Multi-Literacies and Democracy: Religious Zionist Women Reading Actuality in Antiquities

Tamar El-Or

Prologue

The first draft of this article was completed at the beginning of 1995. On November 4 of that year, the prime minister of Israel, Yitshak Rabin, was assassinated. The event caught me in the midst of writing a book about the Midrashah (of which this article is part), a sister institution of the Yeshivah on the Bar-Ilan University campus, where the assassin was a student. A great deal of the public discourse in Israel dealt with the community under study, and the spotlight was focused on Bar-Ilan University and its Jewish studies institutions in an effort to check the connections between their literacy and the assassination.

Far from Israel, as a fellow at the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, I tried to read through all of my field notes and this ethnography. A process that was quite distressing and painful then turned to a challenge after the June 1996 elections and the change of governments. An underlying theme of the ethnography was the dilemma of Israel as a Jewish state versus a democracy of all its citizens. My original intentions were to show that the Midrashah community, though incapable of crossing its national borders, was eager to remain part of the collective that does so. These intentions were dashed by the assassination. It took a while (and mainly the election results) to see that the assassination did not contradict the former interpretation. On the contrary, the struggle remained the same: Who defines the collective? How much room is there for all groups under the canopy of democracy? And what sort of democracy will it be?

1998. Jewish Social Studies. Vol. 4 No. 2

Thus, I decided to leave the bulk of the article in its original form—an exercise that highlights both the advantages and the dangers of writing in real time.

The scope of this article does not allow me to fully reflect upon the questions of "positioning," of working with a community of whom one is politically a rival. It also does not provide me the space to describe and discuss the various methodologies I used in this research and to present all of my findings. This part of my ethnography conveys the opportunities and limits of border crossing as a strategy, for the community under study as well as for the anthropologist and her political and cultural milieus. My forthcoming monograph about the Midrashah tells the rest.

Ethnography, Literacy, and Radical (Critical) Pedagogy

> Radical Pedagogy needs an anthropological grounding but one that recognizes the force of structural determinants that do not show up in the most immediate experiences of teachers and students.
>
> —Henry Giroux, *Ideology, Culture and the Process of Schooling*

The demand to supply immediate experiences while stressing their structural determinants is no threat to anthropology. The need for those "immediate experiences," better known as ethnography, can still be fulfilled by anthropologists who keep going places and taking notes. Henry Giroux's expectation is for a theorized story, one that recognizes its analytical force *a priori*. Giroux's choice of anthropology grounding brings together the fields of literacy[1] and radical (critical) pedagogy[2] with ethnography. Like any other juncture of disciplines, there is the potential for juxtaposition—to read and analyze an ethnography vis-à-vis the theoretical expectations of those disciplines, and to examine the theory in light of the ethnography.

The ethnography in this article provides a rare glimpse of highly literate young Jewish Orthodox women striving to break the boundaries of their knowledge for personal, cultural, and political reasons. Their efforts are met with numerous alternative literacies that create a stressful dialogue: between religious fundamentalism and democracy, between

fixed values and relativism, between ancient texts and current events, between idolized images and living young women. It is within this dialogue that I wish to search for the structural determinants of the ethnography by intertwining the theory with some unexpected "immediate experiences."

Such as:

Six of us were bent over the huge pages of the Talmud, trying to answer the questions posed by our rabbi. Every week he left us a note at the library that we were expected to use to prepare for our lesson. Most of us were relatively passive in the discussion—my knowledge of the Talmud was poor, and others with a more extensive background let the discussion be dominated by two students who read Aramaic. They held the original Babylonian Talmud while the rest of us used the Adin Stienzaltz edition, which includes a Hebrew translation. The discussion itself was rather tame, not like I had imagined when I prepared to study the Talmud. I had foreseen lively discussions like the men had, with much gesticulating and body movements. Men usually stand; we sat at the library table and whispered. That day we were dealing with the laws of Passover, which aroused no special interest. Suddenly a student I had never seen before approached our table and was warmly greeted by the others.

> *Leah*: Hi, Osnat, it's good to see you, where were you last night?
> *Osnat*: Where was I? Come now, where do you think I was?
> *Leah*: I don't know, it was not a mitsvah.
> *Osnat*: It sure was honey, and a great one. The fact that we didn't see each other there just goes to show you that people did see it as a mitsvah. How else would you get 100,000 people to a demonstration?

The dull debate about the laws of Passover was forgotten, and a new, much more lively one evolved.

> *Sigal*: The police said 30,000, were did you get 100?
> *Osnat*: The police, they double the numbers of any leftist demo, and downplay ours.
> *Danah*: I met the whole world there, all my girlfriends from the Ulpena, and from the national service [military service for religious girls], and girls I know from Bnei Akiva [youth movement], and just those are about 100,000 people *(everybody laughs)*.
> *Sigal*: I must admit, it was one of the biggest, not that I have such vast experience. During the withdrawal from Sinai [1982] I was only a kid. It was inspiring to see the big banners, the masses of our people, the steady stream

that kept filling the great square and overflowing into the surrounding streets.

Osnat remained standing. She wore a long, loose denim skirt and large t-shirt and carried a huge backpack. She kept picking up her long, brown, curly hair to cool her neck in the heat.

Osnat: Let me tell you the worst of it all. On my way home I remembered that if one of the People of Israel is fortunate enough to be in the company of 6 Ribo, he or she can make a special blessing—and I missed it! I didn't sleep all night. A golden opportunity and I missed it!
Leah: Wait, now you have me worried. First of all, if it's 6 Ribo, that's 60,000, and yes, we missed it. But I think the prayer book says 60 Ribo, and there were not that many, not even according to our sources.

Osnat let the oversized backpack slide to the floor, opened a side zipper, and drew out her prayer book covered in thick plastic. She turned the pages rapidly while Leah got up to look over her shoulder.

Leah: Stop! Here it is, Aha! It says 60 Ribo. Thank God. I'm so relieved. Six hundred thousand is the number required for the blessing, and we didn't have it.

I watched the young women I had been with for the past seven months. I had joined them to learn about the new phenomenon of Orthodox women's literacy: their demand to study more Jewish texts and philosophy, their thirst for knowledge and dedication to acquiring it.

Joining the Midrashah, a Religious Zionist college for girls,[3] was my next step after studying ultra-Orthodox women and their literacy.[4] I learned a great deal in the seven months I had already spent at the Midrashah, but the incident described here greatly enhanced my understanding of the relationships between knowledge, the mastery of texts, piety, and political awareness. The dual commitment of these young women to piety and political targets was striking. It was not clear to me whether they were more eager to perform the rare religious act of making a special blessing in a large crowd or to have a big turnout for a demonstration.

An old anthropological feeling came over me at that moment in the library: a sense of rupture, of estrangement. It was not the long dresses I had to put on when I went there, or covering my shoulders on a hot day. It was the assumed atmosphere of "yesterday's demonstration" that I

could not share—the interest around the table in a demonstration I oppose—and, most of all, my surprise at the smooth and unproblematic movement between political and religious literacies. This movement, which is a vital component of the religious parties' discourses, surprised me in its everyday, matter-of-fact dissemination in the lives of the young Religious Zionist women. The presence of multiple literacies, and the patterns of dialogue of each one of them, became germane to understanding the process by which these women learn. The act of studying had to be seen in the broad political context, and when so viewed both spheres took on new forms. The students combined and separated them with ease. What would please God more: contemporary political activism or an ancient religious blessing? The ability to shift between democratic practices and religious ones conferred new meaning on each. The dialogue between the two tells us what sort of knowledge the young women are looking for. Will this knowledge (which most of their mothers do not have) make them religiously and/or politically fanatic, or will the presence of multi-literacies lead them to develop a critical eye? The absence of clear or known borders between the political and religious made the crossing and the merging the most important practice, throwing democracy and Jewish law and knowledge into question.

I present an ethnography of a study session with several literacies, and I trace the rhythm of their presentations, the potential of each to critique the others, and the critical power they have for the students' immediate communities and the hegemonic communities with which they negotiate. Following the ethnography is a discussion of literacy as cultural critique and of its theoretical scope and limits, with Giroux's border-crossing pedagogy leading the analysis. But, first, a brief description of the Midrashah.

The Midrashah: A Cultural Home on Campus

Most of the women at the *Midrashah* are students at Bar-Ilan University. Bar-Ilan is a Religious Zionist institution located in the center of Israel that offers a standard university curriculum with compulsory Jewish studies. It accepts students regardless of nationality, religiosity, or gender.[5] Orthodox faculty are preferred. The women's Midrashah was established in 1976 next to a men's Yeshivah. These institutions are open only to religious students, and many opt to take their compulsory Jewish studies courses there. This creates a division in the enrollment in these courses between the general and the religious Zionist students, with a

gender division in the latter. The university's declared policy of "creating a meeting point" between nonreligious and religious Jews is subverted by those institutions. They turn into "homes" for the religious students who are going to school for the first time in a coeducational system and with nonreligious peers, like Orah:

> After the weekend, when I have a big pack full of things I need for the week, I go first to the Midrashah and leave it there before continuing on to my classes. The Midrashah is my home on campus. I sometimes go there to relax, to meet girlfriends, to be amongst my own. This is the first time I am studying with nonreligious people, and with males, and it's not that simple. I prefer the cafeteria there, and I use the synagogue. The secretaries know me. It's kind of home.

Orah is a 21-year-old undergraduate student in chemistry and Jewish philosophy. She takes courses at the Midrashah beyond the required ones, like many of her girlfriends. They are part of a new generation of women who seek more Jewish education.

The opportunities for Jewish higher education for Religious Zionist women are growing steadily; 20 years ago there were none. Israeli, Religious Zionist girls and women could not study Gemara. The first women's colleges offering Gemara studies were established for women from English-speaking countries.[6] Gradually, this novelty entered the more liberal communities of Religious Zionists (the religious Kibutsim, or high school Pelekh in Jerusalem), then the first colleges admitted more and more Israeli-born students (although they still have a majority of students and faculty of Anglo-Saxon background). Finally, because of constant pressure from the students, the traditional institutions (like the Bar-Ilan Midrashah) have initiated special and restricted opportunities to the study of Gemara within them. In 1996, 300 students of the Bar-Ilan Midrashah applied for the program at the new Bet Midrash; 30 were accepted.

Behind Jewish women's right to general and Jewish education lies a history that is beyond the scope of this paper. The story is similar to that of other groups of women but has some unique aspects.[7] It is not one story, since the Jewish people were and are spread around the world, and each epoch and each area has different cultures, sociopolitical conditions, and the like.

This ethnography is about an outgrowth of East European history because that is where the population being studied had its origins, because it has a dominant and powerful history in Israel, and because it contains the roots of the political movements related to the Midrashah. Other histories—Oriental, ultra-Orthodox, secular Zionist, Palestin-

ian—are relevant to the ethnography and were present in one way or another during the observations and interviews.

The Religious Zionist community operates a separate public education system under state supervision. It offers a standard curriculum and Jewish studies, and the graduates follow routine careers of their own choosing, unlike ultra-Orthodox Jews who keep to circumscribed occupations. The ultra-Orthodox rejection of secular life and preference for a "society of men scholars"[8] strongly influenced the Religious Zionist community. In a multicultural society where they enjoy the benefits of a modern state, the ultra-Orthodox chose to reject modernism. The Religious Zionists, who are struggling to become a vital part of modern society as Orthodox people, are confronted with serious dilemmas. Who is the correct Jew? Who is a better Jew? In this cultural struggle, the community developed its nationalist side and became the leader of the "Greater Israel" ideology. It led the settlement movements in the occupied territories under the approving eye of several governments, and for a while it was at the forefront of Israeli Jewish society. Its members were the new pioneers, armed, this time, with the Bible and a messianic theology.[9] The urge for Jewish studies was both an inner and outer need (vis-à-vis competing literacies, secular and ultra-Orthodox) and had its effect on both men and women.

During this study (1992–95), the ideology of the Religious Zionists was under serious political threat because they came to represent the "enemies of peace," the crazy fundamentalists, the Arab killers. Being excluded from the political and ideological center by the Labor-Left government created stress and uncertainty; one response was to seek refuge in the texts where they reconfirmed their threatened identity. The growing phenomenon of women studying Jewish texts—beyond the expected ones, and more than their mothers—began long before this ideological threat. The impact of this phenomenon is quite revolutionary. In spite of the difficulties piled in front of the young female students who wish to acquire a full Jewish education, a major sociotheological change (widely acknowledged in the United States, but new in Israel) is taking place in gender relations.[10] Their new educational experiences are not always empowering (as one will be able to grasp from the following ethnography). Yet the discourses emerging within the community push it to challenge existing gender relations. Ultimately, the young Religious Zionist women demand more and more participation in the religious life (starting with studying religious texts, but moving towards new domains of community life and rituals). This part of my research meets them studying Judaism and themselves in a fairly new educational atmosphere, where they are also experiencing political upheaval.

January 2, 1994

It's the second week of a full strike in all Israeli universities, called by the teachers. Bar-Ilan University is also on strike, but classes continue as usual in the Midrashah. Sanctions never apply to Torah studies. The men's Yeshivah is not on strike either. Most of the women would normally be on campus for regular university studies, but today all of them have made a special point of attending class and very few are absent. They come from Israel proper as well as from the occupied territories.

Before class began, the rabbi approached me and said, "You remember our original agreement, right? You've come to study and nothing else." I have that familiar feeling, the fear of lying, the anxiety over losing my material. What do I care, he can't take away what I've already got, there's nothing he can do, anyway he knows I'm doing research, he gave me permission to be here. At the same time there is the desire to continue to be accepted, to cooperate, not to be cut off.

> *Me*: Of course I remember, how could I forget. In fact I thought about dropping by to talk to you about it, because, you know, it's not exactly . . . I know I said I'm studying and studying means I'm studying Torah and also a little about how the women study and all that.
> *Rabbi*: I just don't want to end up looking like that rebetsin [spoken with derision] from the *Gur hasidim* in your book.[11]

The class is about to begin and all the women are looking at us. It's embarrassing. We exchange a few words about a woman he knows who is a student of mine, and he begins the class.

> *Rabbi*: So, you all remember what we read last week in Tractate Berakhot 28b. There we met Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai on his deathbed, tearfully parting from his beloved students. We tried to understand from the written text what he fears. A righteous man like Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, what does he have to fear from the heavenly court? After we have read together some selections from the Bible and other parts of the Gemara, I want to show you a Gemara I'm sure you're all familiar with, the Gemara in which Rabbi Akiva mocks Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and calls him a fool—a fool for having chosen Yavneh and its scholars instead of Jerusalem and its sovereignty during the Great Rebellion against the Romans [A.D. 66–70].[12] And you must also be familiar with Yehoshafat Harkabi's book[13] that presents Rabbi Akiva as an extreme nationalist who did not correctly read

the military and political map and who led Israel to destruction by supporting Bar-Kokhba. I ask you, my dear girls, what's being said here? Rabbi Akiva didn't read Harkabi's book? Ah, that's funny, good, so he didn't read the book, but do you think then that he didn't know what Harkabi realizes today? I imagine Rabbi Akiva was aware of the Romans' might and understood what risks he was taking. What brought Rabbi Akiva to criticize his predecessor Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, 70 years after Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai chose the Torah and not national sovereignty?

Nu yeladot, what do you think?

Efrat: Rabbi Akiva represents the Israeli Jew, the Jew who doesn't compromise his honor, who doesn't surrender. Like the Jews who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto and didn't go like lambs to the slaughter. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai represents the Jew in exile who takes into account that there are women and children here, let's get what we can. There were people like that in the Holocaust, too, and we know what their accounting led to in the end.

Yael: Today there are also those who use force and those who follow the spiritual Torah path. Rabbi Akiva simply wanted to show that the Jews had power, to give the people the message that there is hope and that miracles can happen, and that you should do what you have to do without making compromises.

Rachel: Yohanan ben Zakkai was prepared to give up the external trappings of sovereignty for wisdom and knowledge and the Torah, and Rabbi Akiva simply didn't believe that you could live only under the crown of the Torah without the crown of kingship and priesthood. They're two different opinions, two different views of the world. You can't say that one is right and one is wrong.

Efrat: It's really amazing if you think about it in the context of our own times.

Rabbi: I don't really want to talk about the context of our times, but since you've already mentioned it, on the eve of the declaration of independence of the State of Israel in 1948, there was heated debate about whether to declare it or not. Ben-Gurion decided to make the declaration against the judgment of many who were afraid of how the Arabs would react. Do we know whether his decision was the right one? We don't know because not enough time has passed. I only want to talk about the moment of doubt, that every leader has to go to his grave with his doubts. That is the reason that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai cries in front of his students: he still is not sure he acted properly. Take Menahem Begin, he punished himself while he was still alive. He put himself under house arrest because he understood in retrospect that his decision about the Lebanon War had been in error. It's a matter of the moral greatness of the leader. I don't want to continue with analogies to today, only to tell you that a leader as great as Yohanan ben Zakkai lived with his doubts, and that says something about the measure and the depth of the man. Because today it seems to me that our leaders never agonize over anything.

Shulamit: Maybe that's tactical, maybe they agonize but make a show of being certain.

Rabbi: I hope you're right. I have a feeling that our leaders today are not on the same moral plane. But let's return to the matter at hand. Who was right in retrospect, Rabbi Akiva or Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai? We have the historical perspective to judge them.

(The women know that history proved Rabbi Akiva wrong, the Bar-Kokhba revolt having led to the exile of the Jewish people, and they know that the Torah enabled the Jewish people to survive in exile for 2,000 years without national sovereignty, but they still do not want to say anything critical about Rabbi Akiva. Even I, though not part of their subculture, was taught in the secular Zionist school system to revere Rabbi Akiva. He was presented as a great scholar who would not give up his right to study. I knew him as a humanist and a hero. When we were children, the Bar-Kokhba revolt was depicted as a heroic chapter in Jewish history, an example to be emulated by the Zionist revival in Israel.)

Rabbi: Nu, girls? You don't want to say anything bad about Rabbi Akiva, don't want to say that he made a mistake? You're allowed to, you know. After all, on the face of it Yohanan ben Zakkai was right. I know, in Ulpena they don't tell you that great rabbis can make mistakes, right?
Leah: Maybe, but it could be that according to Rabbi Akiva's way the exile would have lasted less time.
Rabbi: Okay, but you're forgetting an important historical point. Rabbi Akiva was, in his time, already confronting Christianity, which offered a universal religion with no connection to national identity. The concept of the chosen people was under threat. Anyone could join the new religion, regardless of nationality. That is what concerned Rabbi Akiva. In his eyes, Yohanan ben Zakkai's proposal for a spirituality not dependent on national affiliation puts what is unique to Judaism at risk. And that idea continues to exist today. If you cross the bridge here by the University into Benei Brak [an ultra-Orthodox town], you will hear the same opinions, this very day: spiritual Judaism without any connection to nationalism. Even though Rabbi Akiva failed militarily, he did not fail historically. Why? He brought the aspiration for national existence, the hope for national rebirth, into Jewish discourse. There is a need for opposing forces of impetus and restraint. That's the way critical thinking grows, that's how development takes place. Like the tension between the Hasidim and the Lithuanians that in the end has a positive effect. I don't want to think what the fate of the Jewish people would have been had it not embodied both these forces, spirituality and nationalism.

When he finishes making his case, one of the women raises her hand and says:

Efrat: Rabbi, I know, you already said that you don't like to talk about contemporary issues, but with the situation the way it is, it really is hard not to apply it to today.
Rabbi: Apply it to today? Do you want me to talk politics? Oh, all right, we'll close all the windows. Tamar! Stop writing.

All eyes are turned towards me. They laugh and someone says, "She's probably got a tape recorder."

Rabbi: Look, in my opinion, everything that's happening now is really an expression of the deep and fundamental cultural war under way in Israeli society, for which the debate over the territories is just a cover. I'm in favor of putting all the cards on the table. We must decide what kind of Jewish state we want here when it comes down to it. There are several models, Rabbi Shakh's, Shulamit Aloni's, ours, Rabin's, many kinds. A decision has to be made. I'm not afraid of a fight. It doesn't have to be a fight with rifles. It is a very deep struggle and it has to be fought.
Orah: Maybe the time is not ripe for decisions. Like we don't have a constitution because it's not possible. If there was a decision there would be two nations here, there would be a split.
Rabbi: I prefer a split.
Orah: And if there is a decision you don't like, a democratic decision on a model that you don't accept, would you accept it? And if there won't be any difference between Jewish and Arab citizens? If there is full equality of rights, or a binational state?
Rabbi: If the state is not Jewish, I won't be part of it.

Silence in the classroom.

After the class I walk with him to his office. Some of the students want to talk to him but he puts them off for a few moments. He leaves the door open and we sit down across from each other. I propose an alternative reading to his interpretation of the story about Yohanan ben Zakkai and Akiva. I continue with the same doubt that one of the students raised about how deciding not to decide can be a solution. About a mutual recognition of distinctions, separation of religion and state. He listens with interest and appears to be thinking about it seriously. I share with him the shock I felt at what he said about not being part of a binational state and preferring a split.

Rabbi: I simply don't think that Rabin today has the same morality as Yohanan ben Zakkai had. Even though he made a similar momentous decision, I'm not sure he isn't sleeping nights—I'm not sure he has the same degree of spiritual greatness, that drunken peasant.
Me: I agree that he does not have moral greatness, and I don't see him as a

great spiritual leader. He's carrying out a policy that others formulated, and he can lead. I don't believe he's sensitive or moral, but I believe in the road he's taking.
Rabbi: Perhaps we have to give it a chance, to try it. Why don't you raise your hand in class and say what you just said. It's very important for me.
Me: I don't feel comfortable talking. It's not my place. I'm not part of all this.
Rabbi: Please, I want you to offer your interpretation of the story, what you told me here. I'd like you to say it in class, including your political interpretation.

I never presented my political interpretations in front of that class, or anywhere else—though as the tape recorder remark shows, most of the students could guess where I stand.

Multi-Literacies and the Cultural Struggle over Democracy

> The importance of the debate on literacy, difference, and schooling raises important questions about the fragile nature of democracy itself.
>
> —Henry Giroux, "Literacy, Difference, and the Politics of Border Crossing"

The most powerful sentence in the above session was: "If the state is not Jewish, I won't be part of it" (*Al yehi helki imah*). The meta-subject of the peace policy and the 1996 elections was whether Israel is to remain a Jewish state or become a completely democratic state of all its citizens. This subject colors the session, but only the students, by their questions, extract it and bring it to the forefront and to its climax. And that climax silences the dialogue. The presence of multi-literacies, including a post-Zionist one, is overruled by one literacy: the split. The rupture is presented by the rabbi as his choice over the postmodern vision of a state of all its citizens. A theoretical pause is needed here in order to untangle the emerging literacies.

The challenge of the postmodern era to critical pedagogy is taken up by Henry Giroux in his later writings.[14] The need to legitimize race and ethnic differences, and the obligation to relate to feminism[15] while being committed to education beyond critique, led Giroux to develop the "border-crossing pedagogy."

Giroux reads literacy as a discursive practice capable of dealing with

the crucial dilemmas of the *other*, of representation, voice, history, and differences. Literacy, he claims, marks out the borders of histories, which determine the limits of discourses. It is both an ethical and a political practice because it is done from a certain position toward others, including power, gender, and race. Any discussion of literacy is a discussion of democracy because it can withhold, represent, and empower different groups. Border pedagogy points out the myths of both standardization and pluralism in the educational sphere. It trains its students to cross the limits of their cultural existence, to understand others on their own terms. It seeks the recreation of multi-literacies that accommodate multi-identities without hierarchies, oppression, or exploitation. The existence of multi-literacies and their use to decode debated questions enables deconstruction of the dominant literacy.

It is clear to Giroux that most educators use several literacies that they present to their students and debate for a while, usually in order to dismiss them or to show them as irrelevant or inaccurate. This is the basis of most teaching and of preaching. It assures the audience that options have been checked and truth found. Many literacies were present in the ethnography presented here, stemming from a variety of sources, epochs, ethics, and voices. Sometimes they were quite close to a deconstructive experiment. and sometimes they wore the cloak of Orthodoxy. Most of the time they bounced back and forth between the two.

Literacy studies are usually based on ethnographies of oppressed, low-literate, disenfranchised groups. Anthropology and cultural critique subvert the story to elevate the weak and castigate the strong. How well trained is the anthropologist to deal with a literate elite that stands in opposition to the certain ideologies in which she believes?

I therefore chose border-crossing pedagogy to read my ethnography, and I hope that the ethnography will reread it in return.

The Presence of Multi-Literacies

• The strike of all the universities in Israel developed into a serious and protracted one. Intense debate took place in the media about the future of higher education, the status of professors as intellectuals, and the value of the knowledge they purveyed to the society and the state. But the Midrashah—which is part of the university—kept teaching. Some teachers who worked in both institutions struck in one and taught in the other. Although the students generally supported the strike, they came to Midrashah and Yeshivah classes, affirming the difference between the two institutions. The university's literacy is a secular asset to be traded on

the market; the Midrashah's literacy is a way of life, a sacred act beyond economic considerations. One does not forgo the holy deed of learning the Torah for any reason. Students and teachers alike knew there was more to the strike than money, and they acknowledged that sometimes the academic level was higher in the university departments than in the Midrashah. But this did not prevent them from reconfirming the difference between the two literacies and their hierarchy.

• The rabbi-teacher is a member of the university faculty. He allowed me to attend his classes, read my previous research, and knew what and where I teach. His comment to me at the beginning of the lesson revealed concern about his future representation in my anthropological research. He differentiated himself from "that rebetsin," the teacher in the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic community in my previous research. He did not want to be associated with her and her literacy: they are not of his caliber.

• The Talmud is the most important text in Orthodox scholarship. When people say "He studies Torah," they mean the Talmud. Our lesson was the "Agadot hazal," the legends of the Talmud—what are referred to as the "soft" part. The Talmud literacy was therefore present in an indirect way. The rabbi handed out photocopies of several of these legends at each lesson. He usually remembered to note their sources but sometimes forgot, and the students did not ask for them. The collection reflected no discernible rhyme or reason to the choice or order of the legends; it was his own selection.

The national poet of Israel, Hayim Nakhman Bialik (1873–1934), who came from an extremely Orthodox background and joined the secular Zionist revolution, participated in collecting the legends of the Talmud and published them in 1908.[16] This collection was meant to bridge the ancient literacy and the emerging Israeli one, and parts were and are being taught in the public secular schools. One day the rabbi told us—with a smile on his face—that he usually photocopies from this volume and was disappointed only twice, and then for minor reasons. So, texts from the Talmud are presented on photocopied pieces of paper, not in the huge books, making a detour around the monumental work of Bialik, the Jew who removed his head cover and became a symbol of nonreligious Judaism.

• The rabbi built upon the previous literacies of his students, assuming they have a rich knowledge of Judaism and a vivid memory. Acquainted with their scholarly background, he selects parts of the large Jewish literacy to use in this course. Several times he treats their literacy as "girls' literacy," Ulpena literacy, and his references to it are cynical. He points to its moral content, its ethics, its piety. On the one hand he

respects their Jewish education, and on the other he ridicules its limited static nature and hints that "men do it differently." By so doing, he reinforces the fact that men learn Jewish studies in a totally different way, and that the women's efforts to change this by coming to the Midrashah is hopeless. At the same time, he exposes the women to the practice of critique engaged in by male scholars but withheld from the women in their previous schooling. The rabbi urges them to speak up through the old pedagogical practice of scorn.[17] As one student told me, "He opened my mind and for that I will be eternally grateful, but I'll never take his classes again, because I cannot stand the humiliation."

• Mentioning Harkabi's book, the rabbi evokes a former army general, a nonreligious historian whose book published in 1983 sparked controversy because of its sacrilegious treatment of Bar-Kokhba, the leader of the revolt against the Roman Empire. The rabbi assumes again that the students know the book, or at least its major claims. He does not disagree with Harkabi's analysis of strategy, but he points out aspects of the political and theological context within which Rabbi Akiva took a stand with the rebels. The "Harkabi discourse" that destroyed the hero of our Zionistic childhood is partly accepted by the rabbi, and he presents the academic research surrounding it as reliable. But the hard facts, which the rabbi suspects were known to Rabbi Akiva as well as to Harkabi, do not tally with Harkabi's conclusions. A religious set of meanings beyond the objective-strategic one to explain the revolt was later addressed by the teacher.

• The discourse of the Holocaust and its moral and historical literacy were brought into the discussion quite early. It caught me by surprise, since Israeli Jews tend to use this strongest of historical arguments only as the last resort and not waste it by introducing it too soon. Efrat did not wait long before likening the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi ben Zakkai to the painful debate about the behavior of the Jews during World War II. Perhaps the revolt against the Romans—by all standards a major event in Jewish history—was as vivid to Efrat as the holocaust. Her Zionist-Orthodox education (and that of the other students, I assume, because no one commented) presents these events on a linear continuum. Many years ago my secular-Zionist education did the same, but since then this presentation has been challenged and turned literally upside down.

According to students in the Midrashah, Jews were divided into two groups: passive ones who took their honor to the crematorium, and brave ones who preserved Jewish honor for one glorious moment before dying. This passive/active dichotomy divides ultra-Orthodox from Zionist-Orthodox Jews. It also divides the former right-wing government

from the 1992–96 one, and the public who support the peace process from those who oppose it. The dichotomy stands so long as no one breaks it and reveals the social construction behind it. Efrat's comment recreated the dichotomy as a natural one, enabling the literacy of passive/active Judaism to prevail.

• Into this atmosphere of activism (which is not exclusively an Orthodox one), Yael threw in a religious literacy: if one is strong, God helps with miracles. With this statement she recreates the gap between Zionist activism and Zionist-Orthodox activism.

• Rachel adds the pluralistic approach: "They're two different opinions, two different views of the world[;] you can't say that one is right and one is wrong." She speaks for different philosophies, diverse stands and positions. It's not clear to me whether this is an ordinary pluralistic discourse or the traditional Jewish one of "the Torah has 70 faces" (can be interpreted differently) or a combination of both. The tone of her comment leads me to interpret it as a moral declaration, a call to refrain from judging either position and to give both legitimacy even if their reasons are not clear to us. The humble Ulpena literacy seems to be couched here in a pluralistic discourse.

• As we move through the lesson, more literacies are introduced. The rabbi mentions Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) and Begin (1913–92), two prominent leaders from opposite sides of the political fence, but when they enter the Midrashah lesson their profound differences disappear. They are brought up as examples of "great moral leaders." Ben-Gurion, the father of the nation, gets credit for having had insomnia; Begin, symbol of right-wing nationalism, gets credit for punishing himself. Paradoxically, the self-punishment is not for returning the occupied territories to Egypt and initiating the peace process opposed by the Religious Zionists, but for going to war in Lebanon (1982), an action they strongly backed. The rabbi dismisses the essence of the political act and stresses the personal, moral, ethical merit of each leader. Both Ben-Gurion and Begin showed knowledge of Jewish texts, expressed deep feelings about the Jewish tradition, and stressed their obligation to the entire nation. They represented the state leader who can reach all sectors of the nation beyond his personal political ideology and acts—unlike Rabin, whose measure lay in the magnitude of his actions and who showed little respect for Jewish tradition.

• The rabbi then brings in the literacy of Christianity, presenting it as a major threat to the national existence of the Jews and stating that Rabbi Akiva's political decisions were taken in view of this threat. Christianity offered a nation-free religion, breaking the unique tie between the two and challenging the Jews' claim to being "the chosen people." Thus, any

political act should be judged according to the Jews' ability to reject this threat. Ben-Gurion, Begin, and Rabbi Akiva were faithful to this principle, each in a different way.

• The ultra-Orthodox literacy does not ignore the dual commitment to religion and nationalism; it postpones realization of the latter. The rabbi suggests that the students cross the footbridge over the highway that connects Bar-Ilan University with the ultra-Orthodox city of Benei Brak to see the real face of their ideology. Crossing the bridge means giving up the commitment to nationalism.

The recreation of the dichotomy between ultra-Orthodoxy and national Orthodoxy is crucial to the rabbi, because there is a massive border crossing on both sides. The national Orthodox have became increasingly religious, while the ultra-Orthodox have become more nationalistic.

• Finally, one of the students asks the rabbi to relate his interpretation to the contemporary context, to stop hinting and be more direct. The rabbi makes a brief ploy of refusing, then accedes to her request. He lays out his perception of a nation state and his understanding of democracy. In a bold statement he calls the current disputes in Israeli society a cultural struggle in which the political issues are only a cover for the deep disagreements about the Jewish character of the state. He mentions several models, using well-known figures for each: Rabbi Shakh stands for the ultra-Orthodox, originally anti-national model; Shulamit Aloni (minister of culture and arts during the study) stands for the separation of religion and state and for left-wing politics; and Prime Minister Yitshak Rabin stands for expediency aimed at giving up the occupied territories and the dream of a "Greater Israel."

If for a moment one could understand the rabbi's call for a democratic cultural struggle in which the minorities accept the decision of the majority, or where different discourses exist side by side, Ora's interpretation becomes relevant. Would he accept the majority's decision? Is he ready to treat the Palestinians as full citizens? No, he answered, "If the state is not Jewish, I won't be part of it." His forceful declaration softens somewhat when we move to his office.

Withdrawing from the foreseeable postmodern, multi-nation state is more complicated than it looks. The Religious Zionists made a great spiritual and physical effort to join the Zionist secular revolution. For a long time they were on the margin of that revolution, until the 1970s and 1980s, when they conquered its front ranks. They led the settlement movement in the occupied territories, sent their sons to elite army units, worked within the establishment to promote immigration from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia, and carried on the old Zionist

ideology. Somehow, behind their backs or maybe before their unbelieving eyes, everything changed. The rabbi listened to me very carefully, looking for hooks in my "leftist discourse" on which to hang his hopes, on which he could still be part of the community around him. His readiness to detach himself from this community looked slightly different in his office. The enormous investment of the Zionist Orthodox in public life created a strong (and sacred) bond between them and the state. Their efforts to prove that it is possible to be both pious and modern citizens, their efforts to merge Zionism with Judaism, and their personal commitment to their ideology made withdrawal from the public sphere impossible. The teacher looked hard for something redeeming about Rabin, something that would give him a different picture from the dark one he saw, a hint of "the love of Israel" that perhaps missed his attention.

Could he really listen to me or to the new political reality out there? Could his students grasp any of the above literacies on their own terms? Could he and they be part of a democratic society in the old sense of the word, to say nothing of Giroux's perception of it? And, finally, could the hegemonic discourse learn anything from this classroom session?

The Borders of Border-Crossing Pedagogy

> Our identities are constitutive of the literacies we have at our disposal through which we make sense of our day-to-day politics of living.
>
> —Peter McLaren, "Collisions with Otherness"

Peter McLaren is the "ethnographer" in the "critical pedagogy" group, and the quote is taken from an article in which he applies the latest critique of anthropology and the making of ethnography to pedagogic research and its researchers. His way out of the paralysis of the critical era is through the current conceptions of identities, otherness, and embodiment.[18]

McLaren introduces the concept of literacy as a major factor into the constitution of identity, and in so doing unites the discourses of critical (border-crossing) pedagogy with other forms of cultural studies (as did Giroux). His main ideas will be used in this final section in which the ethnography tries to read back the theory.

Many of the literacies present in the above ethnography, and others that evolved in other lessons, are relevant to both me and the Religious Zionist women students. Our biographies are not totally different: our parents and grandparents came from similar backgrounds; we both believe in the need for the State of Israel; we speak the same language; we read many similar texts; and we face the same political situation. Both "I" and "they" are Jewish and female. My choice to go "there" and study "them" rests on a deep sense of difference and perhaps also rivalry. Politically we stand at opposite ends of the spectrum, and our dispute is over the life and death of both Jews and Palestinians. My observations had to recreate that rupture and justify it through the process of essentialism: to attribute to them and myself two unique profiles, to prove otherness. That day in the library when I sat with them and studied Jewish texts, we exercised our common language and history. The minute someone mentioned the demonstration against withdrawal from the Golan Heights as a means to reach a peace agreement with Syria, I removed myself. I was sure they all agreed with the demonstration, whether they participated or not.

> The Other therefore becomes a cultural generality that accounts for the ethnographer's difference.
>
> —McLaren, "Collisions"

Were I to proceed along the old anthropological path and listen to the field's unified voice, I would hear pleasant music, the tune I wish to hear. They are fundamentalist, a thorn in the side of peace; they brought different literacies to life during the lesson in order to dismiss them and reassert their own correctness, uniqueness, and preferred otherness. They put their national identity above democracy and had no intention of accepting heterogeneity through multi-literacies. I put these women out of bounds: they are the new era's enemies; we, the post-Zionists, know who we are.

Something altogether different happens when one tries to push the critical methods to their limits.

The presence of multi-literacies during the lesson could be seen as a desperate attempt by the group to alter or recast their identity. These multi-literacies work against the dominant trend and try to resolve what Iris Young calls "double consciousness."[19] A duality between the "point of view of the dominant culture which defines them ugly and fearsome,

and the point of view of the oppressed who experience themselves as ordinary, compassionate and humorous."[20] Since they are not oppressed in the common anthropological sense, it further complicates the analysis. The presence of several discourses like secularism, ultra-Orthodoxy (not Zionist), peace policy, academic literacy, and national versus spiritual literacy in the Talmud indicates that the constitution of identities in fundamentalist groups is not an automatic process. They try "border crossing," through which they reveal the fear of losing their former identities and the longing to remain part of the Israeli-Zionist collective. The rabbi declared that if Israel is not his Jewish state, then he wants nothing to do with it. But he also looked for comfort in my reading of the problem and asked me to present it to the class. The students also struck at his coherent presentation, possibly seeking comfort in his explanations and salving some of their wounded identity, but perhaps also to check how far they could go in this exercise in border crossing.

This process threatens my identity. How can I bear the rabbi's willingness to listen to me, who is he really, and what does it say about me and the likes of me? If he is not my rival, a rigid fundamentalist, then who is he and whom am I? Beneath the juggling of literacies in the classroom and in the rabbi's office lay fear, uncertainty, concern, and anger. But there still seems to be no imminent possibility for relativism, for border crossing in the Giroux sense of "understanding them (me) on their (my) own terms." This goes against Jewish Orthodoxy and its nationalism. The postmodern national Orthodox (or any other fundamentalist) is aware of and involved in other literacies than hers but still puts tremendous effort into constituting her never-crossing-borders identity. Does it leave me to do the border crossing, can I understand her/them on their own terms?

McLaren draws the limits: "Of course, in attempting to dislocate the fixity of Eurocentric, sovereign narratives that structure our practice as theorists, it is impossible to remain totally outside the Western frame of reference, and this certainly is not what I am suggesting."[21]

The call to cross cultural limits, to deconstruct ideologies, to disclose agencies, and to break orderly identities is limited by the Western frame of reference. Within it, McLaren expects ethnographers to "re-examine in light of new critical voices that are being sounded from the margins: feminist voices, Afro-American voices, Latino voices, and other voices that up to the present have been dampened."[22]

Is it possible to dislodge the fixity of Eurocentrism while working within the confines of Western ideology? What exactly is the difference between the two? How does the first become an enemy against whom we are supposed to fight under the canopy of the latter? Who draws the lines

of the Western frame of reference? Feminists, Afro-Americans, and Latino-Americans were once outside that frame, and now the fence lines are being redrawn. But someone has to stay outside those fences so the West will continue to recognize itself.[23]

The "absolute other" in our time may not be a woman or a black person but a fundamentalist (better yet, a woman and/or a dark-skinned fundamentalist).[24] The hegemonic discourse in Israel demonizes them on both sides, Jew and Palestinian. They have remained outside the new order in the region, marking off for everybody else the right peace and the right future. Modernism and postmodernism, in which Jewish fundamentalism evolved,[25] make no place for its desires and read no criticism in its claims. Every four years the media wake up to acknowledge the existence of those "others," mainly in order to recreate their otherness, but fundamentalism appears to be an organic part of both societies. The Western traditional frame of reference does not help the enthnographer understand, the politician negotiate, or the citizen live alongside fundamentalists of all kinds despite their rivalry.

Epilogue

In retrospect, all sides failed. The Labor government, its late prime minister, and the hegemonic groups that led the peace process made no room for the "absolute others." The efforts of the rabbi to listen to me as a metaphor caved in under the force of the "split." Prime Minister Rabin was the first victim in this battle, leaving democracy and the peace process threatened. Border crossing is not without problems in Western democracies. Middle Eastern societies, it seems, must find their own way to shake off the illusion of liberal pluralism, to acknowledge the existence of deep splits, and to make sure there is enough room for everyone under the canopy of their clumsy democracies.

Notes

1 Literacy embraces discourses of knowledge and their ideology as well as practice. The common use of the term goes beyond the ability to read and write, or questions of curriculum. It refers to the social ability to gain and use knowledge, to the "cultural price tag" of different knowledges, and to their potential for empowerment.
The use of the term "literacy" or "literacies" throughout this article might raise the question:

why not call it simply a "Discourse," a much more flexible and recognizable term? The answer lies in the context. The heroines of this ethnography are students; they are learning to read "the word and the world" (Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and Reading the World* [London, 1987]). The literature of critical pedagogy (see note 2) does present literacy as a sort of discourse but situates it in the context of learning. Thus the term literacy is more accurate and useful for analyzing this ethnography.

2 Radical (critical) pedagogy is a neo-Marxist pedagogy that uses the above interpretation of literacy, as opposed to its more autonomous interpretations authored by Jack Goody (*Literacy in Traditional Societies* [Cambridge, Engl., 1968] and *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* [Cambridge, Engl., 1988]. See also Bryan Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* [Cambridge, Engl., 1984], James Collins, "Hegemonic Practice: Literacy and Standard Language in Public Education," in *Rewriting Literacy: Culture and the Discourse of Other*, C. Mitchell and K. Weiler, eds. [New York, 1991], 229–54, and James Collins, "Literacy and Literacies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 75–93). The group of critical pedagogists was influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [Harmondsworth, Engl., 1972], and Freire and Macedo, *Literacy*). Alongside the bodies of work by Basil Bernstein (*Class Codes and Control*, vol. 3 [London, 1971], and *The Structuring of Pedagogic Discourse*, vol. 4 of *Class Codes and Control* [London, 1990]), Maurice Bloch ("Literacy and Enlightenment," in *Literacy and Society*, K. Schousbone and M. T. Larsen, eds. [Copenhagen, 1989], 15–38), Harvey J. Graff (*The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the 19th Century City* [London, 1979]), and others, the group offers an alternative perception of literacy as a sign of enlightenment. The group's most notable writers are Stanley Aronowitz, Ina Shore, Donaldo Macedo, Henry Giroux, Candance Mitchell, Kathleen Weiler, Mickle Apple, and Peter McLaren.

3 Religious Zionists are Orthodox Jews who joined the Zionist movement. Their religious political ideology was molded mainly by Rabbi Kalisher (1795–1874), Rabbi Alkalai (1798–1878), and Rabbi Kook (1865–1935). Their cultural history and its sociopolitical and theological outcomes are well presented in Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Tel Aviv, 1993), and Dov Schwartz, *The Theology of the Religious Zionist Movement* (Tel Aviv, 1996).

4 Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and their World* (Boulder, Colo., 1994).

5 Bar-Ilan university has 21,000 students. Seventeen thousand attend the main campus in Ramat-Gan, and the rest study in

four satellites, including one in Ariel in the West Bank. Forty percent of the students are religious, the rest are not; 62 percent are women, 38 percent men; and 2.5 percent are Palestinian citizens of Israel. (Numbers provided by the spokesperson of Bar Ilan, July 1996.)

6 Lauren B. Granite, "Tradition as a Modeality of Religious Change: Talmud Study in the Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1995), and Tamar El-Or, *Literacy and Identity of Young Religious Zionist Women* (Detroit, forthcoming).

7 See Debora Weissman, "Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists," in *The Jewish Woman*, E. Kolton, ed. (New York, 1976), 139–49; Debora Weissman, "The Education of Religious Girls in Jerusalem During the Period of British Rule" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1993) (in Hebrew); El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*; Granite, "Tradition as a Modeality"; and El-Or, *Literacy and Identity*.

8 Menachem Freidman, "Life Tradition and Book Tradition in the Development of Ultra-orthodox Judaism," in *Judaism Viewed from Within and Without*, H. E. Goldberg, ed. (Albany, N.Y., 1986).

9 Gideon Aran, "Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism," in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, E. R. Marty and R. S. Appleby, eds. (Chicago, 1991), 265–345.

10 El-Or, *Literacy and Identity*.

11 El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant*.

12 Yavneh is a town 50 kilometers west of Jerusalem. Following the destruction of Jerusalem and between the two revolts against the Romans (A.D. 70–135), Yavneh was the spiritual center of the Jewish people and the seat of the rabbinical court, the Sanhedrin. During the Great Revolt in A.D. 66–70, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was prepared to give up Jeruslem and national sovereignty and move to Yavneh to continue the scholarship of Judaism.

13 Yehoshafat Harkabi, army general and historian, published *The Bar Kokhba Syndrome: Risk and Realism in International Politics* (New York, 1983) about the Bar-Kokhba revolt against the Romans (A.D. 132–34). His book portrays the rebellion as an act of zealots that caused the expulsion of the Jews from the land of Israel.

14 Henry Giroux, "Literacy, Difference, and the Politics of Border Crossing," in *Rewriting Literacy*, C. Mitchell and K. Weiler, eds. (New York, 1991), and Henry Giroux, "Resisting Difference: Cultural Studies and the Discourse of Critical Pedagogy," in *Cultural Studies*, L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. A. Treichler, eds. (New York, 1992), 199–212.

15 Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (New York, 1992), and Jennifer Gore, *The Struggle for Pedagogies* (New York, 1993).

16 Haim N. Bialik and Y. H. Ravnitski, *Sefer ha-agadah* (rev. ed., Tel Aviv, 1930).

17 Jules Henry, *On Education* (New York, 1972).

18 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London, 1990); Iris M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference.* (Princeton, N.J., 1990); and A. W. Frank, "Bringing Bodies Back in a Decade Review," *Theory, Culture and Society* 7 (1990): 131–62.

19 Young, *Justice.*

20 Ibid., 148.

21 Peter McLaren, "Collisions with Otherness: 'Traveling' Theory, Post-Colonial Criticism, and the Politics of Ethnographic Practice—The Mission of the Wounded Ethnographer." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 5 (1992): 88.

22 McLaren, "Collisions," 89.

23 Smadar Lavie and Tedd Swedenburg, "Ben uve-tokh gevulot ha-tarleut." *Teoryah u-vikoret* 7 (1995): 76–88.

24 Margalit Har Shefi, a friend of the assassin Yigal Amir, is an example of such a combination. Her attractiveness, religiosity, and political extremism have turned her into a mysterious *other* and a media star. A well-known artist in Israel, M. Kadishman, drew a series of pictures of her, but due to her family's pressure these were not exhibited.

25 See Samuel Heilman and Menachem Freidman, "Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews," in *Fundamentalisms Observed,* M. E. Marty and R. S. Appleby, eds. (Chicago, 1991), 197–264, and Aran, "Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism."