottom surgery afforded by medical advances.

Last but not least, this study has shed some light into the entanglements of gender and religion as a site of intense negotiations. Furthermore, I have attempted to outline a preliminary account of religious change by a process in which the ramifications or ripple effects caused by those negotiations have the potential to impact the larger community. In this endeavor, the lack of research on transgender religiosity has asked from me to look at this project with fresh eyes. While being sensitive to the continuities and parallels, I have focused my attention on the ways in which transgender religiosity challenges established notions of agency and suggests new understandings. In doing so, I have been inspired by the agenda outlined above in which the religious is not exhausted by social explanation but it is also a rich and complex field from which to interrogate the social and its certainties. This study has been an exercise in that tension, in performative liminality, which, as a researcher and author of this report has taken the form of a search for form and expository order in in what is "messy" (McGuire, 2008, p. 4) and multilayered. In that vein, I have

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<sup>312</sup> On the topic of online safe(r) spaces for LGBTQ Orthodox, see Theobald, 2012, pp. 294-296.



argued against a certain sociological imagination that models its representations of reality in terms of binaries, spectrums and taxonomies, thus precluding a different imagination based on entanglements. Instead of isolating, analyzing and classifying, entanglements invite us to explore their knots and ramifications as well as the possibilities to enact partial disentanglements so as to avoid the perils of strangulation and dismemberment (see the section ‘Transitioning as disentanglement’ above). Finally, if I had to summarize the two main findings of this study I would list them as follows:

- 1) From the accounts of the participants, it became clear that gender and religion could not be reduced to each other but neither fully separated. Following Barad, I referred to that relationship as entanglement.
- 2) Particularly in a post-transition situation, gendered religious practices had the potential to become a site for gender affirmation among the participants. I have argued that this possibility and its related mode of agency have been previously overlooked by feminist scholars.

## 6.3 From social constructionism to posthumanism: current debates and future perspectives

### 6.3.1 Three sites of resistance

When I started research on this study back in 2012, I was probably not alone among my colleagues in considering social constructionism the overall epistemological framework for our line of work. After all, the idea that our sense of reality is socially constructed provides the definitive rationale for the need of sociology. Yet in the course of my research I started to encounter mounting resistance to the claims set forth by social constructionism. More interesting perhaps, the pushback against social constructionism was coming from different and seemingly unrelated quarters, but which happened to overlap in a transdisciplinary project such as this one. The unexpected coalition of rebels that was slowly gathering around my research efforts forced me to put my initial assumptions under closer scrutiny and, as it turned out, the more I immersed myself in the topic the louder became the objections.

One important difficulty in my task of critique and reexamination was that there is no academic consensus regarding what social constructionism stands for (Burr 2015, p. 2). According to Vivien Burr (2015, p. 2-5), though, most accounts share at least one or more of the following core features:<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> I take the headings for each bullet point verbatim from Burr (2015).

- *A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge*: the idea that we have no direct access to the world, in opposition to what positivism and empiricism claim.
- *Historical and cultural specificity*: historical and cultural contexts shape our understanding of the world, clearing the path for relativism.
- *Knowledge is sustained by social processes*: notions of truth, goodness, acceptability, etc. as well as their opposites are the product of social processes and interactions.
- *Knowledge and social action go together*: socially constructed knowledge becomes normative and shapes the ways in which individuals are included and rewarded, as well as excluded and punished, by their social group.

As the bullet points make clear, social constructionism is a theory about knowledge, how and under which conditions it is produced and circulated and to what effect. The resistance that I mentioned, however, came rather from the complementing ontological side of the argument. Depictions of social constructionism as a theory that denies the existence of a reality external to its representations are a gross distortion. Most social constructionist accounts do acknowledge the existence of a reality external to representation, the question rather is in which way if at all that reality impinges on the representations. According to Porpora, Berger's solution was to bracket external reality altogether, both mundane and religious (2006, p. 58). The world for Berger became an "empty vastness" onto which human beings projected their meanings as on a canvas (1967, p. 100). By severing human projections from external reality, Berger engaged in an extreme form of social constructionism (Porpora 2006, p. 63), which went on to inform the sociology of religion through methodological atheism. However, the problem with Berger's social constructionism was not only that it put aside religious experience but that it dissolved the category of experience *tout court* (Porpora 2006, p. 58). Whereas experience was supposed to bridge the gap between the knowing subject and external reality, all that was left in Berger's account were mere projections (Porpora 2006, p. 63). Finally, Porpora's (2006) main charge against Berger's social constructionism is that it becomes untenable once applied to itself:

The question then is whether social constructionist researchers have any access to the noumenal reality they seek to study or whether all they, too, ever come up with are their own projections. If the latter, why are social constructionists so intent on empirical research and in any case, why should anyone listen to them express their own projections? If, alternately, constructionists do have

access to the noumenal reality they observe and study, from whence derives their remarkable, epistemic privilege? (Porpora 2006, p. 67)<sup>314</sup>

In spite of Porpora's criticism, the aim with his article was not to get rid of social constructionism but rather to advocate for a revised version which acknowledged some role for external reality and thus opened the door to at least consider the claims of lay actors regarding their religious experiences (Porpora 2006, p. 69). As much as I agreed with Porpora's criticism, it was not clear to me whether his views were indeed reconcilable with a revised social constructionism. Social constructionists of a less extreme kind than Berger's already accept that external reality does play some role (see Beckford, 2008, p. 3 for an example), but Porpora's call to practice openness regarding the epistemic implications of religious experiences would still be considered anathema for many.

In the context of my research, Porpora's (2006) work opened one of the fronts on which social constructionism was falling short, but there were others. Gender was probably exhibit A in any study of constructed social categories, as the long lasting influence of the works by Butler (1990; 1993) attests. Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949/2011, p. 283), thus sparking a fruitful wave of feminist scholarship on the constructedness of gender. Yet for the participants in this study (explicitly so in the cases of Dov, Loren, Noam, Yael and Yiscah), an exclusively social constructionist account of their gender identities was at odds with their lived experiences. Loren's case is illustrative here. She was born into a *charedi* Sephardic family and socialized according to strict gender rules as a boy. During her upbringing, Loren had an acute sense that she was not like the other boys, but she did not have the concepts to articulate and explore her feelings, not to mention the lack of awareness about anything transgender. Short of any other resources in the culturally isolated environment in which she lived, she was forced to work out her gender identity backwards, through the cues provided by her own body, and it was not until much later that she could put words into it and say 'I am a woman'. Echoing de Beauvoir, she became a woman in the sense that she had a realization of belonging to the category 'woman' later in life, but the way Loren described that process seemed driven by something much more intuitive and against everything she had being fed by her social environment. Liberally borrowing from Barad (1998, p. 106), we could say that Loren's body was "mak[ing] itself felt" against the social constraints of a life in an ultra-Orthodox community.

As mentioned in the introduction, first generation transgender scholars such as Prosser (1998) and Namaste (2000) were already critical of socially con-

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<sup>314</sup> In a related critique, Barad (2011, p. 449) refers to Michel Callon's and Latour's (1992) point that social constructivism is actually social realism in disguise, that is, "a form of representationalism that takes the social for granted."

structed accounts of gender. More recently, Serano (2007; 2013) has been exploring this issue on the basis of the available scholarship and her own experiences as a “bisexual femme-tomboy transsexual woman” (Serano 2013, p. 4). In her earlier work, Serano (2007) distinguished between what she called “subconscious sex” (Serano 2007, p. 78) and gender identity. Serano argued that the concept of identity was related to notions of choice (identifying with) which were problematic in the case of transsexuals who typically do not experience their deepest gendered self as a choice but rather as a constitutive part of who they are (2007, p. 78). Serano referred to that deeper layer as subconscious sex, which she defined as “the gender we subconsciously feel ourselves to be” (Serano 2007, p. 78). For Serano, subconscious sex is independent from the social phenomena associated with the concept of gender (Serano 2007, p. 82), and although she admitted that there is no conclusive evidence yet, she favored a biological explanation (Serano 2007, p. 81) not unlike the one offered by Elizabeth Haines (2004) in her research on “brain gender.”<sup>315</sup> In her latest work, Serano further nuanced her position by offering what she called a holistic model of gender (Serano 2013, p. 138-168). In that work, Serano attempted to debunk both biological and social reductionist accounts of gender. Serano pointed out that both accounts share in common their homogenizing model which aims to explain why most people are either biologically determined or socially coerced into the gender binary, while failing to account for the diversity of genders that actually exist (2013, p. 147). According to Serano, in order to account for such diversity no one-sided account will do and what is needed is a holistic and non-deterministic model that takes into account biological, social and environmental factors as well as their multiple interactions (2013, p. 158-168).<sup>316</sup>

Whereas Serano (2013) restored the biological within a holistic and non-deterministic model of gender, the understanding of gender of several participants drew both from similar biological accounts as well as from theological explanations. ‘Born this way’ and ‘God made me this way’ arguments seemed

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<sup>315</sup> Interestingly, the idea that something akin to Serano’s subconscious sex was rooted in the brain was echoed also both by Dov and Yiscah.

<sup>316</sup> To make things a bit more complicated, Serano self-identifies as a social constructionist, which in relation to gender she describes as the belief that “gender does not arise in a direct and unadulterated manner from biology, but rather is shaped to some extent by culture” (2013, p. 118). Instead of social constructionism, Serano’s critique is directed to what she calls “gender artifactualism,” which is an extreme form of social constructionism that denies biological and other nonsocial factors any role in the shaping of gender (2013, p. 118). Even if Serano advocates for a revised and multifaceted social constructionism, the fact that gender artifactualist accounts have received much acceptance in broad sections of the humanities and the social sciences justifies including Serano’s vindication of biology as one of the “sites of resistance.” In relation to this, and as I hope the rest of the chapter will make clear, my objections to social constructionism do not question the importance of culture and sociality, but rather aim to problematize the boundaries by which those categories are created, as well as their related notion of agency (see next section).

often to overlap.<sup>317</sup> In combining those arguments, participants echoed the two sites of resistance to social constructionism that I have thus far explored, namely, religion and gender. A third site of resistance came from the field of quantum physics and the work by Barad (1998-2015), as well as other scholars associated with the school of new materialism. As I mentioned before (see 5.2.2), Barad (2003) distanced herself from the social constructivism that, particularly through the lasting impact of the linguistic turn, has been so influential in feminist and queer studies. Although Barad (1998-2015) speaks of ‘constructivism’ rather than ‘constructionism,’ her references to the former as alluding to the field of “social activities” and “culture” (Barad 2003, p. 806) suggest that ‘constructivism’ should not be understood narrowly as relating to a certain psychological tradition but rather as a term interchangeable with ‘constructionism’ in the sense that I am using it here. This change in terminology is in line with what other commentators of Barad’s work have done in the past (see Hekman, 2008,) and for the sake of clarity I will follow their example. The main thrust of Barad’s critique against social constructionism was that it granted too much power to language and culture, while entrenching the conceptualization of matter as a “passive and immutable” surface readily available for inscription (Barad 2003, p. 801). In its stead, Barad urged scholars to come to terms with the “weightiness of the world” (2003, p. 827) by acknowledging that matter is agentive and intra-active (2007, p. 170). Ultimately, we are not socially constructed in the midst of an inert universe, Berger’s “empty vastness,” (1967, p. 100), but rather “we are part of that nature that we seek to understand” (Barad 2007, p. 67).

Conducting transdisciplinary research makes strange bedfellows. In the course of this study, religion, gender and quantum physics came together to illuminate the entanglements and partial disentanglements of transgender Jews with an Orthodox background. What started as a promising transdisciplinary theoretical approach, though, revealed in time a less visible thread of resistance to core premises of social constructionism. Although each contention came from different contexts and philosophical commitments, they had in common that they presented an otherness which was not reducible to representation and which intervened in, or even co-constituted, human affairs. Of those three approaches, the first two (i.e. that there is a God that intervenes in people’s lives and that gender has a primary, innate aspect, not reducible to the social), are currently banned from much academic discourse in the humanities and social sciences, or at least seen with deep suspicion. Such negative reactions are due to understandable historical reasons, given how dogma and gender essentialist accounts have been used to stifle debate and to justify women’s subordinate status. Yet even a superficial reading of the accounts of the participants does reveal that their views are not meant to throw anyone

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<sup>317</sup> Noam was a remarkable exception in this case. Although she believed in God, she did not think that God had anything to do with her being transgender.

back into some sort of dark age, but rather to put words into a lived experience that in the current intellectual milieu stands as countercultural. At the root, what those accounts ask for is a reexamination of the linkages between academia and secularism as well as between feminism and cissexism.<sup>318</sup> Coming from a very different perspective, the third site of resistance (i.e. Barad's contribution to new materialism) belongs to a wider academic debate which has been fruitful in articulating an alternative to social constructionism.

### 6.3.2 From social constructionism to posthumanism

The wider conversation I was referring to is arguably centered around the issue of nonhuman agency. Before Barad, scholars such as Latour (1991/1993) and Andrew Pickering (1995) had been writing about nonhuman agency. According to Latour agency cannot be indissolubly bound to reflexivity and intentionality (2005, p. 71). Latour's model of agency has been described as a form of "distributed agency" (Bennett, 2010, p. 38), in which human and nonhuman actors interact in a network. Accordingly, "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor"<sup>319</sup> (Latour 2005, p. 71). Following the examples provided by Latour, ordinary objects such as baskets and hammers are actors since they make a difference in how groceries are fetched and spikes nailed (2005, p. 71). Latour is careful to point out that he does not aim to reverse the extant social constructionist discourse by suggesting that the basket and the hammer "determine" action, but he asks us to move away from such binary accounts into a world in which:

there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence. In addition to 'determining' and serving as a 'backdrop for human action', things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on. (Latour, 2005, p. 72)

In a similar vein, but writing within the field of the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK), Pickering describes a world that is filled with agency (1995, p. 6), both "human" and "material" (1995, p. 1-34). According to Pickering, a great deal of human activity, including science, involves coping with material agency in one way or another (1995, p. 6). In the case of science, that takes the form of what Pickering calls "tuning" (1995, p. 14), that is, the process of trial and error by which scientific practice is informed and material agency emerges (according to Pickering (1995, p. 16) then, tuning works both ways). The process of tuning, furthermore, illustrates the ways in which human and material agencies are not independent from each other but rather intertwined (Pickering 1995, p. 15). Pickering, however, does make exception

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<sup>318</sup> For the notion of cissexism, see Serano, 2013, pp. 110-137.

<sup>319</sup> Emphasis in the original.

in the case of human agency and recognizes that it has an element of intentionality, of organizing itself around “specific plans and goals” (1995, p. 17), that is absent in the case of material agency. That element of intentionality, though, is not embedded in an autonomous subject but rather in the current state of scientific culture which provides the “surface of emergence” for those projects (Pickering 1995, p. 20). Furthermore, given that the current state of scientific culture is the result of continuous tuning, intentionality is then inseparable of the intertwining of human and material agencies (Pickering 1995, p. 20). Pickering finally describes how his social constructionist colleagues in the mainstream of SSK are committed to a humanist project in which “the human subject [is] the center of the action” and any glimpse of nonhuman agency is to be subordinated to that premise (1995, p. 26). On the other hand, Pickering explains how scientists and engineers are committed to the opposed view, an antihumanist project, in which material agency rules supreme. Through his focus on human and material agencies as emergent in practice, Pickering offers a third way out of the impasse which seeks to:

[subvert] the black-and-white distinctions of humanism/antihumanism and [move] into a *posthumanist* space, a space in which the human actors are still there but now inextricably entangled with the nonhuman, no longer at the center of the action and calling the shots. The world makes us in one and the same process as we make the world.<sup>320</sup> (Pickering 1995, p. 26)

Although posthumanism has been given different and contradictory meanings, both as an intensification and a critique of humanism (Wolfe 2009, p. xi-xxxiv), following Pickering (1995) I would describe the strand of posthumanism I am interested in as a rejection of anthropocentrism with far-reaching epistemic and ethical ramifications. Key in that understanding of posthumanism would be a rejection of the Kantian notion of the human subject and a problematization of the boundaries of the human (see Barad, 2001; Braun, 2004), as well as the nature/culture binary (Barad, 2008; Latour, 1991/1993). Another characteristic would be a keen interest in questions of agency and materiality, particularly in regard to the acknowledgement of nonhuman actors and the redefinition of human agency not as something that someone has but as a relation of a body with other bodies, both human and otherwise (Braun, 2004). Last but not least, by rejecting anthropocentrism, posthumanism would also question the claim of human exceptionalism as well as the project of human mastery over the world (Barad 2012a, p. 28). In that broad sense of posthumanism, it would include the work of SSK sociologists such as Pickering, ANT scholars such as Latour and new materialist theorists such as Barad.

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<sup>320</sup> Emphasis in the original.

I agree with Pickering, Latour and Barad that the realization that we live in a world populated by a myriad of nonhuman agencies, from baskets and hammers to high-tech scientific apparatuses and the universe itself, calls for an end to the anthropocentrism that social constructionism had elevated to the category of a disciplinary premise. But as Barad points out, we have to be wary of democratizing attempts aimed at extending what were previously considered human prerogatives to nonhumans (2007, p. 378). The point is not assimilation, that is, to invite “everything into one category (man’s, yet again)” (Barad, 2008, p. 329), but rather to unsettle those categories. Barad challenges the democratizing attempts of agency, which she relates to ANT<sup>321</sup> and “neovitalist theories,” for failing to ask how the boundaries between human and nonhuman are created and come to matter “for particular purposes of particular kinds of flourishing for particular beings” (2012b, p. 80). As an example of the latter, Barad draws from the research by Monica Casper (1998) on feminist debates surrounding fetal surgery to point out that granting agency<sup>322</sup> to fetuses may come at the expense of the rights of pregnant women. Similarly, Barad is skeptical about the strategic deployment of a democratized notion of agency as a way to raise the public awareness on environmental issues (2012d, p. 21). ANT-inspired political scientist Jane Bennett elaborates on this point drawing a distinction between “caring for an environment,” as a concern that reduces nature to an external “substrate of human culture,” and an ethics grounded on “vigorous materiality” (2010, pp. 111-112). Bennett explains how thinking in terms of “vigorous materiality” (1) tends to horizontalize, without fully democratizing,<sup>323</sup> the relations between humans and nonhumans; (2) presents nature as emergent rather than teleological or driven by a deterministic causality; and (3) reconfigures the notion of human embodiment by opening us to the “‘alien’ quality of our own flesh” (2010, p. 112). That last point refers to the idea that our bodies are actually inhabited and constituted by swarms of microorganisms, which leads Bennett to conclude that we are not “embodied” but rather an “array of bodies” (2010, p. 112).

At the same time that I take on board the caveats and modifications expressed by Barad and Bennett, I regard the insights developed also by Pickering and Latour on the proliferation of nonhuman agencies and its attending call to end anthropocentrism as a path for a more robust scholarship than the currently offered by social constructionism. I would argue that new materialist approaches enable us to engage more deeply with materiality and the world of hybrids (Latour, 1991/1993) we already inhabit, without losing what we have learned about the constructedness of natural-cultural artifacts. In chapter 4, for instance, we have seen how the participants’ entanglements were enacted

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<sup>321</sup> See Latour’s (1991/1993, pp. 142-145) notion of the “parliament of things.”

<sup>322</sup> On the irony of “granting agency” see Barad, 2012d, p. 17.

<sup>323</sup> Bennet, like Barad, is no proponent of a Latourian (1991/1993, pp. 142-145) “parliament of things.”



through their negotiation of gendered religious practices which could be conceptualized as Barad's material-discursive practices involving a wide array of components including but not limited to bodies, sacred texts, medical technologies, religious artifacts, clothing, gender identity, gender assignment at birth, religious beliefs, medical and scholarly discourses on sex & gender, etc. It was in the thicket of those entanglements that agency emerged, in conditions of intra-action rather than interaction, which is what, at best, the less extreme forms of social constructionism allow. Furthermore, an engagement with new materialist approaches is also of salient political importance at a time in which the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman are increasingly becoming fluid and disrupted,<sup>324</sup> while the future of what I would precariously refer to as 'the human species' arguably depends on moving beyond environmental concerns into matters of "vigorous materiality" (Bennett, 2010, p. 110-113) and its attending decentering of the *anthropos*.

This could well be the end of the story, but not so for the sociology of religion. In the case of my own field, the move I have been advocating away from social constructionism and towards posthumanism (never to be confounded with antihumanism) introduces a final twist of particular meaningfulness to which now I turn.

### 6.3.3 Epilogue: from posthumanism to (re)enchantment

In his influential book, *A secular age*, Charles Taylor (2007) singles out what he calls "construals of agency" (Taylor, 2007, p. 566); namely, the value-loaded stories about agency that operate at the level of taken-for-granted assumptions, as a core characteristic of human existence in an immanent frame closed to transcendence (Taylor, 2007, p. 565-566). Such construals of agency draw on important notions, such as (1) the distinction between religion as a childish illusion and unbelief as the mature and sober view that courageous moderns should embrace; (2) the favoring of one's own disengaged reason over authority; and (3) the enormously world-transforming powers that are unleashed by that combination of cool-headedness and self-reliance (Taylor, 2007, p. 556-566).

Following Taylor here, it is reasonable to claim that changes in our sense and conceptualization of agency are bound to affect our outlook of the world

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<sup>324</sup> See, for instance, the cases of the Quantified Self movement (Lupton, 2016), or Neil Harbisson's "eyeborg" and Moon Ribas' "seismic sense" as well as the project their founded, the Cyborg Foundation (retrieved from <http://www.cyborgfoundation.com/about>), or the biomedical research on human-animal chimeras aimed at growing and harvesting human organs from inside genetically modified sheep and pigs (see DeGrazia, 2007; as well as article in *MIT Technology Review* from January 6, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/545106/human-animal-chimeras-are-gestating-on-us-research-farms/>).

and our relationship with it. In the case of Taylor's "buffered self"<sup>325</sup> (2007, p. 38), a change in the sense and conceptualization of agency as the one I have explored previously in this chapter and in discussing the results (see section 5.2.2), allows for a change in its secular outlook in which the self is once more sensitized to a world of nonhuman powers.<sup>326</sup> Although coming from a very different perspective—Taylor is a Christian philosopher, the following authors are not—this comes close to the conclusion that Bennett (2001; 2010) or philosopher Isabelle Stengers and Nobel laureate in chemistry Ilya Prigogine (1997) have reached within the work of nonhuman agencies developed among others by Barad, Latour and Pickering.

Both Stengers & Prigogine (1997), as well as Bennett (2001), write about the (re)enchantment<sup>327</sup> of the world that follows from awakening to a universe populated by nonhuman agencies. Even Latour (1993) has occasionally joined the (re)enchanted chorus by stating:

How could we be capable of disenchanting the world when every day our laboratories and our factories populate the world with hundreds of hybrids stranger than those of the day before. (Latour, 1993, p. 115)

I would argue that the inescapable Weberian references to disenchantment<sup>328</sup> in the body of work I am presenting here, even if Stengers & Prigogine (1997) write within the philosophy of science and Bennett (2001) within political theory, has important implications for sociological theory. For Bennett (2001), a core aspect of disenchantment is that "nonhuman nature [figures] as more or less inert 'matter'" (Bennett 2001, p. 7). In response to the disenchantment narrative, Bennett developed her own version of "enchanted materialism" as a disposition to create attachments with the world by appreciating its strangeness and liveliness in a variety of sites including the animal kingdom, technology, commodity capitalism and Kafkaesque bureaucracies (2001, p. 80). In her later work, on the other hand, Bennett (2010) emphasized the second understanding of enchantment:

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<sup>325</sup> That is, the self that exists at a distance from the world, "disengag[ed] from everything outside the mind" (Taylor, 2007, p. 38), as opposed to the self that is "porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers" (Taylor, 2007, p. 27).

<sup>326</sup> See also Bennett 2001, p. 63 for a similar argument in reverse, that is, how in the bygone enchanted age described by Max Weber "agency was distributed more widely to include non-human animals, natural forces, plants, and rocks."

<sup>327</sup> I use the parenthesis in deference to Bennett who wishes to distance herself from the "reenchanters," particularly from those of the ecospiritual hue (2001, p. 91). Instead, Bennett claims that the world has never been disenchanting in the first place (2001; p. 91).

<sup>328</sup> Disenchantment is a central concept in Max Weber's theory of secularization defined as "the knowledge or belief that *if we only wanted* to we *could* learn at any time that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things—in principle—can be *controlled through calculation*" (emphasis in the original) (1917-1919/2008, p. 35). The advantage of using the concept of disenchantment here is that it applies equally to immanentist and transcendentalist religions and spiritualities.

the first towards the humans who *feel* enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that *produce* (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies.<sup>329</sup> (Bennett 2010, p. xii)

Interestingly, in Bennett's (2010) account above the realization of nonhuman agencies does not have to result in a crippling of human agency but in a possibility for its enhancement through more ethical action. To be sure, the enchantment Bennett describes is not a return to the "cosmology of the Christian Middle Ages" (2001, p. 9) and its world of spirits but neither fits in the "contemporary understanding of secularism" (2001, p. 9). The third locus of enchantment that Bennett is exploring is an immanent, non-teleological enchantment which, ironically from the point of view of transcendentalist religions, has been fueled by scientific advances and the realization that the world is made of vibrant and agentic matter. That is the argument that Stengers & Prigogine develop (1997, p. 40); namely, that science has been able to move away from the paradigm of unchanging laws (what they call "the end of omniscience," Stengers & Prigogine, 1997, p. 33) to come to terms with the unpredictability of nature. As with Bennett, though, what seems *prima facie* a downgrading of human agency actually opens new paths of ethical action through "a dialogue with nature that cannot be dominated by a theoretical gaze, but must be explored, with an open world to which we belong, in whose construction we participate" (Stengers & Prigogine 1997, p. 40). In their conclusions, Stengers & Prigogine claim that "the old animist alliance is truly dead" (1997, p. 58) but so is also the world of the Copernican revolution. In their stead, Stengers & Prigogine invite us to inhabit a different, still materialist but fully enchanted, universe:

It is not the silent and monotonous world, abandoned by the old enchantments, the clock world over which we received jurisdiction. Nature is not made for us, and it has not surrendered to our will. (Stengers & Prigogine 1997, p. 58)

More important perhaps, the search for knowledge in such a world should no longer consist in Weber's disenchanted calculations (1917-1919/2008, pp. 31, 35), but rather in a "poetic listening" (Stengers & Prigogine 1997, p. 59) to nature which acknowledges the openness and creativity of the world in its becoming. Compare Stengers & Prigogine notion of "poetic listening" with Barad's promise that "if we listen carefully, we can hear the whispered murmuring of infinity immanent in even the smallest detail" (2012b, p. 16), or to Barad's claim that "[d]oing theory requires being open to the world's aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder" (2014, p. 154). In a sense, this study began by listening to the most open question I could think of: what is your story? Listening has been my main discipline as

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<sup>329</sup> Emphasis in the original.

a researcher and as a double outsider. It has been through the practice of listening that I learnt to become attuned to the voices of resistance to social constructionism that in the course of my study have arisen from different and unexpected quarters.

Arguably, social constructionism forced us to live in a cage within a cage. The larger one is Weber's famous "iron cage" of capitalist rationalization (1920/2001, p. 123). The smaller one, subtler and for that reason all the more pervasive, is the linguistic cage of meanings and representations. In that context, what posthumanism does is to leave the door of the linguistic cage ajar for those willing to cross it through embodied "practices/doings/actions" (Barad 2003, p. 802). On the other side, there is a world which is both familiar and strange. All of a sudden baskets and hammers are still baskets and hammers, but also something else, something other. Matter is still all around but now it is alive, vibrant, agentive. This is a world that is up for grabs. A materialist (re)enchantment of the kind advocated by Stengers, Prigogine and Bennett is one possible religious alternative for those who want to live more fully in the world without relapsing into "the old animist alliance" (Stengers & Prigogine, 1997, p. 58). But I have little doubt that what those authors are groping for is a religious response, a religion after religion, if you like. Bennett expresses it in crystal clear terms in her version of the Nicene Creed<sup>330</sup> for new materialists:

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that his pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually *doing things*. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.<sup>331</sup> (Bennett, 2010, p. 122)

The ironic connotations of Bennett's paraphrase of the Nicene Creed do not escape me, but I would argue that the explicit religious references are not exhausted by irony. I would rather situate the sensibility of authors like Stengers, Prigogine and Bennett in a context of "cross pressures" described by Taylor as a tug of war between secular narratives and the sense of their inadequacy

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<sup>330</sup> A explicit reference to the Nicene Creed is to be found in Bennett's (2010, p. 122) text. The Nicene Creed was traditionally believed to have been promulgated by the Council of Nicaea in 325 and later endorsed by the Council of Constantinople in 381, but that interpretation has been abandoned in modern times and its origin is still the focus of much scholarly debate (see Creeds: Christian Creeds, 2005). For comparative purposes, I reproduce the first sentence of the Nicene Creed as currently spoken by Catholics: "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." Source: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, retrieved from: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/>.

<sup>331</sup> Emphasis in the original.

(Taylor, 2007, p. 595). In the case of those authors, an essential part of their project seems to be to detach secularity from Weber's instrumental rationality and in this way to achieve a post-secular dispensation that combines a sense of awe and wonder with a commitment to science and reason (Weber, 1921-1922/1978, p. 24). Others will probably reject that synthesis as a new attempt to domesticate religion and will rather engage in enchantments of the ancient sort, or in the existential theism of a Charles Taylor, or in the daily embodiments of piety of a *sharia* or a *halakha*. At the end all comes back to the same: once the human subject no longer stands alone at the center, there is plenty of room for a whole cast of new actors. I believe that such is the messy world we are moving towards and my hope is that sociologists of religion—together with feminist quantum physicists, enchanted ANT scholars, intra-acting brittlestars and indeterminate dinoflagellates—will be there to partake of its puzzlements.

## Postscript

During my last period of fieldwork, Belinda was at the initial stages of her transition. She had come out to her wife and she had started taking hormones. Given that her community was left-of-center in the Orthodox world, she was hoping that she would be able to transition in place, perhaps even to save her marriage.

After my fieldwork ended, I contacted Belinda once in a while and asked her to let me know how things were going for her and her family. At the beginning, there were a series of promising signs. Belinda and her wife had decided to give it a shot at staying together and Belinda finally had come out to the community's rabbi. The rabbi's initial reaction had been supportive. He told Belinda that he abided by the Tzitz Eliezer and that he would work to make sure that Belinda and her family could remain in the community. However, as long as Belinda's transition was taking place and until she had undergone bottom surgery, the rabbi asked her to refrain from attending services. As Belinda put it, the rabbi's answer was "worse than [she] hoped, better than [she] expected." Although her forced withdrawal from services put a strain on Belinda's religious and family life—no longer being able to accompany two of her children—the prospects of a future readmission into the community as a full member seemed to make it worthwhile.

A few weeks before this manuscript went to print, I contacted Belinda once more. Unfortunately, the situation had changed for the worse. The rabbi did a *volte-face* and not only did he ban Belinda from services but also from all type of communal activities, inside and outside the synagogue. Furthermore, the rabbi also intimated that he no longer felt comfortable around Belinda. In spite of that, the rabbi vowed to continue working for Belinda's readmission, but after the recent turn of events Belinda had lost trust in him and feared that the ban would become permanent. Belinda's concerns seemed confirmed when later on she found out, second hand, that in her absence the rabbi had engaged in a process of erasure aimed at effacing any memory of hers as a (former) community member. Finally, the rabbi's faltering support as well as other pressures had taken a toll on Belinda's marriage. Although still on good terms with each other, Belinda and her wife were filing for divorce.

# Glossary

*aliyah, pl. aliyot*: occasion in which a male congregant is called up to the *bimah* to read from the Torah during synagogue services.

*Amidah*: ‘The Standing Prayer,’ one of the main prayers in a religious service.

*androgynos*: intersex.

*Ashkenazi*: pertaining to the Jews whose families originate from central and eastern Europe; among the ultra-Orthodox, often Yiddish-speaking.

*assur*: forbidden.

*baal teshuvah, pl. baalei teshuva*: a non-Orthodox Jewish person who becomes Orthodox.

*bar mitzvah*: ritual ceremony in which a Jewish boy comes of age.

*bat*: ‘daughter of’, used between two proper names to call congregants in ritual contexts. Ex: Leah bat Sarah (Leah daughter of Sarah).

*bedieved*: ‘after the fact,’ Talmudic term.

*beit din*: rabbinical court of three in charge of conversions, among other things.

*Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai*: the schools of Hillel and Shammai, comprising their students and followers.

*beit knesset, pl. batei knesset*: literally ‘house of assembly’ in Hebrew, a synagogue.

*ben*: ‘son of,’ used between two proper names to call congregants in ritual contexts. Ex: David ben Yakov (David son of Jacob).

*bimah*: raised platform in a synagogue used to read from the Torah scroll.

*birkat hamazon*: Jewish prayer of grace before meals.

*brakha, pl. brakhot*: blessing.

*Chabad*: A *chasidic* organization known for its outreach efforts toward unaffiliated Jews.

*charedi*: ‘God-fearing’; the self-designation of the people in the group that outsiders usually call ultra-Orthodox.

*chasid, pl. chasidim*: an ultra-Orthodox Jew belonging to the branch of Judaism called *Chasidism* that was founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in eastern Europe.

*chasidut*: the teachings of the *chasidim*, beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century R. Israel Ben Eliezer, the *Baal Shem Tov*.

*chazal*: Hebrew acronym for “our sages of blessed memory”; term used to refer to the sages from the Mishnah and Talmud eras.

*chazanit*: female synagogue cantor.

*chevra kadisha*: the ‘burial society’ devoted to preparing a corpse for burial, which includes a ritual washing of the body. In Orthodox Judaism, women and men are prepared for burial by a ‘burial society’ composed of members of their same gender.

*daat yachid*: ‘single opinion;’ ruling made by one *posek* that is not shared by any other *posek*.

*datlash*: Hebrew acronym for ‘*dati leshe’avar*’ or a formerly Orthodox person.

*daven*: Yiddish for praying (verb).

*Eretz Israel*: the Land of Israel.

*erev shabbat*: the eve of *shabbat*.

*ezrat gevarim*: the men’s section in an Orthodox synagogue.

*ezrat nashim*: the women’s section in an Orthodox synagogue.

*frum*: Yiddish for religiously observant.

*gadol*: a ‘great one,’ a Torah scholar of great stature.

*halakha*: Jewish Law.

*Hashem*: ‘The Name;’ a pious way to refer to God.

*hashgacha pratit*: divine providence.

*hashkafah*: outlook, worldview.

*Haskalah*: the Jewish Enlightenment that flourished in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and that advocated, among other things, for emancipation and education in both secular and religious subjects.

*hatafat dam brit*: the letting of a drop of blood, a ritual performed on male prospective converts who are already circumcised as a substitute for circumcision.

*giur*: religious conversion.

*kabbalah*: a mystical and esoteric tradition in Judaism frequently based on the teachings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century R. Isaac Luria.

*kashrut*: religious dietary laws.

*kavanah*: ‘intention,’ the attitude and mindset of an Orthodox Jew when praying or performing rituals.

*kehillah*, *pl. kehillot*: a Jewish community or congregation.

*kiddush*: blessing over wine recited at *shabbat* and Jewish holidays.

*kiddush Hashem*: ‘the sanctification of the (Holy) Name;’ acts of piety performed under duress, often associated with martyrdom.

*kippah*: skullcap

*klal*: the Jewish community.

*kol islah*: a prohibition that prevents women from singing in the presence of men.

*leyn*: to chant Torah according to a ritual cantillation.

*litvish*: literally Lithuanian; frequently used to refer to ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews who were historically opposed to *Chasidism*.

*lubavitch*: see *Chabad*.



*lulav* and *etrog*: the four species (myrtle, citron, willow and date palm leaf) needed to perform a special blessing for *Sukkot* that is mandatory for Orthodox men.

*mamzer*: an illegitimate child or the child of another *mamzer*.

*mechitzah*: partition or division; barrier used in Orthodox synagogues to separate the women's from the men's section.

*Meshiach*: the Messiah.

*mikvah*: ritual bath.

*minyan*, *pl. minyanim*: quorum of ten Jewish men necessary to perform certain religious practices.

*mitzvah*, *pl. mitzvot*: commandments as codified by the *halakha*.

- Negative *mitzvot*: those prohibiting an action, e.g. do not vow to idols.
- Positive *mitzvot*: commanding an action, e.g. fast on Yom Kippur.

*motzaei shabbat*: Saturday evening time after the end of *shabbat*.

*negiah*: the prohibition of physical contact with members of the opposite gender (binary speaking) outside the immediate family.

*niddah*: term referring to a menstruating woman who has not immersed herself yet in the *mikvah*. During *niddah* a wife is forbidden to have sexual relations with her husband.

*Pesach*: Passover.

*pikuach nefesh*: principle in *halakha* according to which saving a life takes precedence over most other *mitzvot*.

*posek*: a rabbi who, due to extensive training in *halakhic* scholarship, can decide over complex *halakhic* questions.

*psak*, *pl. psakim*: *halakhic* ruling given by a rabbi with comprehensive training as *halakhic* scholar.

*Purim*: a holiday that commemorates the story told in the book of Esther and in which masquerading is customary.

*rebbe*: head of a *chasidic* dynasty and spiritual leader of a particular *chasidic* group.

*Rosh HaShana*: the Jewish new year, one of the central Jewish holidays.

*Sephardic*: pertaining to the Jews who trace their ancestry back to the Ladin-speaking communities who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15th century.

*seudah*, *pl. seudot*: obligatory festive meal celebrated in connection with an important life event (circumcision, bar mitzvah, wedding, etc.) or religious holiday.

*shabbat*: the Sabbath or day of rest comprising from sunset to sunset between Friday and Saturday.

*shabbes*: Yiddish for *shabbat*.

*shem u-malkhut*: the name of God (Tetragrammaton) followed by the kingly attributes recited in blessings.

*shiddukh*: a match, a marriageable partner.

*shomer mitzvot*: male form for someone keeping *mitzvot*.  
*shomeret halakha*: female form for someone keeping the *halakha*.  
*shul*: term used mainly by Ashkenazi Jews to refer to the synagogue.  
*siddur*, *pl. siddurim*: Jewish prayer book.  
*smikhah*: rabbinical ordination.  
*sukkot*: the feast of the tabernacles, celebrated in memory of the 40 years spent by the people of Israel in the wilderness.  
*tallit*: prayer shawl.  
*tallit katan*: fringed garment covering the chest and back containing *tzitziot* usually worn by Orthodox men under their clothing.  
*tefillah*: prayer.  
*tefillah betzibur*: public worship, usually in the synagogue.  
*tefillin*: phylacteries.  
*tikkun*: the spiritual mending of oneself and the world to hasten the coming of the Messiah.  
*tikkun olam*: see *tikkun*. The expression *tikkun olam* ('mending the world') also allows secular humanist readings as a general will to make the world a better place.  
*treif*: Yiddish for non-kosher.  
*tumtum*: A person whose biological sex is not visible to the naked eye and, therefore, cannot be determined.  
*tzitzit*, *pl. tzitziot*: ritual tassels.  
*tzniut*: modesty.  
*vaad*: rabbinical council, different from the *beit din*.  
*yahrzeit*: death anniversary.  
*yeshivah*, *pl. yeshivot*: religious school mainly devoted to the study of Talmud.  
*yeshivish*: 'black hat' Orthodox Jews whose life is centered around Talmud study in the *yeshivot*, often used as a synonym for *litvish*.  
*yetzer ha-ra*: the evil inclination; what incites people to sin.  
*yichud*: according to *halakha*, the prohibition for a woman and man who are not married to each other nor closely related to be together in a secluded space.  
*Yom Kippur*: The 'Day of Atonement,' one of the central Jewish holidays.  
*zimun*: prayer recited before *birkat hamazon* when 3 or more men eat bread together. On occasion, a single male youngster who has not reached *bar mitzvah* age can be counted. When the gathering includes 10 or more eligible members, the text of the prayer changes slightly adding the Hebrew word *Elokeinu* (Our God).

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