

CHAPTER TWO

WHO AM I SUPPOSED TO BE?

STORIES OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

PROLOGUE 1

EVERY WEDNESDAY

It was 10:25 when I parked my car. HaYarkon Street began to fill up. Most of the cars were old ones, and many were plastered with bumper stickers. Some displayed the Na-Nah-Nahma-Nahman Mi-Oman mantra of the Bratislaver Hasidim. Others asked “What, you haven’t become religious yet?” and still others proclaimed “You can’t make a million people shut up.” A young couple emerged from a Subaru. He drew a *kipah* from his pocket and put it on his head. She wore a tight skirt that reached down below her knees, and stylish sandals without socks. Her hair was loose, and she had a knapsack on her back. They parted at the entrance to the yeshiva. He went in the main door, to the central hall, while she, and I, walked around the back, to the women’s entrance. Not many women were there yet—only about forty. I knew from experience, however, that the lower auditorium, which served during the day as the yeshiva’s dining hall, would slowly fill up.

The ramp leading down to the back entrance was dimly lit. Actually the back access drive to the building, it was lined with piles of crates, wooden palettes, and discarded yeshiva gear. The foyer leading into the lower hall had been converted into a small religious emporium. Its shelves were packed with volumes of instruction, children’s books in versions appropriate for Haredi homes, decoratively bound Books of

Psalms, head kerchiefs, hats, gifts for the Jewish home, candlesticks, pictures of rabbis. A separate shelf held video cassettes of Rabbi Daniel Zer's lectures and, at the end, the few audio cassettes that remained for sale in the video age. Beyond, in the auditorium, rows of plastic chairs faced a large screen.

At 10:30 the regular background music ceased, and was replaced by the special music for the neighborhood rabbi-preacher who, in the 1970s, founded the network of Or David yeshivot. Sometimes the music was played by live performers and sometimes it was recorded. Except on days of mourning, the weekly lecture always began with this music, which accompanied the rabbi's entrance and procession to his seat before the Holy Ark. The audience sang: "Rabbi Daniel—we love you."¹ On the large closed-circuit television screen, the men stood and clapped their hands over their heads. The women who watched them also stood, sang, and clapped hands. The rabbi took his seat, the people sat down, and in the lower, women's hall the chairs slowly filled up.

By 11 p.m. there were about a hundred women.² They came and went, entered and exited, whispered among themselves, laughed and chatted. But mostly they listened, reacting to what was happening above with gravity, laughter, amazement, and applause. Sometimes their reactions mirrored those of the men above, perhaps with a split-second delay. The night was hot, and the smiling matron who oversaw the women's section handed out soft drinks in plastic cups. She plodded from row to row, the fringes of her kerchief swaying over her eyes, her thick feet shod in rough-looking thongs. If a woman demurred, she'd say with an even larger smile: "It's free." So was the air-conditioning, which made the room a welcome refuge from the heavy early-summer humidity outside. At the end of the lecture, the women who had stayed all the way through went out and

crossed the steaming street. Some walked home, while other small groups got into cars; still others met up with their husbands, who emerged from the main hall. See you next week, on Wednesday, same time, same place.

I attended the same lectures for three years. Not every week, not always, and I didn't always stay until the end.

This chapter is based on the observations I conducted during the lectures, on my notes I managed to take of what the rabbi said as he spoke, or which I wrote down afterwards. I also make use of audio cassettes of his talks, which I bought in the foyer. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first addresses the significance of “stories of personal transformation” as a rhetorical praxis, and juxtaposes Rabbi Zer's talks with a Protestant example. The other two sections examine the way the rabbi addressed three subjects that were central to his lectures: love, the Israeli state, and the Holocaust.

1. MIDRASHIM OF CHANGE AS A PRACTICE OF CONVERSION

In Dror Shaul's film, *The Witch Sima Venkin* (2003), one of the protagonists is injured in an automobile accident and lies in a coma. A *teshuva* industry activist, who distributes free audio cassettes of a famous preacher, enters the man's hospital ward. A boy who is visiting another patient puts a cassette in his Walkman and places the earphones on the unconscious man's head. He plays the cassette in this way for a few days, and in the end the protagonist opens his eyes. His wife stands beside him at this dramatic moment of awakening. She whispers to him: “How are you?” I, in the cinema, facing the screen, guessed what the answer would be, and whispered it under my breath:

“*Baruch Ha-Shem*”—“God is blessed.” The sick man immediately echoed me: “*Baruch Ha-Shem*.”

Religious preachers, argues the American anthropologist Susan Harding, reformat their listeners’ hard drives, delete their operating system, and install a different system instead. The fundamentalist conversion industry’s tools are language, rhetoric, law and story. The preacher speaks, the candidate listens, and at some point he or she also begins to speak the preacher’s language.³

Harding devoted ten years to investigating of the great changes her society underwent in the 1980s in its attitudes towards religion and culture. Her focus was Jerry Falwell, the leader of the Moral Majority, a fundamentalist Protestant organization. She attended church meetings, prayers, community activities, ceremonies, and classes. She watched television programs, listened to radio broadcasts, read texts, and conducted hundreds of interviews. She collected a wealth of material, and decided to focus on the rhetorical aspect of the process of personal transformation,⁴ which in her view is the principal engine of the entire enterprise. Her insights have inspired my reading of the ethnography I present in this chapter. I hope that the utility of placing the two cases side by side will outweigh the disadvantages inherent in any such comparison.⁵ I will move back and forth freely, and sometimes associatively, between the American and Israeli cases, with the goal of illuminating the local case and pointing out its unique aspects.

The rabbi-preacher’s act of speech is, first and foremost, a rhetorical performance. Rabbi Zer, like Jerry Falwell, links word to word, sentence to sentence, and creates a

world which he presents as the real, true, one and only world. His performance thus constitutes the research field.

Before focusing on rhetoric, Harding sought to understand the huge change she discerned in American attitudes towards religion and culture. In her view, during the decade of the 1980s, fundamentalist Christianity “returned from exile” after fifty years of isolation. What happened in the 1980s, she argues, changed the way American society experiences itself and its public space. At the same time, it changed the fundamentalist Christian movements. These mutual influences, which in her view created a different America and a different fundamentalism, are the focus of her study. As an anthropologist, she tries to understand these changes from within one of the sites of events, and as from as close as she can get to the people producing them.

The leader of the Moral Majority speaks to millions, just as the Haredi preacher Amnon Yitzhak does in the Teddy soccer stadium in Jerusalem, or as *Rabbanit* Leah Kook does in the Yad Eliahu basketball stadium in Tel Aviv. Yet, in fact, all of them give private lessons. Their message must enter each heart and each brain separately, and this is the point Harding wishes to reach.

She begins her journey in 1925, with the Scopes Trial. A biology teacher, John Scopes, stood accused of teaching evolution in a public school in Dayton, Tennessee, in violation of a state law. The event, which was widely covered in the press, reestablished a distinction between the American that wanted to be seen as enlightened, scientific, urban, and secular, and the America that the media portrayed as benighted, primitive, provincial, and religious. Harding chooses this moment because of its drama, visibility, and because it reached every American home. She also argues that, even though Scopes was

convicted, fundamentalism lost the battle and was forced underground. The event was a traumatic one. The prosecutor, who won his case, died of a heart attack five days after the end of the trial. The liberal journalists who flooded the small town sent home carnival-like descriptions of the boondocks. They caricatured the town and its inhabitants, presenting them as everything that enlightened America feared.⁶ The Bible, which the town sought to defend, was proved to be a text in which its protectors were less than proficient. The defenders won, but they felt defeated.

That, argues Harding, was the beginning of an era in which those who wanted to view the United States as an enlightened country could do so. The choice of fundamentalist Christian groups in the South and the Midwest to entrench themselves in communities, churches, and homes, allowed the America of the East and West Coasts to assume that it was liberal, scientific, urban, peace-loving, unbigoted, and later also feminist, friendly to the homosexual community, and skeptical. But the fundamentalist communities remained active. Harding surveys how they slowly changed, how cooperation between churches grew, and how they made a huge effort to appeal to a larger spectrum of ethnic and cultural groups. The fundamentalists sought to become relevant to all areas of life and to offer an alternative America. They demanded a place in the central arena, and in parallel created their own platforms of discourse, especially in television, radio, and the press. They sought to disseminate their “moral message” through every possible pipeline, and to saturate the American public and public space.

In the 1980s, Harding argues, it looked as if American consciousness, as manifested in its major press organs, television, and Hollywood movies, became aware of the strength, depth, and breadth of the fundamentalist movement that they thought had

vanished. Such fears generally get translated into political language—who will affect the choice of the next president, how Congress will look and so on. But, she claims, the real change was cultural, and on that social research must focus. The political implications are a byproduct of the cultural change.⁷

In fact, a considerable part of the social scientific treatment of religious movements in general, and of fundamentalist ones in particular, addresses their political activity. Such research seeks out sites of power, political party organization, and integration into public spaces. It focuses on issues of public policy that are election issues: for or against abortion, friendly or unfriendly to homosexuals, for or against territorial compromise, willingness or unwillingness to enlist in the Israeli army, for or against women's rights. Yet these issues actually reflect the agendas of the researchers. Focusing on them hinders true understanding of the deep and broad processes involved in the activities of these movements. The political establishment and the media are not absent from the agendas of Jerry Falwell or Rabbi Zer. But the Mizrahi Haredi movement, like fundamentalist Christianity, is much broader than the narrow bounds of politics. The return to religion, the “strengthening” of the laxly observant, the changes that the movement brings about in the conduct of families, and in neighborhoods and communities with Sephardi majorities, are not just about what party to vote for.

Harding does not use political or religious terminology to paint her portrait of Jerry Falwell's fundamentalist enterprise. She prefers to describe his operation as “in effect, a hive of workshops, of sites of cultural production, that smelted, shaped, packaged and distributed myriad fundamentalist rhetorics and narratives” (p.15). The “Falwell Empire” encompassed discrete groups who experienced themselves as,

simultaneously, victims and critics of modernity. Over time, their numbers swelled to millions (including, from 1970 onward, Afro-Americans as well), and they set out, united, on a mission to change America.

Given Harding's choice of the Scopes trial as a critical juncture in the history of American fundamentalism, it is tempting for an Israeli investigator to use a no less famous local courtroom drama for the same purpose. This trial marked Israeli society's patterns of inclusion and exclusion and pitted an establishment that viewed itself as enlightened and secular against a Haredi Mizrahi cultural icon. The defendant was Aryeh Der'i, a former cabinet minister and political chief of Shas, the Mizrahi Haredi party founded by Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef. Shas quickly became a major political force, gaining enough Knesset seats to hold the balance of power between Israel's two major parties.

Der'i was charged in 1993 with corruption, bribery, and abuse of power. Sephardi leaders, and not just those of his own party and religious persuasion, claimed that the trial was an attempt to silence a Mizrahi politician who had dared challenge the Ashkenazi establishment. He received vocal support from the Sephardi street but was ultimately rejected by Rabbi Yosef, his spiritual and political mentor. I will not interpret this event and address it in all its complexities. Nevertheless, the symbolism is too tempting to resist. I therefore note some associative parallels between the Scopes and Der'i trials.

In her article "The Der'i Trial: A Political Trial," Liora Bilsky proposes to recognize certain trials as political ones.⁸ While the legal system recognizes no such category, she believes that political trials can be used as an arena for scrutinizing competing narratives. To Bilsky, the Der'i trial is reminiscent of the Dreyfus trial. Her

associations range from Dreyfus, the persecuted Jewish officer in the French army, to Theodor Herzl, the Jewish-Austrian who covered the trial as a journalist, and from there to the birth of Zionism. The Der'i trial's position on this continuum marks it as part of both the chain of Zionism and the chain of anti-Semitism. It is an interesting placement, because Der'i sees himself as a Zionist, but also sees himself as being persecuted for being Jewish. Like Dreyfus, he sought a place for himself in the public arena—the Knesset and the cabinet—and not in the part reserved for religion. Dreyfus was naturalized via the army and offers corps, while Der'i climbed a sectorial path laid out by his Mizrahi religious party. Bilsky argues that the judicial system made a great effort to demonstrate that the Der'i trial was not a show trial, but rather a just trial. The difference between these two categories lies in the dichotomy between the action of an individual and the interests of a group, between game and truth, between an actual crime and a trumped-up charge. In a just trial, an individual is judged for an act he is alleged to have committed. Its purpose is to bring the truth to light. A show trial, she argues, addresses group identity and performs a ceremony or game. Der'i himself did not position himself as a victim alongside Dreyfus. Instead, he argued that the state was treating him as it had Adolf Eichmann and John Demjanjuk—who was extradited from the U.S. to Israel and tried on charges of being Ivan the Terrible, a sadistic Ukrainian guard at the Treblinka death camp. In other words, Der'i's trial was indeed a show trial, but one in which the Zionist establishment chose him, just as it chose “absolute others” (Nazis) for the purpose of reinforcing its hegemony.

Much has been written about the Eichmann trial's cultural roles. Less has been written about the more recent Demanjuk trial (Demjanjuk was convicted by an Israeli

court, but the conviction was overturned by Israel's Supreme Court).⁹ It is clear that when Der'i puts himself in this league, his principal target is his persecutors—the state, the state attorney's office, the media. He means to identify his trial, but certainly not himself, with Eichmann and Demjanjuk. Every rational person understands that Der'i is no Nazi, so the question he poses is why the state is treating him as one.

Let us, for a moment, remove the Der'i trial from its Zionist context and see how it might be seen in the context of the Scopes trial. In the American trial, the man in the dock was one perceived by a part of the public as a fighter for freedom of thought and science, while others viewed him as a heretic. His trial was a performance, broadcast on radio coast-to-coast, and reported in real time in the press. The owners of media outlets had opinions on the issue—some liberal and some conservative—but, for the most part, dissemination of the legal narrative was in the hands of those who wished to see the teacher acquitted. Paradoxically, as already noted, the guilty verdict against Scopes caused fundamentalist groups to withdraw from the public eye for a long period. They reemerged when they believed that they were a majority—not only a moral majority, but an actual majority. With mass marches and giant convocations, they sought to validate a Gallup poll published five years previously, which showed, in the mid-1970s, that every third American had been “born again” (Harding 2000, p. 19). The turning point arrived fifty years after the ritualized trial, which had been held in the country's rural backwater. When the fundamentalists staged a mass march on Washington, D.C., the media covered this event just as it had the Scopes trial, but this time the liberals' scorn was accompanied by concern and anxiety. Once again the “others” were swarming. But this time, the “others” had their own print and broadcast media, which reached huge audiences.

It may not be possible, so soon after the event itself, to pinpoint the Der'i trial's symbolic import. Notably, however, it proceeded in the opposite direction than did the Scopes trial. In their repercussions and visibility, both could be called show trials. Both brought to a ceremonial peak the dichotomy between the modern, enlightened (scientific/legal) code and the primitive religious (provincial/Mizrahi) code. In both trials, there was a notable contradiction between the outcome of the trial and its cultural consequences. In the Scopes trial, the "others" won in the courtroom and lost outside. In the Der'i trial, the accused man lost in the courtroom and won outside. His victory was not personal, and it was not his fate that was put to the cultural test. The Der'i trial marked the acme of the system's acts of exclusion and dismissal of the "others," and he himself starred in it as the person who was sabotaging the dichotomy's resilience. He refused to be a victim, but also took it upon himself to be one; he rejected Zionism and viewed himself as being an integral part of the Zionist state; he condemned the state, yet counted himself among its most important leaders at that time; he criticized the establishment and national leaders but had close ties to many of them. Der'i was the most outside insider it was possible to be. His hybrid status, from within and without, helped blur the identity between the public arena, or "the state," and the established hegemony. Like other hybrid phenomena, it was necessary to grant his presence a meaning that could be controlled.

When he reported to begin serving his sentence, he was accompanied by motorcades and marches. The masses of "others" took to the streets, a confident, if battered and unhappy, majority. During his first weeks in prison, his supporters conducted a round-the-clock crusade in the public space, where they sought to be seen

and identified: group after group, families and individuals, Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Hasidim, and even Lithuanians made their way to Ramla to set up the “Sha’agat Aryeh” compound. It wasn’t the mall in Washington, nor the Rose Garden opposite the Knesset building. It was a camp established spontaneously in a vacant lot outside the prison walls, whose population clashed constantly with the authorities. Stands, tents, a temporary *beit midrash* (the Sha’agat Aryeh yeshiva), fast food carts, charities seeking donations—it was an amusement park of self-confident otherness that marked the end of otherness. Yet, it must be remembered that when new forces flood the public space, they do not topple the established power structures. The fact that the visitors to the Sha’agat Aryeh compound included members of the Knesset and cabinet ministers who represented the others, or media figures who represented the others, sabotaged the hegemonic power structures but did not eradicate them. The same happened in the American case, according to Harding: “Marginalized groups were mainstreamed, but mainstream groups were not marginalized” (p. 79).

From the moment a marginal group refuses to accept the role of the “other,” and from the moment its members are visible, conspicuous, and active in the public space, the public space cannot be indifferent to their presence, and the hegemony cannot perpetuate its delusions about them or about itself. When Mizrahi Haredi/religious groups repositioned themselves, they burned the public space, etched it with new forms, and exposed marks that had previously been blurred. New coalitions came into being the minute the great binary segmentation (secular/Ashkenazi/enlightened vs. religious/Mizrahi/primitive) was broken. The Ramla prison attracted, for a variety of

reasons, members of very different groups, whose common ground was their distance from the classic hegemony. Ashkenazi members of marginal Hasidic sects were there, along with Haredi and non-Haredi Mizrahim, newly religious people, new immigrants, and sympathizers. Other figures stopped by to demonstrate their antipathy to the system that had staged the show trial.

Harding notes that, today, those American fundamentalists who adopt separatist tactics attract many marginal groups—third-world immigrants, Hispanics in the U.S. and South America, and Afro-Americans. The figure of the stereotypical “other” from Dayton, Tennessee took on color and form, changed languages and appearance. It is now very elusive and cannot be identified automatically. Not only has the believer become a hybrid—his religiosity is also more ambitious and less confined by borders. Harding describes this believer as “morally outraged, socially engaged, and routinely politically active” (p.80).

The Mizrahi *teshuva* movement has established links with Ashkenazi Hasidic sects like Habad, Bratislaver, and Kalib, and is changing them from within. Living under a single roof are people who were born Haredi, those who became Haredi, and those who have yet to complete their conversion into the Haredi way of life. These groups are composed of non-hegemonic Ashkenazim,¹⁰ Sephardim, and new immigrants. They include men, women, teenagers, and children. Some of the classic templates that are used to sort the religious (and non-religious) population are preserved, but alongside them sprout new possibilities that sabotage the socio-religious common wisdom.¹¹ The profile of the “believer” in Israel is now less stereotypical than it was in the past, and so is its

public space. The public space has changed: More religious acts are conducted in public and more secular acts are performed by religious people. This change has a complex history and a variegated present. It spills out beyond religious matters and embraces basic sociological parameters like class, ethnicity, and gender, and secondary parameters such as political views, cultural tastes, and language. As part of this process, the periphery—in this case religious and Mizrahi—is pushed into the center. The margins seek to be the majority. The obviousness Israeli identity is changing, and as a result, the definition of “modern Israel” is under challenge.¹²

One of the obligations of social research is thus to examine the ways in which this change is accomplished. Harding chose to concentrate on rhetorical praxis. As an anthropologist who conducted field work of varying kinds, she heard in speech, lectures, religious ceremonies, and sermons the sounds that helped her understand the principal part of the phenomenon that interested her. As one who was exposed to a different, but similar, enterprise of conversion, it is easy for me to understand this choice.

Stories of personal transformation seek to implant in each candidate for *teshuva*, or for rebirth, a language that will construct a world to take the place of that which is perceived as self-evident or standard. Implantation of the new language involves a constant dialogue with the existing language. The exegetical language of the preacher, addressing the canonical texts, is the major intermediary between the language to which the candidates aspire and the language to which they are accustomed. In the case of the Christian fundamentalists that Harding studied, the texts are the Old and New

Testaments. In the case of Pardes Katz, they are the corpus of canonical Jewish texts, from the Bible through current commentators and rabbinic legal authorities.

The preacher is, therefore, a sort of translator. The flow between him and his listeners has special stresses when the audience is distant from the language to which it is being directed. This is not the city's preacher, or the synagogue's, nor is it the woman who visits Beit Ya'akov schools to teach classes for the women of the community. Such preachers undoubtedly act as translators and mediators, but the linguistic distance between them and their communities is not large. What sets apart the preachers that Harding listened to, and what sets Rabbi Zer apart, is that their audience has still not accepted the language. In the Christian case, acceptance of the language is almost the last station. In the Jewish case, the language is an intermediate stage, coming before orthodox observance of the Torah's laws, but it contains new strengths.

The preachers translate the language of the Bible into a modern religious and cultural language. Those who hear them weave this language into their daily lives and create a fabric of similar languages composed of the same threads—the particular pattern depending on the speakers. The threads taken from the preacher can be found in the language's genetic code, its grammatical rules, in its semantics and in its style. This code, in Harding's words, is the conduit of faith: "a faith that becomes part of you comes through speech. Speaking is believing" (Harding 2000, p. 60).

When a person accepts God and his order in the world as true, she codes that acceptance in verbal expression. "I reached the bus stop just when the bus was about to leave, heaven really helped me." This seemingly innocuous sentence, of a type I have often heard from Haredi women, does not speak of a life saved or an evil averted. But it

is a fundamental speech template for believers. If you do not acknowledge that God's intervened in your favor, you speak outside the accepted style. If your language does not flow smoothly in the right channels, and you will show yourself not to belong to the camp of the believers. A woman who speaks this way understands that she lives with God's personal intercession in her life. That understanding has become an intimate part of her. It is clear to her that if God had not intervened, the bus would have driven off without her. Of course, that does not mean that if she'd missed the bus that God did not have her interests in mind, because "and then, who did I see? My brother-in-law and sister in their car, driving right in my direction, really help from heaven." And if they hadn't shown up? "What can I say, I dragged the bags all the way home, and only with heaven's help did I get there before my daughter got back from school." The understanding that every event in the universe, every detail of existence, is linked to the Creator, must be expressed in words, especially if the speaker is a convert.¹³

Conversion ceremonies are generally conducted by *witnesses* or *victims*. These are the best candidates for instilling the new language because they, like the believers, either lacked it or were persecuted and forced to conceal it. They know how to move between the present language and the new, good language quickly and creatively. They can signal to their audience that they are fluent in both. Beyond the central role of inculcating the language, their mission is to prove that, even though they are by choice or coercion fluent in the other language, it is vapid. It is a language of lies that paints a distorted view of the world that rests on shoddy foundations.

The selections below present “witnesses” and “victims,” and show their praxis before their audiences. Notably, a part of the audience that listened to Rabbi Zer’s sermons participated largely only in the rhetorical aspect of the conversion process. In other words, even though Judaism demands progress towards observance of the commandments, beyond (or independent of) the acceptance of faith, many of the listeners remained in a fairly fixed position in their religious observance, but continued to attend Rabbi Zer’s talks each week. Rabbi Zer berated and flattered them simultaneously. He often mocked those “who come here because today is Holocaust Day, everything else is closed, so let’s go hear the rabbi.” Or he commented that “some people have been coming here for years, but cover their hair? That they don’t have the strength to do it. Well, with God’s help, they’ll do it some day.” Yet, at the same time, he also made a point of praising the regulars. “Even once a week is something, they come and hear some words of Torah, then go home.” His role as a converter does not allow him to scorn this group of slow movers, because they are his field of work. Even if he wanted to see them progress and make way for a new group, he can not give up on those who are “stuck.”

The people in the audience heard a lesson and another lesson and perhaps told other people about it. In conveying the story to others, and while they listen, the listeners closed up gaps in the story, or in subjects that were not entirely clear to them. They filled in interrupted sequences, or references to an unfamiliar source, or the citation of an unfamiliar name. None of these became obstacles to understanding the story or accepting it as truth. They rather became invitations to work, to active involvement both during the act of listening and while conveying it to someone who was not there. The rabbi himself,

in his story, told a story he heard from a friend, who told him about someone who told him that... the Ba'al Shem Tov on his way once on the eve of the Sabbath....

The speakers' sources of information are not important. The important fact is that they speak as "witnesses" or "victims." As such, and unlike experts, they are supposed to tell their own stories, whose power derives from the fact that they were "there" or experienced "it." That is the source of their legitimacy, and it is also the safe shore towards which the story strives—to be saved, to survive and to be rescued, to make it home to bear witness. To be rescued from Pardes's Katz's cinemas (which had already shut down), where people roll bottles down the aisles, to get out of the yard of the neighborhood elementary school where kids get beat up, to avoid the street where women in revealing clothes walk, to get away from the beach, from the soccer fields. To get inside, to get home, to the real place. The road to salvation is paved with interlocking stones taken from the canonical texts and from life.

2. A GREAT SOUND IN THE SKY

When I sat down, the rabbi was already speaking. He began with the different rewards given to Noah's sons, Shem and Yefet, for observing the same precept. The two of them together took their drunken father's cloak and averted their faces so as to cover his nakedness without seeing it. Yet the verses that follow give a greater reward to Shem and his descendants than to his brother.

"How can it be?" the rabbi asked. "They do the same thing, one beside the other, two brothers, and different rewards? The reason is the effort, the suffering, the price, and

the intention of each one. Shem was more intent, made a bigger effort, did not act casually.”

From this point, and throughout the evening, the rabbi developed the subject of relativism. The lecture was practically devoid of any reference to current events or politics. It was about returning to religion, about the status of *hozerim be-teshuva*, and about the changes in the conjugal and family relations they experienced. A classic lecture.

It is more difficult to be a *ba'al teshuva* in our generation than it was at the time of the holy Rabbi Yitzhak Luria. It is difficult because the street is more seductive. Now it's summer, summer is awful and terrible, summer is Sodom and Gomorrah, it's a mortal danger. To go out into the street and to return safely is the parting of the Red Sea, a man has to pray to God to return home safely this summer. The licentiousness, the beach, the streets, it's not for nothing that they said that where a *ba'al teshuva* stands perfect saints can't stand, it's a war, a war. To overcome temptation, lust, I know. I was there, it's a tough war. To grow up in Bnei Brak is to grow up in an earthly paradise, it takes no special wisdom to be an adherent of the Torah. But to grow up in a public school, in the street, and to overcome it—that's a war. When someone succeeds, it makes a great sound in the sky, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, cries and says, “Look what a son I have.”

Rabbi Zer's lectures, like the talks of others active in the *teshuva* industry, are built on a foundation that he returns to regularly. Even if the talk gets pulled into political areas and the news, because of some special event, something always keeps him focused

on his principal objective, “to make a great sound in the sky.” To bring another man or woman, boy or girl into the circle of observers of the law. This foundation requires the rabbi to remember and to remind his audience what a difficult state the candidates are in. He must reiterate it time after time, even if the subject is preceded and followed by jokes at the expense of his listeners, disparagement of their way of life, and deliberate distortion of their values and behaviors. He must demonstrate his intimate knowledge of the pre-conversion state. The rabbi states that he knows, he was there at the battlefield of secular life. He knows how hard it is to get through school, to cross the street safely, to get through the summer.

At the principal stations of confrontation he cites over and over again in his talks, education (public schools), the neighborhood, and the street get tied up in a single package, from which he proceeds to the social plane that includes the state, its values, and its historical assets. At each of these stations, the rabbi describes his audience as people conducting a struggle for survival and to find a place. Everyone struggles, but the rabbi focuses on the Mizrahi plight specifically. The outcome of the struggle is known in advance. The rabbi assumes that each person sitting in the hall is slated to lose the fight, or has already lost. He or she has dropped out of school, has been infected with the stink of the street, has been alienated from the country and placed in the margins. He sees and depicts his listeners as *victims*. Victims of the state, victims of secular culture, victims of school, victims of the street. His audience has fallen into a trap laid by others. At each lecture, he offers his listeners a way of getting out—a critical vantage point on the battlefield and a proven strategy for victory.

The first stage, inherent in the opening words quoted above, offers recognition of suffering as a basis for reward. The proposal is that a person's actions should not be judged in isolation, but rather also in relation to the price he or she paid to carry them out. What is a simple matter for one person may well be a complicated move for another. Rabbi Zer constitutes his listeners as victims and recognizes victimhood as deserving of compensation. Some in Rabbi Zer's audience have already become religious, yet they still feel inferior to their neighbors in Bnei Brak who were born Haredim. Rabbi Zer comforts these listeners by telling them that the latter grew up, for all intents and purposes, in paradise, where it is easy to grow up straight. But if a person born at the gates of hell makes his way to heaven, he, as everyone knows, is greater than the saints themselves. The rabbi expresses his envy of Bnei Brak's children, and always tells his listeners that he hopes that their children grow up like those lucky individuals. Yet in opening with the story of Shem and Yefet, he says that this righteousness has been achieved with less work. The story implies that it will thus meet with less reward.

After making this fundamental distinction, the rabbi turns to further sites of empowerment. In the end, the audience is meant to understand that the way to get out of the state of victimhood, to break free of the trap and not get caught in another one, is the path of faith and observance of the Torah's precepts. But tracking the rhetorical process that seeks to reach this understanding shows that its fabric is no less important than its goal. The rabbi, like others who pursue his craft, will show his audience that it has strength to give, and that giving is possible when there is a need. Awareness that one must always give to others, the rabbi will impart, assuages the experience of victimhood. It empowers, as in the following story.

They tell about a man from the country who went to market with a wagon. He loaded it up with a mountain of merchandise and tried to drive. The wagon's wheels sank in the mud. What did he do? He wanted to take off weight. Did he take off merchandise? No. He took off one wheel. You're crazy, people told him, you're taking off a wheel. Afterwards he took off another wheel. That's the way people are. It's hard for them economically, they reduce their donations to charity. They don't manage with their money? They cancel the bank order [for charity] or don't sign any. How can they do such a thing? Charity is the home's wheels, what makes it go. Even if things are tough and there isn't anything to give, if you give your last shekel to charity, abundance will come. God values charity according to the difficulty the giver faces, according to his suffering. What is it for a rich man to give two thousand dollars, ten thousand dollars, he doesn't feel it, but when a person gives his last shekels, that makes a great sound in the sky. Homes like that, in which there is charity, will have everything.

Rabbi Zer knows that his listeners belong to the middle and lower-middle class. True, he spices up every lecture with a story about "a rich billionaire who came to me," but except for such special guests, the halls where he speaks are filled with people whose livelihood doesn't come easily. He teaches this group to give, to adopt for itself the position of donor. Each one can be Rothschild, each one has enough to give to others.

This special position is one shared by the entire Haredi community. Anyone who has spent more than two hours in an apartment in a Haredi neighborhood has certainly heard a knock. The young boys and girls scamper to open the door and go back to

whisper something to their mothers. The mother will usually give the child a few coins to give to the collector. Every coin is accepted gladly, and parents make no special effort to find out who the collector is and what charity he represents. Some families keep a box of coins by the door. People who live off the contributions of others and government subsidies also give a few coins to people who come knocking, and share the experience of those who give.

Rabbi Zer does not speak of the moral aspect of charity, or of the empowerment it offers. He presents it as something fundamental that moves life forward. It is what opens the gates of the lock on the river and allows the fragile raft of existence to float, or as he puts it, to get out of the mud. The farmer who tries to lighten his load by dismantling his instrument of locomotion (the wheel) serves as an example of non-Jewish—gentile or non-religious—folly. Such people search for what is heavy (expensive) and do not consider the essence. The impetuous farmer loaded more and more merchandise on his wagon and caused its wheels to sink. The subjects of the metaphor will appear later, but for now money serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it is the extra weight that can be unloaded from the wagon, while on the other hand it is the wheels of another wagon. The charity a person gives is what takes the stick out of the wheels of his wagon. When it's taken out, the wagon will move. Livelihood and abundance will follow. The harder it is to take out the stick, or the less excess weight there is to throw off the wagon, the more God will value the givers. This excess, as small as it might be, will be laid on someone else's lighter wagon, and will speed up the giver's wagon. It's a *perpetuum mobile*. The entire Jewish world moves.

Money, and with it the importance of earning a living, regains its respectability only after this detour to the stations of charity, the difficulty of giving, and intention. The “bank orders” that the rabbi mentions are not those familiar to the non-religious public—ones that allow property taxes or electricity payments to be deducted automatically from one’s bank account. The orders in question—thousands of them—automatically deduct, each month, a donation to religious institutions, charitable foundations, and groups that work on returning Jews to religion. Such bank orders have become a critical source of financial support for the religion industry. The result is that part of the charity discourse directs giving to operations like that of the rabbi himself. In other words, one way or another, he is asking the members of his audience to pay him. But money’s honor is limited, and its taste depends on very particular spices. There is no money in the world whose taste is better than that of the Sabbath, of the Torah, of the joy of observing the *mitzvot*.

The rabbi said, on another occasion:

What is money? If someone were to come to me and say, take a billion dollars and turn on a light on Shabbat, a single switch, would I take it? No riches in the world are equal to observing Shabbat. But a non-religious person, he’ll do anything for a hundred shekels. The delight I taste on Shabbat, that I taste in Torah study, is priceless. There is no taste like that anywhere. A person who’s tasted it knows, a person who knows both sides of the barricade knows the difference between the taste of lust and the taste of the Torah.

In a sharp reversal, all money becomes worthless, tasteless to both the giver and the receiver. It will now be valued on a new, different plane, with the ultimate standard of measurement. The relativism between one who suffers and one who suffers less, between poor and rich, vanishes. In its place is a cast-iron distinction between religious and secular Jews, between those who observe the Torah and the rest of the world. People are willing to do many things to obtain money, religious people included. But when money faces off against the desecration of the Sabbath, or against the entire Torah, it ostensibly loses its value, because it is weighed against existence itself. In such a case, doubters have two options: they may walk in the light of the Torah, or allow their appetites to lead the way. A non-religious person, the rabbi says, will do anything for a hundred shekels. His Torah is his appetite for lucre. A religious person who has tasted the Torah will not be tempted to deviate from it for any sum in the world.

The binary tension the rabbi created at the beginning of his talk between Shem and Yefet, between the person who is born religious and the one who becomes religious, between the person who suffers and the one who suffers less, between the person who gives and the person who receives—is reorganized as he brings it all to one side of the binary cluster. The ideal type who appears time after time in Rabbi Zer's talks—the person who makes the greater effort and is rewarded accordingly—is represented here in the figure of Shem. Shem, the direct ancestor of Abraham, and therefore of each and every Jew, designates the person who was not born religious but became so, who suffered in order to make the change, and who still suffers daily in order to persevere.

Rabbi Zer addressed a huge variety of subjects in his talks but, as noted, he returned to three focal points again and again. In the following selection they are

characteristically intermingled. Afterwards I will separate each one out for description and analysis. But in the rabbi's actual lectures, love, the state, and the Holocaust were interwoven:

And what did Ehud Barak say before the elections? What was his slogan? "One people, one conscription." And now, would you believe it? Who would have believed it? It's Purim, it's King Ahasuerus, everything's been stood on its head, he wanted to do something bad for us and he ended up doing something good. He alone, against all his friends, he says, he's really doing a Talmudic disputation, he's learned Talmudic disputation [laughter], first we'll be one people, then we'll have one conscription. Wonderful, he learned casuistry. Next week I'll talk about drafting Torah Jews, and I promise you that I won't leave any loophole, there hasn't been anyone whose heard me and hasn't been convinced, even Ehud Barak, if he were here, he would become religious [applause]. He would understand that the educational principle of one people is our education. Not the education they give. It's hard for us, hard to see our brothers and sisters preferring to be in pollution and stench and to pay money for it, instead of coming, free of charge, to a scented place.

Even if they come here once a week, even if they do a little, that's something. A person enters a good place, he comes out different. If you go to the movies, bottles fly, there's shouting, because it's a cinema.¹⁴ But if you go to a *beit midrash*, serenity and innocence, perfume, so who ever comes out, comes out a different person. Like water on the stone in the story about Rabbi Akiva,

even the first drop changes something, because otherwise the hole in the stone would never appear.

A good person, a person who gives charity, it's like he is studying Torah, and even actually studying. When I was a student at Porat Yosef yeshiva, I heard a story about a Holocaust survivor who raised an orphan girl. A man who came out of there with nothing, lost his wife and his children. This man did not lose his faith, remained righteous, he raised an orphan girl who had lost her parents there. Don't say he was a great rabbi, he was a simple Jew, illiterate, he'd come to synagogue and pray from the heart. This man was rewarded when a stranger came to teach him to read and to make him into a Torah scholar.

The crowd is enthralled by the story, and when the rabbi relates that the old man in the synagogue who taught the Jew Torah was the prophet Elijah, the women gasp in wonder. About a third of the women are in full religious dress, and about half, mostly girls and young women, are dressed modestly but fashionably, in long skirts. The rest are wearing non-religious clothes—pants, tank tops, dresses, and the like. None of these latter women are the objects of any criticism or comment. The atmosphere in the hall indicates that, for most of them, this is an event that is in some sense a night out, a form of entertainment or leisure activity. Sometimes they accompany friends or sisters who are in one stage or another of *hit'hazkut*. It is thus not at all unusual to find groups of women sitting together, some in Haredi dress, some in modest fashionable dress, and some in totally secular garb. Teenagers and adults, mothers, grandmothers, and children have all gotten out of the house to hear the rabbi.

During the lecture, the rabbi speaks specifically to the men. They are the audience he sees before him. But he speaks of women who come to talk to him, the wives of policemen, lawyers, and judges (that sequence is interesting in and of itself), and they weep—they all weep.

What's money, what's a home, that's nothing, there's nothing, everything is ruined, it's all lies, stinking, the husband runs around with other women. But a Torah Jew is perfume, a Torah Jew is a treasure. He respects his wife, loves her like his own body, and honors her more than his own body. He doesn't come home and tell her, "Shut your mouth, who do you think you are? I married a thorn bush and made you into a flower." You did? Everything you have at home is from her [applause from the women]. I studied for six months before I got married, what a woman is. A woman is another world, you have to study, to know, to respect. So a man will give everything he has to marry his daughter to a Torah scholar. A woman lies at home with a fever, 104 degrees, She tells her husband to take out the garbage, he looks at her and says: "Me? Tell your mother to come and take out the garbage." With a Torah Jew, such a thing doesn't happen. Boys come to me, they've had a girlfriend for seven years, and I tell them, why don't you get married. He says to me: "I'm not sure about her." What? With us, you know each other three months, and you get married, and what homes they establish and what families. With them, they know each other seven years and they've got a 40 percent divorce rate, and their children? The wild west, rude and insolent.

This part of the lecture silenced the women's hall. Even the women who generally remain outside in the hall, collecting donations, signing women on bank orders, selling books, pamphlets, scarves, and so on, crowded into the large doorway to listen to the rabbi put down men. Some, already on their way out stopped to hear the end, stopped to listen to the conclusion, which offered scenes of married life.

The rabbi produced a sea of words on this evening, as on other evenings. But consider the rhetorical structure he used, the "how" and the "what."

The chain of subjects and the construction of contexts that characterize the talk are not exceptional in popular religious rhetoric. The lack of linearity is an open space waiting to be filled, amenable to cutting and pasting, additions, and exegesis. Harding's claims about Falwell's discourse apply here. Jumping from subject to subject is not meant to open gaps that cannot be bridged. On the contrary, it is meant to allow each listener to enter the story and complete it according to her own requirements. The rabbi announces the subject he will address during the coming few lectures. In fact, in each of the lectures in question he says something about the announced subject, but no more than that.

Rabbi Zer moves between the language of the Torah, halachic expressions, the language of midrash and the Talmud, and everyday and street language. This, too, is a familiar rhetorical practice. The range of dictionaries allows the languages to flow one into the other. The language of the Torah re-describes the street, gets dirty, cleanses it and is cleansed with it. Everyday language is presented as legitimate. It causes the listener to lend his ear to a familiar melody, and opens her heart. Then, when they are relaxed and attentive, the turning point appears. Everyday and street language, and what it brings in

its wake, are humiliated in everyone's hearing, and the *beit midrash* and its language remain the only alternative for education, married life, and stable finances.

Another importance praxis is the constitution of the speakers' and listeners' positions. As noted, they share an equal status; sometimes that shared status separates into two entities, but it is meant to come together again. The praxis portrays the listeners as victims. The speakers fall under the same category—they were victims of society, and now they are witnesses. They are witnesses of what they once were, of what was, and witnesses of what can be—proof of the possible change. Like drug addicts, alcoholics, and compulsive eaters, the listeners hear the stories of people who once lived as they do. Rabbi Zer describes that life as a disease, a compulsion to wallow in filth. Nevertheless, even as they wallow, the Rabbi perceives the potential for a cure. If all they do is come hear his talk, even if they perform one small *mitzvah*, it is a great deal—when you take into account where they are. It makes a great sound in the sky. Every victim can become a fighter, every pauper a benefactor, every punk a Torah Jew. It's a difficult war, the rabbi says, and he knows what he's talking about. He returns time after time to its principal battlefields—the home, the public space, the national space. These are all tied to the “what.”

Many areas of struggle appear and vanish on the battlefield. But in my observations, and my study of Rabbi Zer's audio and video recordings, three foci figure prominently: the state, the Holocaust, and love. The rabbi adduces Ehud Barak, who was elected prime minister in 1999 with an unusually large majority. One of the central issues Barak focused on in his election campaign was universal military service, and secular Jews' anger at Haredim who do not serve in the military. His slogan was “One people,

one draft,” which marked him as an enemy of the Haredi public. After he was elected, however, Barak wanted to bring the Shas party into his coalition. So he had to drop his plan to eliminate the army’s exemption for Haredi yeshiva students. To justify his deviation from his original platform, Barak had to equivocate—the casuistry Rabbi Zer referred to. He argued that it was first necessary to construct “one nation” (embodied, in his view, by the secular/religious, Sephardi/Ashkenazi, left/center coalition he sought to create). Only then would it be possible to demand “one draft.” Rabbi Zer made fun of Barak for having learned to mold a precept to fit reality, rather than changing reality to fit the precept. He also winked at Barak’s world, where you can manage the law so that it does what you want. Rabbi Zer invites Barak to come to hear how the rabbi justifies the exemption. Now that the prime minister has learned Talmudic disputation, maybe he will appreciate the rabbi and even become religious. The audience chuckles, but Rabbi Zer is in fact telling them that every Jew, even the ostensibly anti-religious prime minister, is a candidate for *teshuva*. In Harding’s words, once Barak hears the “truth,” he will have to acknowledge it. From that point, the road to *teshuva* is a short one.

The state and secular culture are represented, through the person of the prime minister, as having an exploitative relationship with the religious community. They lack an ethical spine and, as a result, they bend in accordance with their interests. This image of the “others” can vary, however. At this point, at any rate, the rabbi’s words form links from one sphere to another: from the individual struggling for his place against the state and its institutions, to the history of Israeli society, and from there to the family and the home. From the giver of charity and his difficulties, who seeks to join the community of observers of the Torah, to casuistic Ehud Barak, to the pollution of secular public

schools, to the *beit midrash* in the yeshiva, which is a scented garden. It is not important if you come only once a week. Rabbi Akiva also began to study at a late age, like the illiterate Holocaust survivor from Europe, who saved an orphan and was rewarded by having Elijah the prophet as his teacher. One thing is linked to another, one subject connects to another.

The plastic chairs in the lower hall and the wooden pews in the upper hall are occupied mostly by young people who, each Wednesday, receive this package of recurrent themes—love, state, and Holocaust.

3. LOVE IN THE ORCHARD

[Marcuse quote read it in hebrew will have to look](#)

Romantic love has become an intimate and inseparable part of the democratic ideal of abundance, which has accompanied the growth of the mass market, and has so offered a common utopia that crosses and supersedes social boundaries (Ilouz 2002, p. 15).

That is why, for Barthes, this form of romantic love, combined with risk and courage, can make anything possible (Sandoval 2000, p.140)

Can love really “make anything possible?” Born on the last waves of the 1960s mythology of love, individuals who live in the Western world and its colonies experience the residue of Marcuse’s utopia. It would seem that, alongside “memories” from the hunter-gatherer period and nomadic life, the modern chapter of the human encyclopedia

retains possibilities for love. Love as a social and political process, that also includes individual pleasure. Therefore, anyone who seeks to offer an alternative to modern life, as Rabbi Zer does, must address love. By addressing it, he assumes that his audience is “addicted” to love, and that he must offer alternative ways of achieving and giving up love. These alternatives will distance the audience from the empty and false love offered by the markets of the modern world, and will reveal what “true love” is.

The tension between the appropriation of love for the stabilization of capitalist society and the use of society to unravel love places Marcuse and Sandoval on one side and Ilouz on the other. The first two view love as a force that can challenge capitalism, while the latter sees it as part and parcel of capitalism. Our protagonist, the Sephardi neighborhood rabbi, moves between these poles in his lectures. He displays superb familiarity with the thinking that nourishes their views, and which flows from it without the need to address it, because he, like his listeners, lives in an era in which huge powers are attributed to love.

Erich Fromm sought to depict love as the basis of interpersonal solidarity, and to offer it as an alternative to bourgeois morality and the capitalist structure. Marcuse outlined the revolution necessary to actualize this process and to shape a non-oppressive civilization. In such a civilization, work, creativity, art, and sexuality actualize the potential of freedom and happiness concealed in the libido. Both of them conducted a dialogue with the works of Marx and Freud, which laid out, more or less, the boundaries of the game and marked out new possible boundaries for the Western generation of the mid-20th century. Ilouz continues the conversation with these thinkers and with those who

followed them, but as a sociologist, she is not concerned with portraying a utopia of love. Instead, she follows the current incarnations and customs of romantic love. These, Ilouz argues, plainly link it to capitalism.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, love was part of the moral system of the Western-Christian world. Love symbolized sacrifice, selflessness, devotion, and generosity. In the early twentieth century, against the background of changes that began during the enlightenment, romantic love began to promote moral individualism. In other words, in the modern world love serves as an expression of the individual's rather than the collective's moral choices, and often runs counter to the latter. By glorifying the autonomous power of individuals who are capable of making personal moral judgments, romantic love granted the individual's preference for whom to love the special significance of choice. Consumer individualism was constructed on the foundation of moral individualism, and it, too, became linked to the term "love." Ilouz argues that when capitalism turned from a method of cruel exploitation to one based on mass consumption, it had to display a nicer face to potential buyers. The rhetoric that the system developed combined the old and new value worlds, constructing a special place for romance. Around this, it built an marketing-consumerist temple of fashion, food, travel, and leisure. As Western society became increasingly secular, the sacred, ritual, utopian dimension that constituted the meaning of romantic love grew. It was sanctified as a collective vision that symbolized freedom, prosperity, self-expression, and creativity.

Loves linkage to its agents of commercial distribution has not ceased to preoccupy contemporary scholars. They continue to search (thirty years after Marcuse and From) for unmediated ways into the spring of love's energies. Feminist scholarship, for

example, has tracked manners of speech about love on both the critical and utopian level. After two waves of gender study that revealed the high prices women have been compelled to pay in order to maintain the romantic utopia, a third wave has brought with it hopes for love. This wave, sometimes called “cultural” or essentialist, has sought to flood the public space with the “feminine,” to insert into the personal, social, and individual repertoire the feminine habitus. It seeks to speak about nurture, care, and love as well. Elizabeth Spelman’s book *Fruits of Sorrow*, which takes as its subject human suffering and the politics of sharing out sorrow, offers at its end a feminine praxis of care as a political tool for reducing human suffering.¹⁵

Movement between the planes of the home and childcare on the one hand, and the public space in its various dimensions on the other, characterized feminist scholarship until the end of the twentieth century. But during the third wave, and even previously, new voices emerged—those of feminists of color who offered more radical readings of the social situation. The contribution to postmodern and feminist discourse of American third-world feminists¹⁶ has been reported by Chela Sandoval.¹⁷ She offers a methodology that grows out of their unique position—“the methodology of oppressed women.” Romantic love is one of the methods that Sandoval enumerates for coping with the oppressive system. In contrast with Ilouz’s approach, she sees romantic love as a space with subversive potential, not obligated to the capitalist order. Sandoval is, of course, aware of the commercialization of love and of its consumerist manifestations, but she, like Marcuse, tries to reach it by an alternate route, untainted by the market. As her guide, she uses the late texts of the French theoretician Roland Barthes, especially his book *Lover’s Discourse*.¹⁸ Sandoval, following Barthes, seeks to reach the area of utopian

romantic love, that which is a passageway for the lover and the beloved, a passageway to ideology, outside language and without syntax. It is a place that is no place, in which it is possible to love without supervision, without clichés. There are no betrayals, desertions, jealousies, and frustrations. The stereotypes of love relations do not belong to this place, in which everything is original. In the West, Sandoval argues, love and relations are not known in this way.

The range of unsupervised love is another example of a “third space,” of the non-binary area that many post-colonial writers have addressed.¹⁹ The “methodology of the oppressed” is a way of saying what cannot be said, that which cannot be made into a theory. It is a method for the social expression of emotions, experiences, art, poetry, and religion as well. She perceives all these as worthy and standard sources of knowing the way of the world and changing it.

If we accept Ilouz’s approach, we will view romantic love as one of the center points of capitalist democratic secular society. If we follow Sandoval, love will be an alternative utopian site for the construction of new worlds, less capitalist and more spiritual.

In this part of the present book, the guide is Rabbi Daniel Zer. The rabbi knows that love touches each of his listeners, without regard to gender, age, or religious observance. He knows that it is a central part of the culture he faces off against, and he returns to it deliberately time and time again. We might say that he has a very good understanding of Ilouz’s sociology, is empathetic to the longings of Marcuse, Spelman, and Sandoval, but that he has his own methodology of the oppressed.

My scrutiny of Rabbi Zer's alternative love project will begin with a text transcribed from an audio cassette. This choice enables an encounter with a text stripped of its context, separated from its audience and the audience's reaction, independent of the lectures that preceded or followed it. Presumably, the recording has been edited, since there are no pauses in Rabbi Zer's speech and no background noises. Following this selection, I will present ethnographic segments from talks that addressed the subjects of love and of sexuality. There, the "noise" will return.

Sense and Sensitivity²⁰

We spoke, in the subject of *shalom bayit* [literally, "peace in the home"—relations between husband and wife] about the subject of love. What is true love. And we saw what is written in Avot [a tractate of the Mishna; the cassette does not offer the reference, but Rabbi Zer quotes chapter 5, mishna 16]: "Love that is dependent on an object, when the object is gone, love ends. That which is not dependent on an object, never ends. What is love that is dependent on an object—the love of Amnon for Tamar, and what love is not dependent on an object—the love of Jonathan and David." What was Amnon and Tamar's love? They were half-siblings, with the same father but different mothers. Tamar was beautiful, Amnon saw her, her love entered his heart, he didn't know what to do until one of King David's advisers gave him advice. Pretend you're sick and ask Tamar to make you food, and when she comes to your room, do what you want. And that's what happened. Amnon pretended to be sick, asked Tamar to make him food, and did what he did. She went out

to the streets, she screamed, she cried, she tore her clothes. What is written after the act? And the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. Wonder of wonders, how is it possible for there to be such a drastic decline, to have such a powerful love for her to the point that he was almost sick from her, suddenly not only does he hate her but his hatred is greater than the love he had for her before. How can that be? And a second thing, what did he want from her, did she ask him to love her? He came, did what he did, forced her, against her will. Defiled her, humiliated her, and on top of that he hates her. But we explained that in fact Amnon loved himself. Why does he call Tamar, because he knows that he can get satisfaction and pleasure from her.

And we brought in the parable of the fish. A man eats fish, they ask him why he eats fish, he says that he loves fish. But what does he do with the fish? Takes them home, cuts them into pieces, puts salt on them, fries them in boiling oil, and eats them. That's loving fish? Go to the sea and throw them bread, give them food, watch how they eat, that's called loving fish. If there are fish whose taste is bitter, will he eat them? No! Is that a fish lover? No. Cannibals also love human beings. Who's willing to visit them? That man doesn't love fish, he loves himself. The fish taste good, so he calls himself a fish lover. That's the same as the love of Amnon and Tamar. Amnon calls that loving Tamar. Amnon doesn't love Tamar, he loves himself, he's got an interest. He knows what pleasures he can get from Tamar—he calls that loving Tamar, but he loves himself.

That's the way all love is today in the streets. Love at first sight, he sees her, he thinks of what he can get. He calls it love at first sight, but the minute he gets what he needs, the hatred with which he hated her is greater than the love with which he loved her. That's love? Do you know what kind of love? Love that is dependent on an object. When the object is gone, the love ends, when the interest disappears, the love disappears. So a boy can go out with a girl for six years, use the most stupendous language with her, my only, my eyes, but after six years he sees a prettier girl, one appeals to him more, and he says to his girlfriend: I'm sorry, we're not right for each other. After six years we're not right for each other? That's it, he found a butterfly he likes more.

What is love? Love is to give, not to get. And all the love in the street today is to get, you want fish, get them, eat them, enjoy. There's a big difference between love between a husband and wife and a mother's love for her son. A mother wouldn't be willing to trade her son for any other boy in the world, even if her son is sickly and unhealthy and not good-looking. Her neighbor's son can be a handsome boy with very high intelligence, but a mother won't agree to exchange her son for the neighbor's son. But a woman is prepared to trade in her husband. She sees a more handsome, more successful, richer husband, she's willing to switch. She's able to leave her husband, divorce him, and go. These things happen every day. Why? Because on her husband's side it's receiving. She marries in order to receive. When you get married in order to receive, when you see another person who looks as if you can get more from him, then you're done with that husband. If she married her

husband in order to give, to provide and to give and to give, that kind of woman will not leave her husband. A man who marries a woman in order to give and to bestow. To give and to give is love that builds itself, that kind of love doesn't blow up. That's love that lasts forever, that's true love, that's love that you build. A man who gets married in order to say I won't be your sucker and I'll have the last word at home, better not to get married, why, because that home won't last. That's not love, that's love of himself, love of himself like love of fish. A mother's love for her son is love that the mother only gives and gives to her son, from the day he is born, she gets up a hundred times in the middle of the night, diapers, changes, he cries and drives her crazy and she just gives and gives, she is tied to her son by real love, love that you build, it ties her to her son, ties her to her husband, ties him to his wife, that is true love.

But the love of David and Jonathan, it is written that this is love that is not dependent on an object. Jonathan was the son of King Saul. Naturally, it's the way of the world, a king dies, who continues after him? His son Jonathan. And Jonathan said to David, and it was known in Israel: King David, I know that you will be king of Israel after my father. With God's help I will be your deputy. He was not jealous of him, he didn't hate him. There was a great love between them. What does David say to Jonathan? Your love is greater for me than the love of women. My love for you is greater than the love of all women in the world. All love of women is interested love. With touching, with interests. My love for you is without touching and without interests. That

is true love, love in order to give, in order to invest, that's true love, love that is not dependent on an object.

A man going to get married would do well to examine himself, am I going to get married in order to give to my wife, in order to give of myself, so that it will be good for her, or for it to be good for me? If he's getting married so that it will be good for him and not for his wife, he'd better not get married.

We talked last week about all the songs outside, love songs, if she leaves me, what will be with me, it's hard for me. He doesn't ask, what will be with you.

Who, what will be with you? To hell with what will be with you, nothing.

The Hazon Ish, peace be with him, said of that: the love of Torah Jews gets stronger each day. Torah Jews get married in order to give and to give. Love in the street gets weaker, because they get married to receive as much as possible. I am the man of the house I am the boss I am the last word and I won't be your sucker. That kind of love can't last. It gets weaker.

We saw in the words of the commentators why God exempted women from Torah study. After all, Torah study is equal to all the *mitzvot*. Why did God exempt women from Torah study? Why? For *shalom bayit*. What is the connection between peace in the home and Torah study? Peace between a man and his wife and Torah study? The husband comes home from work, the food isn't ready, the house is upside down, you know what happens to a husband who comes home and the food isn't ready? That's it, the blood rushes to his head. He'll pick up his wife and wave her around like a chicken before Yom Kippur. What happens? He sees his wife studying, wow,

studying Torah. Why isn't there food? Why is the house upside down? She says to him, I have to study Torah, I have to study Torah. It'll be off with her head, it will be Gog and Magog at home. God said to the woman: I exempt you from Torah study especially so that there will be peace between you and your husband. But what else? What the husband learns, the woman gets a half share. She's his partner.

Dependent on an Object and Not Dependent on an Object

“What is true love?” Rabbi Zer asks, joining a long line of scholars who have studied the question. Standing before his audience, the rabbi seeks to scrutinize this intimate question, which people spend so much time discussing. The sense one gets from detached listening (at home) is that the rabbi decided to participate in a panel discussion on love, to show that on his side there's also something to say about it, and that he actually might be the one who knows what true love is. The unstated assumption is that there are sham loves, counterfeit or false loves. The question may well indicate that we are not talking about a distinction between true and false love but rather between different behaviors that are considered love but which are, in fact, not love—like sexuality, desire, dependence, and jealousy.

The rabbi enlists as guides two exceptional love stories from the Bible that are cited in the Avot tractate of the Mishna. The first, that of Amnon and Tamar, is a tale of incest, deception, and rape—a brother forces sexual relations on his half-sister. The second, that of David and Jonathan, centers on the love of two men. The rabbi does not address the fact that the verse from Avot that praises one of these loves over the other is based on two non-standard love stories that the Bible dares to tell.²¹ The rabbi uses

Amnon's deed to condemn a model of love based on satisfying desires, love that leads to pretense, lies, rape, debasement, and humiliation. That is love that loves itself, the love of a person who sees and wants, loves and takes, takes and casts aside. Amnon loved, Rabbi Zer maintains, but he loved himself. He was entirely motivated by his personal interest. The same Amnon also hated. He hated with a grater force than he loved. The rabbi spends time on this pendulum, on the instability of love that seeks to satisfy desires. It is short-lived: "When the interest disappears, the love disappears." In its place comes a potent hatred (self-hatred?), directed at the victim whose role has ended.

Such love is born from a glance, and its source is the eyes. "Tamar was beautiful, Amnon saw her." The beginning of this bad story was the objectifying gaze that Amnon gave Tamar. Eyes appear frequently in the rabbi's lectures, as gaping holes in the body that poison can penetrate. In a general way, he follows a Jewish mystical tradition that is cautious about what the eyes may see. Here the glance is like a pin drawn out of a live grenade, which must then explode. The evil glance has a nice name in the street these days, the rabbi claims. It's called "love at first sight." It's a kind of glance that, as skilled watchers of movies and television, we have learned to identify as soon as it happens on the screen. The Rabbi rejects love based on the assumption that there is something of substance in what the eye sees, in the information that the glance can convey. The gaze does not convey anything other than a desire to take what the eye sees. The only imagination that the eye uses is the imagination that depicts those things that the viewer can get but which he cannot yet see. Eyes, like the street, are a key word in the rabbi's talks. They are Satan's representatives in our bodies, a tool of the evil impulse, who wants to achieve satisfaction. Tell her a thousand times, "my only, my eyes,"²² and you'll

cast her aside when you see something more promising. Love at first sight is, then, a distortion of the concept of love, because love born in a glance is like a reflex. The ostensible lover sees himself in the object he looks at, and in the range of pleasures waiting there for him. One look in this mirror is enough to seduce him. He cannot face up to his consumer urge, he wants her and he intends to get her. True love, the rabbi maintains, is to give, to give, and not to receive.

In her survey of the history of love, Ilouz describes pre-modern love as a symbol of giving, devotion, and unselfishness. In this sense, Rabbi Zer is situated no later than the Renaissance, but he is fully acquainted with the current discourse of love. It seems likely that he joins other religious preachers in seeking to return the family moral order to a place from which it was exiled. But, beyond this, the rabbi has an interesting social critique.

The rabbi's parable of the fish sounds at first like a comedy sketch. But he develops it into something reminiscent of Sandoval's arguments relating to Barthes. Love, according to the parable, is to let the object of your love live. To let it, her, them alone. To go to the sea, to throw them bread, and to watch happily how they enjoy it. Love does not require ownership. Love that flows and lets its object alone is disentangled from the binary nature of subject-object relations, from giving and taking, from mine or not mine, from loving or hating. Such love is not a hostage to glances or tastes—it also takes in the bitter and the ugly. In this form, love is a utopia, something approaching Sandoval's "third space."

But the rabbi is not interested in spending too much time in these open spaces. As a pedagogue and preacher whose job is to reshape reality, he must return from love to

life, and especially the lives of his listeners. In order to create the appropriate place for love, he makes fun of popular culture. “I’m sorry,” he says in imitation of the dissimulating boy, “we’re not right for each other.” He knows that his audience knows that he knows that this sentence is one of a set: “It’s not you, it’s me,” or “I’m just not built for commitment right now.” These hollow sentences come from the popular-therapeutic repertoire, and their purpose is to enable their speaker to avoid relationships. The rabbi’s tone ridicules the word “right” and does not believe in the word “sorry.” Immediately thereafter he glosses the real meaning of the cliché “found another butterfly.”

Mizrahi music does not escape unscathed, either. As popular merchandise, it reproduces selfishness and hedonism. Under the canopy of legitimacy of confession and open expression of emotions, the singer shouts “it’s hard for me,” or “what will be with me,” and his songs are taken to be songs of love. “Who, what will be with you,” the rabbi says. “To hell with what will be with you.”

Ilouz argues that the therapeutic discourse is meant to help people of the post-modern age renew their faith in love. It tells them that, beyond routine, daily “relationships,” there is, apparently, love. Rabbi Zer does not believe in this discourse, and sees it as a syntactic system meant to conceal moral evasions. It is a kind of narrative disseminated in the market in order to tell ugly stories in beautiful language. Scorn is in his voice, and his skepticism is great: “After six years you aren’t right for each other?”

Current romance has deconstructed the story of great love into a series of relationships, says Ilouz. There is much less space for telling a single story about a single

couple. The rabbi understands that love is a story, and he does not seek to evade that. Nor does he seek support from the spheres of marketing, consumerism, or leisure. He repeatedly mocks partiers and consumers, and proposes to invest in love rather than to waste it, to build it up and not take it apart. A man or woman who makes a covenant of love must do so with the intention to give unilaterally, the rabbi says, “to give, to provide and to give and to give.” But he does not remain on the utopian level of giving without compensation. He promises reward for those who give respect and stability—a strong home and proper relations. For the construction of a stable home, the rabbi erects two scaffolds, but neither is taken from heterosexual relations: one is love between two men and the second is the love of a mother for her son. He returns to the verse of Mishna that he opened with and interprets “your love for me was wonderful, more than the love of women” as a sweeping statement that “all love of women is interested love. With touching.” In other words, however you look at it, a man’s love for a woman is a love that is dependent on an object. Jonathan’s love for David went beyond the envy one would expect from someone whose crown was to be taken from him and laid before a new kind. It is devoid of an object. The only positive and reliable love of women is a mother’s love for her son. She gets up at night for her crying son, feeds him, changes his diapers, take him to her bosom even if he is ugly and stupid, even if the neighbor’s son is better looking.²³

These devoted mothers, who are at the same time Tamars—potential rape victims, rejected and cast aside—sit in the lower hall, hidden from the rabbi’s eyes. But they cannot breathe easily. The rabbi’s condemnation is directed at them as well.²⁴ It “looks as if you can get more from him, then you’re done with this husband.” Women are not only

abandoned, the rabbi says, they also leave to follow the horn of plenty. Whether they found each other in an act of love at first sight, or they thought they could get more from each other, he and she are now together in a noxious relationship.

The love that involves falling in love, a glance, physical contact, and the satisfaction of needs, is thus doomed a priori. Men and women desire it, and in looking for it they debase each other. The right to love and be loved, according to the compact of democratic liberalism as it appears in the world of representations is fraudulent, a recipe for rape, degradation, and humiliation. What remains is a mother's love for her son and a man's love for his friend, and with these one must get into bed and raise up a new generation. The way to do the trick does not go down new paths. It goes back to the family, to marriage. In this sense, the rabbi does not stray from the accepted manners of discourse even in non-religious speech, including the therapeutic discourse. But he focuses precisely on his own community, aiming at the new division of labor between the housewife and the yeshiva student, between one who reaches paradise because he studies Torah and one who joins him in heaven because she allows him to study in clean clothes and with a full stomach.

Romantic love, love at first sight, compatibility between husband and wife, extended courtship, and living together before marriage, equality in the division of housekeeping chores—all these are part of the spoken language, as well as of the cultural world of the lecture's audience. The rabbi's foundation work requires him to censure that world and to fight it. He seeks to alienate his audience from film, newspapers, women's magazines, telenovelas, from open conversation between boyfriends and girlfriends. He never ceases to distance his listeners from the common language of love and

relationships. The rabbi never assumes that he has successfully purged the other language. He returns to it constantly. He addresses it directly, or issues close to it. In particular, he returns to the canopy under which this entire cultural department shelters —“modesty.” This was the subject of the rabbi’s talk on Israel’s “holiday of love.”

4. IF YOU GUARD YOUR EYES, YOU FEAR HEAVEN

The fifteenth day of the Hebrew month of Av, in the Hebrew year 5760—the night before August 16, 2000. I begin my run at 7:15 in the evening, a few minutes before sunset. Most people who walk or run on the Tel Aviv seashore choose this hour, when the gates that close off the beach set aside for the religious public are opened. When they are open, you can continue, unimpeded, for nearly two miles from the Tel Baruch beach in northern Tel Aviv all the way to the Herzliyya marina. At this hour, no one charges entry fees, and the temperature drops a bit. After running a kilometer or so, I reached the religious beach and glanced over the fence. At first I didn’t realize what I was seeing. A well-dressed crowd had gathered at the open area in front of the changing rooms. For a minute I thought that I’d run into an event like the birthday celebrations that people sometimes organize on the beach in the evening. But I soon realized that these men in black and white were the Wednesday bathers—Wednesday being a men’s day on this sex-segregated stretch of shoreline. They were waiting in a large knot for their buses. Some dawdlers were still on the beach or in the water. Maybe they had come in their own cars and, not dependent on the bus, could allow themselves a little more fun before dark.

With rock music in my earphones and endorphins coursing through my veins, I felt like slaloming through the crowd. I couldn’t keep to the water’s edge in any case, because the beach looked like a moonscape. The sand was pocked with craters, as if an

entire battalion of gold prospectors had just passed through. A boy sitting in one of these natural bathtubs told me why they were there. He, like other Haredim who remained on the beach, entirely ignored the walkers and runners in scanty sports clothing and bathing suits who crossed his line of site. But, as they passed by it was hard for the remaining bathers, especially the boys, not to make eye contact for a few seconds. A young man in a bathing suit and white teeshirt, wearing a knitted *kipah*, was packing photography equipment into a hiker's knapsack. He had completed a day of work in which he had, apparently, taken snapshots of Haredim having fun during the *bein ha-zemanim* period. I was listening to the radio as I ran, and the announcer on Galgalatz, an FM radio station popular with young Israelis, told me through my earphone not to miss the sunset taking place at this very moment. Certainly not today, the holiday of love. "If you don't have anyone to watch it with," she said, "watch it alone. If you don't have anyone to love today, love yourself," she recommended.

By the time I reached the religious beach again on my return trip south from the marina, only a handful of Haredim remained on the beach. Most had disappeared into the accordion-buses that drop them off in Bnei Brak and Petach Tikva—home, in the holy neighborhoods, away from these secular pastimes that, even if they separate men and women, are nevertheless on the boundaries of the impure.

I met my sister-in-law next to the newsstand where I had started my run. "Are you coming to see Amos Kollek's *Fast Food, Cool Women*" she asked. "I'm dying to see it," I replied. "But I have to go to Pardes Katz, to Daniel Zer's lecture, I haven't been there for a month." That morning I'd called the yeshiva, hoping to hear that there were no lectures during the *bein ha-zemanim* period. The telephone rang for a long time and my

hopes shot up. But in the end someone picked up the receiver and said, “If God wills it, today at 10:15, like always.”

At 10:10 I stopped to buy pitas at the corner, so I wouldn't be the first one there. I found a parking space close by, just in front of where a smashed, vandalized car stood on the sidewalk. A small clutch of men stood in front of the yeshiva. I noticed three Haredi men speaking to a teenage boy who bore a backpack. They were clearly trying to talk him into coming inside. Their business was persuasion—for the evening, for tomorrow, for always. As I passed by, I caught snippets of conversation. But I could not stop to listen. I walked on, right and left and left, behind the yeshiva, to the women's entrance. An old Volvo stopped next to me. An older couple emerged, he with a *kipah* and she with a kerchief. He went ahead and she turned to the back. Before going in, she shouted in the direction of the building opposite the women's entrance: “Nili! Ilanit!” After calling twice more, a woman and teenage girl in non-religious dress emerged onto a second-floor balcony and shouted, “We'll be there in a minute!”

In the meantime, the rabbi appeared on the screen, the singers sang in his honor, the women stood in respect and clapped hands to the music. The show began.

I thought he would talk about the uproar surrounding Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef's recent remarks on reincarnation and the causes of the Holocaust. But Rabbi Daniel Zer instead gave a classic sermon on impurity and permissiveness, without any reference to the Hebrew date—the 15th of Av. The radio's love holiday was not, so it seemed, his holiday.

The rabbi read, or recited by heart, the principal text on which he based his remarks. It was from the book of Proverbs and, in accordance with Jewish tradition, he attributed that book to King Solomon. Despite his subject, and despite the character of that book of the Bible, he did not address the tension between the text's moralism and Bible's account of King Solomon's huge harem. Here is my reconstruction of his lecture:

The non-religious Jew is like one of the horses in the chariot that Solomon describes. You steer right, he goes to the right, you steer left, he goes left. Gentiles, the most impure of the impure, tell him from France what to wear and he wears it, what to eat and he eats it, they lead him by the reins. They say that we do brainwashing, but they don't have brains at all. They go wherever their heart takes them. Our sages said that the holy and the wise hold their hearts in their hands. They control their hearts. The heart wants to go to the beach, they tell it no. It wants to eat impure foods, they tell it no, you are a Jew. It wants an abomination, they tell it no. The others go with their hearts, they have no brain at all. That's how it is when your heart is in your hands. It all begins with the eyes, the eyes suck up everything, take pictures. Many things are written about the eyes in the kabala, in the Holy Zohar. Satan is described as being all eyes. If you control your eyes, everything is under control. Everything begins there. If a dog, or a cat, or if you'll forgive me, a mouse knocks on your door, would you open it? Will you let an abomination into the house? No! What's your house, a zoo? It's the same with eyes. Don't look, don't suck it in, don't let it inside. Someone who looks at a vile picture, all his limbs and sinews become impure, his whole

being is impure. A person who pays the woman at the cash register at a newsstand, and instead of putting it on the counter he puts it into her hand, so that he can enjoy and look at her hand, that's impurity, utter impurity. [Rabbi Zer is extremely emotional, incensed.]

My sisters, I address you as a brother to his sisters. What have they done with us? They've undressed you, you're naked. How can you allow the government and the cinema and the media to undress you, thirty years ago, if a woman had gone around the way women go today, the non-religious would have shouted "shame!" at her! But today, what degeneration, we degenerate and get used to it and degenerate more and get used to it. Where are the modest daughters of Israel, all the gentiles knew that our girls were modest. But today? A man goes to work, he doesn't know what his wife is doing at home. I heard, not on us, today a man came to my office, I don't want to go into details, that there are all sorts of overseas trips for women to do things, we shouldn't know about them. [The rabbi is shouting, almost crying, very upset.] Daughters of Israel, my sisters, I cry out to you, come back. One comes back in repentance, what joy that causes in the heavens. I see Haredi girls in Bnei Brak who grew up in sanctity, what girls, what innocence, everyone wants daughters like that, everyone would want a wife like that.

Whoever sins in the flesh is hurt financially. People come to me, they were billionaires. Today? Debts, troubles. I ask them, did you fool around with women? They say, whatever I wanted, single women, married women. I tell them: That's it. There's nothing worse, this entire country is an abomination.

Fifty percent of the non-religious school children are drug addicts. All their radio stations are full of permissiveness. And what do they want to close? The holy radio stations. Only pure speech and Torah and modesty interfere with their airplanes. When Shas is in the government, things are quiet. The minute they leave, give it to them, persecute the Torah. But it won't work, the country is full of *hozerim be-teshuva*. They said that all the circuses will become synagogues, and look, the Teddy soccer stadium has been filled with *hozerim be-teshuva*. [The audience applauds, and the women quickly join in.] The Jewish people are starting to understand, are starting to come back in repentance.

And the main thing, as I said, is the eyes. Rabbi Elimelech of Lezhinsk said that one should not look an impure animal in the face, or in the face of a gentile and an evil person. Protect your eyes. The holy Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, of blessed memory, said that. Where people guard their eyes, there is fear of heaven, and if people don't guard their eyes there is no fear of heaven. We will speak at length next week about fear of heaven. [The rabbi calms down a bit, lowers his voice, takes a sip of water, and goes on.]

I will tell you a story even though I've already told it a few times. It's a true story, it is recorded in history books, it will describe for us—even though it turns the stomach and it's awful—who the daughters of Israel were, what it is to be a modest daughter of Israel. It happened during the Inquisition in Spain.

The rabbi relates, movingly and with tears in his voice, the story of how the Inquisition executed a Jewish girl by tying her braids to a horse and dragging her through the streets. Her last request was for pins, so that she could pin her dress to her body so that her flesh not be bared in public. Her request was granted, and she attached the dress to her skin. Then she was dragged, bleeding, through the streets. During the hardest part of the story, the rabbi exchanges his speaking voice for the chant of prayer, an Ashkenazi chant. He sways and closes his eyes:

And what did she ask for, what? What did this holy girl want? Rider, rider she said, as he dragged her and her body was already broken. Rider, rider, please, stop for a moment. The cavalryman, even though he was a gentile, stopped, and she tells him. While you were dragging me, my dress came loose and my body was bared. That's what she said to him, with her body gashed and torn. And he, the gentile, untied her, hauled her up on to the horse, and galloped to another land and converted to Judaism. Such were the holy daughters of Israel.

The audience falls silent and the rabbi calms relaxes. "Ten years ago," he continues, "I told that story at a 'Jewish marathon.' A man of about 50 came up to me and said: 'I'm becoming religious. I once was principal of a non-religious school. I've heard this story several times, and I know that in Spain you can see the girl's grave, but this is the first time I've cried.'"

It's 11:30 p.m. suddenly we hear singing in the upper hall, we sit it on the screen. The men stand and sing in honor of Haham Avraham, an elderly kabalist who lives in Pardes Katz. He has long, gray hair, loose sidelocks, wears a large embroidered Georgian

cap, and a striped shirt. As he walks through the audience, men press or kiss his hand. He ascends to the stage and sits down next to the rabbi.

“Will he speak as well?” I ask Ganit, who is sitting beside me. “No,” she says. One of the organizers hands out soft drinks, which the women accept eagerly. For the first time I do not refuse. It is cold and tastes good. At 11:45 I get up, whisper to Ganit that I will call her, take two cassette tapes of another preacher, Amnon Yitzhak, that a boy is handing out for free, and go out into the humid night.

Happy holiday of love.

The Sunset of the Radio and the Religious Beach

Trips, hikes, picnics, and time out together are part of the tool chest that build the romantic utopia. The announcer on the Galgalatz radio station joins this construction project by declaring, each day, the precise minute when the sun settles into the sea. The day I wrote the account above, the fifteenth of Av, has in recent years undergone a huge commercial revival as the Israeli Valentine Day—our biblical white summer holiday of love. It’s a prime evening for weddings, for food and wine festivals, for lectures and seminars on “the concept of love,” and each year there is a rock concert at Tzemach, the southern beach of Lake Kinneret. Thousands of young people flock there for a night of music, and perhaps of love as well. This Hebrew “holiday” is not celebrated in religious and Haredi circles.²⁵ However, it falls during the *bein ha-zemanim*, when men are on vacation from their studies and join their wives and children for end-of-summer vacation activities.²⁶

During my regular workout I encounter, at an open compound, outside, a leisure site, men from the world I am studying. The situation is not one of work; they and I are

using the beach for similar purposes. We were not meant to meet there. The gate that allowed me to make my way into the beach they were using was opened only after they were supposed to leave. But they remained, because of a late bus, or because of the private car that waited for them above. It is hot at home and nice on the beach. The city guard who opens the gate is more punctual. At seven he draws back the bolt, allows the gate's two wings to separate. His work day is over.

In the twilight hour, between the sea and the dry sand, on a narrow band of wet continent, people pass each other. They are not supposed to look at me, and I am not supposed to examine them, or perhaps I am. As one who has worked for so many years among the Haredim, I have internalized the habit of looking down when encountering men, and the other codes of movement in public and private spaces. But suddenly, in the neutral space created between the divided time (for them and for us), we met. I in my running suit, those who remained on the beach in their swimsuits, and the Galgalatz announcer with her pedagogy: "If you don't have anyone to watch it with, watch it alone. If you don't have anyone to love today, love yourself."

Even during the few minutes that we spent together in this liminal compound, we lugged with us the load of our similar and opposing cultures. This load is the raw material that is worked by cultural entrepreneurs, among them the preachers of religious transformation, including Rabbi Zer.

Rabbi Zer doesn't like the fact that the people who come to hear him also go to the beach, but he knows that they do. He is less concerned about those who go to separate-sex beaches, but he knows that some of them still go to mixed beaches. But even the latter, it turns out, can put more of a barrier between them and the other bathers. The

beach appears and reappears in the rabbi's lectures, one of a string of self-indulgent activities that he enumerates constantly: going to the beach, going to Eilat, having cookouts, going to soccer games. The rabbi generally suffices with these four examples. Sometimes he adds going to the movies and watching television. These are the sum total of the worthless activities he attributes to his audience, When he mentions that a rich man came to his office today, he can add overseas trips and gambling. But, knowing his audience, he generally lists common and popular activities. He knows that between one Wednesday and the next, in the summer in particular, no small number of his listeners will engage in one of these disgraceful pastimes. He knows why he is speaking, and they know why they are listening. Soldiers from his camp patrol his yeshiva's perimeter, and know how to identify people who are looking for a way in. I saw some of them before the lecture, in conversation with a teenage boy. The woman who emerged from the old car, who looked religious, called out to women from the apartment across the way, who did not look religious, to join her. The blending of those who have already undergone change with those who are still seeking—and with those who come on occasion to listen, meet, check things out, have a good time, or learn something—creates an extremely complex human mosaic that demands sophisticated cultural labor from the rabbi. How far should he take them down? How much can he offend them? Whom should he offend? Should he seek to fortify some of them? How can he tell the story in a different way? If the radio's sunset is not a romantic haven, and if a person should not love or fall in love with himself, what is the point of devotion and what are the chances of finding love?

How Can You Allow The Government and the Cinema and the Media to Undress You?

To implant his alternative story, Harding argues, the preacher first deconstructs the “other,” external, world of meaning. Rabbi Zer does precisely this. He begins paradoxically. Stereotypically, non-religious people label religious people as irrational, and portray themselves as being individuals able to make judgments and decisions. Rabbi Zer reverses the stereotype. “Gentiles, the most impure of the impure, tell him from France what do wear and he wears it, what to eat and he eats it.” Non-religious people, he says, are brainwashed by the imperatives of fashion. Even worse, those who hold the reins are “impure gentiles.” The non-religious person, who styles himself as an autonomous individual who can’t be told by anyone what to do is, in Rabbi Zer’s portrayal, the sap of foreign manipulators. They control him, but even more so, he is a slave to his own whims. His freedom is a type of slavery. His heart rules his brain. The rabbi offers his listeners the means to break free of this domination. When your heart tells you to go to the beach, say no, and when it tells you to eat impure food, tell it “I am a Jew.”

Even the trifling, unavoidable daily act of receiving change at a newsstand becomes an example of an abomination focused on the hand of the saleswoman. When he talks about matters of modesty and abomination, the rabbi gets emotional. His voice rises and at times he is on the verge of tears. When he addresses the women, he is able to move me. He can’t see them, so he has to guess. He knows they are there, knows that women who aren’t there may hear some of what he says from the men. The women’s modesty is precious to him. “My sisters, I address you as a brother to his sisters. What have they

done with us? They've undressed you, you're naked." The transition from his appeal to them to his description of "our" catastrophe is entirely comprehensible. According to the patriarchal code, a sister's immodesty harms the entire community. The rabbi says who is leading them astray. He knows that his listeners read newspapers, that the women sometimes read women's magazines, that they listen to the radio, watch movies, and some also watch television. He seeks to mark them all as parts of a conspiracy, a single system that seeks to change Jewish society in Israel.

To provide some historical depth to his arguments, the rabbi says that what is in our day acceptable clothing for women was once considered slutty by both religious and non-religious women. The problem is that we become accustomed, that scruples are worn away until the forbidden becomes legitimate. "Their" criteria are not absolute—they can be eradicated and contained, but it is hard to stop them. Degeneration runs so deep that he has heard—and he does not want to go into detail—that women actually engage in sexual tourism.²⁷ Such profligacy has a bitter end—many men who were billionaires sank into debt and confess to him that they fooled around with women. Schoolyards are full of juvenile drug addicts, and the radio (Galgaltz?) is full of fornication. Society's tolerance is so misplaced that when a radio station has to be closed to reduce frequency interference for aircraft navigation, the government decides to close the "holy stations." But the rabbi is certain that the temples of impurity will be filled with Jews returning to religion, just as the Teddy soccer stadium filled up with *hozerim be-teshuva* when Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak appeared there. When a Shas legislator predicted that the Knesset, Israel's parliament, would eventually turn into a *beit kneset*, a synagogue, he knew what he was talking about.

In the meantime, the rabbi has to offer a romantic alternative, a different kind of love story. The story, which closes the evening, tells of a medieval romance involving a Jewish princess, a knight on horseback, a swift horse, blood, cruelty, repentance, and a happy ending. As the rabbi chants the story with an Ashkenazi lilt and Ashkenazi pronunciation the audience falls silence. The story brings tears to the eyes of the *hozer be-teshuva* that the rabbi mentions. A Jewish girl is taken to be executed, apparently because of her adherence to her faith. Rather than being afraid of death, she is afraid of the shame of having her body exposed in public. Her courage and total devotion melt the heart of the cruel gentile who discovers (even he) the absolute truth. This discovery is the turning point in the story, and changes the life of the “other.” He saves his victim and himself, converts to Judaism in another land, and perhaps even wins the hand of the princess.

5. I THINK I GOT THE POINT

Spring, 2002. I know that I’ve heard enough, but sometimes I still show up. I stand in the remodeled foyer, leaf through the books and browse the long-sleeved teeshirts. Like the women around me, I rummage through the *mezuzot*, the candlesticks, the straw hats, and the beribboned kerchiefs. While ostensibly looking through a book, I overhear a conversation between a married woman (whose hair is covered) and a teenage girl in Haredi dress.

The married woman: “It sounds to me like something that’s starting off on the wrong foot. His family doesn’t want you and they haven’t even seen you?”

The young woman mumbles: “Something like that.”

The married woman: “Look, you have to decide whether you even want him. Do you want him? What do you feel? Are you interested? Are you turned on? What do you think? Leave his family out of it for now. Where do you stand?”

The girl remains silent most of the time, staring at the floor.

The married woman: “It seems to me that what you need to do is to take some time to think, and give him time to think, and see where you stand. Are you coming to Rabbi Rafael’s lecture on Tuesday?” The girl nods. “So there, with Rabbi Rafael...”

I can’t hear them any more. Lots of women have come into the foyer and separated us. Perhaps the girl wanted to ask the rabbi’s advice, and perhaps the married woman told her she could do so at the lecture. Perhaps not.

Next to me stands a thin, delicate young woman with glasses. She is dressed in an especially Haredi way—a gray pleated skirt like those worn by girls at Beit Ya’akov schools, and a long-sleeved shirt with a long, light gray vest over it. A tight white kerchief covers her hair, and is covered in turn by another gray and black kerchief, leaving a narrow strip of white around her face. She looks almost nun-like, and very Ashkenazi. She is browsing through the books. I want to speak to her, to ask her why she came. Maybe she is herself active in returning people to religion. My past experience is that the more Haredi a person is, the easier it is for her to make conversation with other kids of women. I want to speak, but don’t. Even when she takes a seat in the hall, I don’t take one of the empty chairs next to her. It might look suspicious, since there are so many empty chairs around. When the hall fills up and others sit around her, I decide that it’s too late.

Music is forbidden during the period of mourning preceding the fast of the Ninth of Av, so the lecture is preceded by a recording of a lesson on the stories of Christianity. I don't know if the speaker actually studied the New Testament (was that possible?), or whether he derived his knowledge from other sources, but he displayed great facility with the Christian text and confronted it in detail. The women paid little attention, but it was strange for me to hear talk of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, baptism, and the apostles over the Or David loudspeaker system. Just before the lecture began, I managed to get a smile from Orit, who was passing out Lev Le-Ahim flyers. She approached women that seemed like promising targets (that is, ones wearing jeans, short skirts, and tank tops), smiled, and tried to interest them in the *teshuva* organization's study programs and schools. On a normal evening, she manages, in my estimate, to get about ten women to fill out the forms. She smiles at me again, tries to figure out my long clothes, uncovered hair, and wedding ring. I don't help her and she keeps going.

The rabbi enters without the usual fanfare, and one girl tells a row of friends she brought with her: "Girls, you'll have to wait until after the Tisha B'Av for the songs."

The crowd consisted mostly of young women and teenage girls. Perhaps the reason was that it was summer vacation, or perhaps the fact that there are not many other things to do during the days before the Ninth of Av. The girls were dressed in everything from pants and tank-tops to above-the-knee skirts to somewhat modest and entirely modest skirts and blouses. Girls with bare arms and girls with long sleeves kissed each other. Many of the women who walk past me smell as if they just came out of the shower—their hair is still wet, up or loose. They've rubbed moisturizing cream on their bodies

and applied a bit of makeup, a bit of perfume. Going to hear the rabbi is something of a night out. Most come in groups, and have the house keys in one hand and a cell phone in the other. They grab a row, cross legs, clasp their hands, and let's go, let's see what the rabbi will give us tonight. Some come as family units—a grandmother, mother, and grandchild in a carriage, or a mother and several of her children. Some of them bring food and drink. It's a fun but attentive atmosphere. All in all, except for the endlessly ringing phones, and the constant getting up, going back, and switching seats, most of them watch the screen and listen to the rabbi. And the rabbi has something to tell them.

The selection below is abridged and edited, according to notes I took in the dark hall.

We'll continue from last week, when we talked about the sanctity of man, and today I want to talk about the sanctification of the covenant. What is most serious transgression? [From the beginning of the lecture, he raises his voice, giving it the tone of an angry prophet.] Casting one's seed in vain. Whoever does that corrupts all his organs. This small organ corrupts the entire body. If you are holy for me, you are mine, but if you are impure, you are like Arafat to me. He who makes himself a bit holy, is made very holy. But a man who defiles himself a bit is greatly defiled. All this degeneration, all this Gog and Magog that we are in—security, the economy—all that is from impurity. The home is destroyed, destroyed. I will now read from the words of Rabbi Ya'akov Abu-Hatzeira, and he makes an acrostic out of the word *bereshit* ["in the beginning," the first word in the Torah and the Hebrew name of the

book of Genesis]. All the words deal with sanctifying the covenant in purity. That's the beginning.

The children of Israel did the sin of the golden calf. The sin of the golden calf, gentlemen! Idol worship! And 3,000 of them died. But for the children of Israel's lewdness and impurity with the daughters of Moab? For that, a plague broke out among them that knocked down 24,000, and it would not have stopped without the brave act of Pinhas. He was a zealot, zealous for the word of God, unafraid. He knew what a risk he was taking, but he wasn't afraid, didn't think twice. That Pinhas was the same as Elijah the prophet, who ascended alive to heaven. We need to rejoice that we are *ba'alei teshuva*. To act that way, without thinking twice, to be proud that we are zealots for the word of God, without looking down, without being ashamed. People will say to me: what happened to you, have you gone bonkers? Lost your mind? Gone off the deep end? But you, be proud, because you are a Jew. If someone tells you that, he is a gentile, what's Jewish about him? Does he keep the Sabbath? Does he keep kosher? Holidays? Nothing. That's not a Jew, that's a gentile. Tell him, don't be ashamed, tell him, you call yourself a Jew? You're a gentile! You go into the bank and they give you a cup of water, don't be ashamed, say the blessing out loud, say the blessing so they hear. When your friend puts a *kipah* on his head, on Yom Kippur, at a wedding, at a *brit mila* [circumcision ceremony], tell him, go tell him, what happened to you, have you gone bonkers? Have you lost your mind? What happened, all the sudden at a *brit*, at a wedding, on Yom Kippur? Now you remembered?

Yes, we're bonkers and out of our mind. We're the only ones who are Jews all year, we're the only ones it's right for, us, not the intellectuals, just us from there, from Pardes Katz, for us it's right. Look them in the eye—let them look down. I used to walk to the yeshiva on the Sabbath morning wearing a *tallit* [prayer shawl], cars passed by on Jabotinsky Street, and I looked the drivers in the eye. Every one of them would cast down his eyes, he knew he was a liar and that I'm the real human being. They go in lust, and we—like bridegrooms we go.

The rabbi bends down, picks a book up from the lectern in front of him, and continues:

Maimonides says that a man who saw a woman and love entered his heart and he fell ill, he only wants her, even just to talk to her from the other side of a fence, only to hear her voice, better for him to die from this illness of his heart rather than to sin with her, even if she is unmarried. And you know why Maimonides says that? So that the daughters of Israel not be forsaken! [The rabbi shouts over and over again] So that the daughters of Israel not be forsaken! [Applause in the upper hall, and immediately thereafter in the lower hall as well.] Who destroyed our daughters, our diamonds, our treasures? Every girl who walks down the street is my sister. I am responsible for her, and who destroyed her? We, the boys. We destroyed her, a boy goes out with a girl for seven years, why don't you marry her? I still don't have faith in her. What's that, how is it that with the Haredim three or four months is enough, there's a wedding and the matter is over.

The girls giggle. They applauded him after he cried out “not be forsaken.” But they seem to be trying to imagine themselves married three months after meeting a boy. It’s a situation foreign even to the religious ones. They talk to each other, turning their faces from the screen to their neighbors, to speak for a minute about their lives.

The rabbi reads an Aramaic passage from the Talmud and paraphrases it. It’s a story about a woman who went to bake at her neighbor’s house. The neighbors’ goat nibbled at her hot bread and died. The halacha says that the woman must pay the damage. Why? Because the owner of the goat could not keep an eye on his goat because another woman had come to bake at his house and he feared that her arm might be bared and her modesty compromised. “Look at that! Her arm might be bared! Today women are in the garbage, in the trash. Be kosher, be modest, not a garbage can, they will value you, you will have a life of honor.”

The rabbi returns to the scenes of the beach that he likes to evoke in the summer, the mixed beaches and lewd streets. And I—after listening to him for three years—get the point. I’ve had enough. I leave earlier than usual.

6. NEITHER SAINT NOR SLUT

One who has cast his eyes on a woman and has fallen ill and is on the verge of death and the doctors said that he will not recover until he fornicates with her, he should die and not fornicate with her, even if she is unmarried, and to speak with her from behind a fence, he is not to be told to do so, and if he will die he is not to be told to speak with her from behind a fence, so that the

daughters of Israel not be forsaken and by these things come to engage in forbidden unions (Maimonides, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 5:9).

In the moments before the lecture, I overheard a chance conversation, followed Orit's work for Lev Le-Ahim, and looked over the audience of women. I saw again and again the extent of the work that had to be done. It is work that is never completed. Rabbi Zer's house is a way station, and controlling the traffic to and from it is not a simple task. There will always be new candidates for transformation, always the need to reinforce those who have already crossed the threshold, and that's not to mention those who toe the line but also need to know, each time afresh, that their way is the correct way and that truth is on their lips.

In the overheard conversation between the married and the young woman, I heard threads from the weave of a matchmaking discourse. The religious woman, who was perhaps involved in the transformations in the young woman's life, received an update from a meeting that apparently took place recently. The conversation turned on two opposing axes. One was the axis of making a match, the family's opinions, and arranged marriage. The second was the axis of personal discourse of choice and chemistry. By tradition and law, a Jewish woman may give or withhold her consent to marry the man her elders have chosen for her. A variety of matchmaking encounters, in which women accept or reject their family's choice, are described in other parts of this book. In the brief segment quoted above, the older speaker seeks to align the two axes. She has no interest in thwarting the respect the girl's family is due, but before setting out on a campaign to convince the family, she wants to be sure of the girl's personal position, the leanings of the heart, so she speaks to her in the language of contemporary love.

“Look, **you** have to decide whether **you even want** him. Do you want **him**? What do you **feel**? Are you **interested**? Are you **turned on**? What do you **think**? **Leave** his **family** out of it for now. Where do **you** stand?” In her short sentences, the speaker returns, in different ways, to the young woman. She asks her to clear the field of his parents, and of what he might want, and to know where she stands and what she wants. She wants to know if there was chemistry, if she was turned on. It is reasonable to assume that such terminology would not be used in a Haredi matchmaker’s debriefing of a girl, or in a conversation the girl might have with anyone who wants to know if she liked the boy. The bluntness, the slang, the emphasis on finding out the “ego state,” and the fact that the conversation was conducted in the foyer of a public hall, would not have happened, at least not in this way, in the Bnei Brak paradise of modesty described by Rabbi Zer. The women agents of transformation seek to speak to girls in their own language. They move between the new and old language in order not to lose their clients. When the subject is the love that is meant to lead to one of peaks of the transformation process—marriage with another *mit’hazek*—the mediator is all the more careful. She is concerned both about the girl and about the process.

In the meantime, above, the rabbi continues to flog the masturbators and the defilers. He links the “Gog and Magog”—that is, the Intifada and its metastases—to this pollution. But when he seeks to show his audience the right way, the rabbi makes use of the language of the street. In contrast with the conversation between the women, the rabbi uses slang sarcastically and ironically, to make his listeners smile: “We need to rejoice that we are *ba’alei teshuva*.... You go into the bank and they give you a cup of water, don’t be ashamed, say the blessing out loud.” Walk slowly down Jabotinsky Street on the

Sabbath, with your *tallit* on—make them stop, be zealous for the word of God, like Pinhas. They tell you that you’ve gone bonkers, lost your mind, gone off the deep end? That’s okay. Don’t be ashamed. The rabbi advises his listeners to stand tall, because he assumes that the time has come to go out into the public square. He doesn’t call on them to march on the Knesset in Jerusalem right at this moment, but he definitely wants them to see themselves as the moral majority. The one who says you’ve gone bonkers himself puts a *kipah* on his head on holidays or at celebrations. What happens to him then? Does he go bonkers? No, he is deceiving himself. You, the rabbi tells his listeners, you walk the straight path, the path of truth, and you should be proud.

The rabbi knows how a large portion of the Mizrahi public relates to religious tradition. He therefore knows that to disparage a man who puts a *kipah* on his head just on holidays or Friday nights can be a major insult. If the *hozer be-teshuva* dares to call his adversary (who may well be his brother, brother-in-law, or father) a gentile, it will cause real injury. The fact is that a person can feel “completely Jewish” by making just such occasional gestures of piety, out of habit and respect. Alongside the intra-Mizrahi segmentation between those who are religious and those who are not, there is also a division between us, the “crazies from Pardes Katz,” and the others, “the intellectuals.” It is likely that this distinction is also directed outwards at the liberal Ashkenazim, who are on other occasions referred to directly.

Once the rabbi feels he has bolstered his army of proud bridegrooms, he lashes out at them again. Maimonides distances the audience from the street and from slang, and move the moral horizon from Jabotinsky Street on Shabbat to the Talmudic court, with the woman behind the fence, the oven, the goat, and the guest baker. The rabbi turns guilt

inward, to the people who face him. This time it is not the government or Zionism. It's each individual man's surrender to his impulses: we have destroyed our daughters, our treasures. Instead of marrying them, you go out with them and leave them forsaken.

The women in the lower hall like it when the rabbi takes a swipe at the men. But the example he brought from the Haredi world, of three months of acquaintance before marriage, sounds pretty strange to them. How can a girl know, in just three months, where she stands, what she wants, and what she thinks? As the older woman told the younger woman before the lecture, "what you need to do is to take some time to think, and give him time to think." She certainly didn't mean that they should take seven years to think about it, but she certainly gave a place in the Jewish home for her brain, and for the heart and its embers.

At the end of this section on the ways in which the rabbi addresses love, relationships, and modesty, I seek to assemble the picture that the audience sees in the mirror that the rabbi holds before them. The rabbi's labor first constitutes an image of potential candidates for transformation. The image is constructed from what he knows and from what traits he wants to attribute to them. He creates this image anew in each lesson, and it persists throughout the evening as a living entity in all respects. Its biography and future fate are recounted time and again. At every opportunity it is called on to do something, to return, to make a repair.

The first stage of the transformation process thus depends on adopting the image reflected back to you as your real image. In Harding, the Protestant candidate for transformation must understand that what he tells himself about how the world is ordered

and the meaning of his existence within it is incorrect, and that there is a true story he must accept. Candidates must understand and acknowledge that they are in error. If they tell the story of the world correctly, God will reside within their hearts and will illuminate them with the single, only truth. The transformation demanded by Rabbi Zer is similar, but different. Candidates must accept a story, but many of them do not feel distant from it from the start. The “faith story” is not the center of the problem—the center is the kind of life to live alongside it. What do you do with this truth? Is it possible to accept its singleness of meaning and wear jeans? Is it possible that “all was made by His word,” in the language of the blessing to be recited before drinking a glass of water, and to continue to work as usual, to attend synagogue only on holidays and sometimes on the Sabbath? Is it possible to kiss the mezuzah each time you enter or leave your house, to put on a *kipah* for a wedding, to go hear Rabbi Zer lecture, to make donations to yeshivot, and to go to soccer games on Saturdays?

For a long time, it seemed as if one could. It seemed that you could live that way while accepting God’s existence. It seemed so possible that it became the stereotype of Mizrahi lives—traditional, but not religious. But Rabbi Zer seeks to make a radical change. He seeks to distance the Sephardi public from the “traditional” pole and to bring it into the central field where the Haredim are the players.²⁸ Dedicated to this dramatic process, the rabbi has difficulty being lenient towards intermediate images that are both one thing and the other, even though he does, from time to time, offer them a pat on the head. But the rest of the time he is tough with his listeners. He balances his words to men and to women, and does not spare either. In a general, sweeping way, the identity of the men falls under the rubric “punk” and the women under the label “slut.” All the men

want is a good time, to cheat on their wives, to earn easy money, to have cookouts, to go to Eilat, to go to soccer games. The women demean their bodies, bare themselves to the world, and think only about how they look. Young people have fights at school, drop out, use drugs, and seek vapid pleasures.

The drama that the rabbi presents offers a narrative in which his listeners can turn from punks and sluts and delinquents into a family. The man is a Torah scholar and the woman a housewife. Their home bustles with obedient children who are educated in “a scented place.” Since the repair is inclusive, it must offer healing to both sexes and to all ages, in this world and the next world.

In speaking before a potential audience for redemption, the rabbi must be familiar with the world of his listeners. He must recognize the injustice they have suffered in their lives and show them an escape route. Rabbi Zer is well-acquainted with his audience and often speaks to them with empathy, love, and tenderness. So he condemns the inferior, demeaning status of the Mizrahi woman. He portrays her body as a site of violation and violence in the world outside. Her life, and that of her family, is steered by a gentile world concerned only about fashion. They are subject to the twisted morality of television, to the avarice and commercialism of the society around them. He harshly criticizes the relations of exploitation and coercion that prevail between the sexes. More than men and women have compassion for and love each other, they seek to control each other. Men who have not yet accepted the yoke of the Torah go home with the feeling that they are still punks. And the women, if they are Mizrahi women of the middle class, are still sluts. They don't have jobs, their families are unpresentable, they have no respect

for their bodies and don't control them, and they are unable to raise their children properly.

Some members of the audience come to hear Rabbi Zer on a weekly basis, year after year, without becoming observant. Others go only part of the way. Together, these two groups make up at least half of the weekly turnout. Out on the street, they live with the feeling that they will not be okay until they make a full transformation. Even though you work and do your best with your children, even though your husband contributes all he can, working hard to support the family and doing his part emotionally and educationally, something is still missing. When you look outside the neighborhood, you see the differences between you and the images in the media. When you look inside, within the neighborhood, at your Haredi neighbors, you feel that you haven't gone all the way. You've neither finished high school nor become religious.

The Mizrahi public that listens to such rhetoric on the "holy radio stations," and on religious satellite television programs, is presented with a picture that casts it in stereotypical molds that do not undergo critique or deconstruction. On the individual level of relationships, love, and marriage, the transformation discourse ratifies the most shallow clichés about Mizrahiyut. This is not the case in the areas of citizenship and nationalism, as will be seen below. The audience can understand from the rabbi's talks that the principal blame for the fact that they have, ostensibly, become punks and sluts lies with the Zionist state and secular-Ashkenazi culture. That give them something, but not enough. To remain in this situation is to remain a victim.

Indeed, the rabbi leaves most of his listeners there. Until they make the change he prescribes, the only anchor he offers them is adopting the victim's critical stance. To

graduate to the status of “witness,” a person who can tell others what she used to be, the novice must take a few more critical steps. And the choice is limited—you’re either a slut or the respectable wife of a Torah scholar. The woman who comes to the rabbi’s lectures, but who is neither a saint nor a slut, cannot identify her life in the rabbi’s rhetoric. If he penetrates her heart, he plants there, once again, the image of the slut or, regrettably, the image of the girl who once more hasn’t lived up to her potential. Once more she almost turned into something, she almost finished high school, she almost enlisted in the army, almost finished a bookkeeping course. This picture of herself, which the rabbi has instilled in her, may well lead her to admire others who have already gone down the road and become Haredi—while underestimating her own value. But there is also solace, because each woman in the audience knows that somewhere, some time, when it’s right for her, she can become one of the women who “returned.” The knowledge that she is always welcome into the community of the correct, that a seat there is reserved for her, is not a matter of little consequence.

These “reserved seats,” held for the community at large by a minority within it, are a social and personal potential, a secret power with great symbolic significance. Someone always wants me/us. In that reserved space I can, according to what the rabbi says, break free of the pursuit of love and romance and receive a “Jewish home.” In this way I can liberate myself, in one fell swoop, from the fight for survival in the permissive capitalist world and move into an economic struggle within well-marked borders. This package deal is not unattractive, but most of the women have not yet signed on. As they have at so many junctures in their lives, they feel that they live alongside something rather than being part of it.

From here, the discourse of transformation expands into additional planes of principle, less universal and very local. These address Israeli citizenship and Jewish nationalism.

PROLOGUE 2: HOLOCAUST AND INDEPENDENCE

The Or David website provides access to all the yeshiva's public lectures and celebrations of holy men from 2001 onward. This virtual library replaces the audio and video disks that used to line the shelves of the yeshiva's foyer. Now all the material is organized, accessible, and free to all who possess a personal computer and internet connection. The site's interface is modest, although not the simplest possible. Every so often a notice flashes across the screen—a request for a donation, the announcement of a special event.

Among the dozens of lectures available on the site, there are only six (from the years 2001-2003) by guests who appeared alongside Rabbi Zer. One of the six is Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, who honored the yeshiva with his presence during the period of *selihot* period (the year is not noted). The others are popular preachers, ones who draw large crowds. Most of these are Sephardi, an exception being the Lithuanian Ashkenazi Rabbi Yehuda Yosefi—one of the founders of the back-to-religion movement and one of the pioneers of the large open lecture given to a heterogeneous public. Another one of the six is an Ashkenazi who appears at the yeshiva at least twice a year. His talks have a separate line on the website and are labeled “special sermons.” This guest is a Hasidic rabbi, the admor of Kalib.

The admor of Kalib's life project involves appearances before a wide range of publics—the newly religious, religious Zionists, non-religious Jews (if he is given the

opportunity) and others. He moves among these different as a “witness,” a Haredi Holocaust survivor. He survived the Auschwitz death camp, and some say he was castrated there. His appearance is exceptional—he’s an old man, but his face is as smooth and beardless as a baby’s. Instead of sidelocks, his features are framed by two tufts of soft hair, long and light-colored like that of a three-year old boy who has just had his first ceremonial haircut. His blue eyes are very large and his voice (with its heavy Ashkenazi accent) is warm, soft, and conciliatory. Rabbi Zer shows great respect for him, bows his head to receive a blessing, and receives much more. In every one of his talks, the admor speaks of repentance and Torah study, of modesty and charity, but he always connects it to “there”—to Auschwitz.

He lives in Bnei Brak, where he has founded an institute called Shema Yisrael. It publishes an encyclopedia that presents a Haredi view of the Holocaust.²⁹ Likewise, he is involved in the establishment of a Haredi Holocaust museum in Jerusalem’s Sanhedriyya neighborhood. The fact that an admor who is a Holocaust survivor is involved in such projects is not surprising, especially in light of the growing and developing Haredi involvement in organizing the memory and historiography of the Holocaust and in passing it on to the generations to come. Kimi Kaplan, who has studied changes in how the Holocaust is presented and remembered among the Haredim, points out that this community’s preoccupation with the Holocaust (which had been addressed by scholars previously scholars) has turned from an obsession into a profession.³⁰ The Haredi public has developed a number of ways of resolving the Holocaust’s challenge to faith, falling into two major categories. The first approach maintains that God’s management of the universe has its own logic, but cannot always be understood by human minds. The second

offers an alternative description of the historical process and counters the accepted historical Zionist gloss on the Holocaust with a faith-based alternative. Kaplan surveys the wealth of Haredi publications about the Holocaust that have come out over the last decade. Some are based on biographical testimonies and stories of the heroism of Haredim who observed the Jewish precepts under conditions of war. But alongside these, more and more publications are appearing that use academic sources and other research that places the Jewish Holocaust within its historical context. These new studies, the most central of which have been written by Haredi women, refrain from the erstwhile claim made by Haredim and other groups outside the Zionist mainstream that accuse Zionism and the Jewish community in Palestine of being indifferent to the destruction of Europe's Jews.

In his book *Holocaust in the Sealed Room*, Moshe Zuckerman discussed Zionism's role in organizing and managing the memory of the Holocaust, against the background of the first Gulf War.³¹ The war's progress, and the way it touched on "Holocaustic" icons, invited Zuckerman's critical scrutiny. He addressed a large range of issues, but I will focus on one of them, the position of "victim." Such positioning, at home and towards others, is central to understanding Zuckerman's analysis. It also fits the protagonists surrounding Rabbi Zer's educational enterprises, both the speakers and the listeners.

At the beginning of his book, Zuckerman quotes a statement by Yehuda Elkana, a philosopher and Holocaust survivor. Elkana claims that Israeli society (relative to the Palestinians) is motivated by "a profound existential anxiety, fed by a specific interpretation of the lessons of the Holocaust, and by a willingness to believe that the

whole world is against us and that we are perpetual victims.”³² Zuckerman seeks to show how Israeli society has moved away from a universal interpretation of the Holocaust, asserting that it is a private and unique historical event. In this version, the Holocaust is a singular occurrence, but a Holocaust also lies in wait for the Jewish people at all times. Our Holocaust is a legitimate foundation for our existence and for the entire range of our actions in Israel, in particular against the Arab other, but not just against the Arabs. The expansion of the “Holocaust discourse” and its application to an entire spectrum of subjects make management of the memory difficult, he writes. Challenges to the collective memory need not take the form of canceling or limiting this broad use. The tremendous force of the Holocaust discourse and its seductive power have led even its sharpest critics to seek shelter there as further worthy victims. Everyone wants to be a Holocaust survivor.

The attempts to take the reins that direct “Holocaust heritage” out of the hands of the Zionists, or to steer them in another direction, come from different quarters. All have in common their opposition to the Zionist idea, or a sense of living on the margins. Both motives apply to Mizrahi Haredi/Orthodox groups. Actions of opposition to the discourse are carried out as guerrilla operations. A classic example is the movement headed by Rabbi Uzi Meshulam, a Haredi Yemenite rabbi who headed a cult that in 1994 barricaded itself in a house in the Tel Aviv suburb of Yehud and shot at Israeli law-enforcement officials. They demanded an official investigation of the “kidnapped children.”

Jews from the Islamic world came to the new state of Israel in a mass wave of migration in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Some families, mostly Yemenite Jews, whose babies and toddlers were hospitalized, were told that their children had died. But

rumors persisted that the children had been handed over to established Israeli families for adoption without the parents' knowledge or consent. The subject has periodically erupted into the Israeli public discourse.³³ Using the movement's publications, and media reports, Sigal Ozeri studied the Holocaust discourse's place in the group's subversive ideology. In texts produced by the Meshulam group, the fate of these children is paralleled to the death of 1.5 children in the European Holocaust. The two cases are equated to produce a joint Nazi-Zionist campaign against helpless Jews. The perpetrators, the group alleges, sought to either eliminate the next generation of Jews or to engineer the younger generation's character. They performed medical experiments on Jewish children, and denied responsibility for their deeds. Placing children in the center allows the discourse the flexibility to wrap itself around a comparison between the secular Zionist movement and the Nazis, between cutting the sidelocks off Yemenite boys and the persecution of European Jewry, between murder and abduction, all under formal sponsorship of the state, Zionism's doubt-free ideology, and mechanisms of operation and concealment that do not cease to create conspiracies and deny them.

Thus children link one disaster to the other, serving as the ultimate victims of anti-Semitic forces. This connection reappeared in Haredi discourse in the summer of 2003, when Minister of Finance Binyamin Netanyahu proposed cutting Israel's national child allowances—a government benefit that is especially important to the Haredi community, with its large families. Placards in Haredi neighborhoods proclaimed a “Holocaust,” and the government was compared to the Nazi regime that killed Jewish children. This muddled comparison grows out of persistent suspicion of the Zionist regime, disbelief in and criticism of democratic procedures, and an image of the state

apparatus as a hugely powerful, heartless police regime. The “other”—the Haredi, and even more so the Mizrahi Haredi—is forever the victim.

Penetration of the precincts of Holocaust discourse provides great critical power and enhances legitimacy. This action seeks for the Haredim a place in the management of Holocaust memory and a place for the Mizrahim with the Holocaust’s horrors.

Zuckerman hardly intended this kind of universalism in his critique. He sought to free Holocaust discourse from Jewish ownership and to allow it to serve as a bridge to compassion and acknowledgement of the suffering of others, without national or religious restriction. The Haredi, and Haredi-Mizrahi, Holocaust discourse indeed seeks to broaden boundaries. In doing so, it aims a sharp and serious critique at the hegemony that guards the boundaries of the discourse, and deconstructs many components of the conventional wisdom of Zionist history. At the same time, however, it makes it more difficult for Mizrahim to divest themselves of the stance of the eternal victim, because it demands the expansion of the list of those who have the right to claim to be Holocaust victims, and to condition that right on national and religious Jewish affiliation.³⁴

Challenging and recreating victimhood, as well as demanding a seat at the national table lies at the center of the ethnographic selections in the next section. They will serve as a platform for presenting and analyzing the interwoven subjects of Holocaust and nationality.

7. HOLOCAUST AT THE KING DAVID FESTIVAL

4 Sivan 5760; June 8, 2000. Five minutes after leaving home I was on the street leading to the Or David Yeshiva. Cars were parked on both sides of the road and another column of cars was parked on the center line. The place was packed today. I walked

quickly, knowing my way. The fences around the yeshiva were decorated with posters announcing the big convocation held two days ago in the Yad Eliahu basketball stadium—Shas’s annual assembly. That morning, Shas’s ministers and Knesset members had voted with the opposition to topple the government. At the entrance to the women’s foyer I encounter Bracha and Shoshi, whom I met in the course at the community center. Two other young women are with them. They seem happy to see me, because Shoshi says: “Do you come here a lot? That’s great.” And Bracha adds: “Good for you, bravo for coming, come in, come in.”

There’s a huge crowd inside—at least 300 women. Last time there were 70 at the most. Children, babies, toddlers wandering near their mothers. At least 20 women are not dressed religiously—they wear pants and tight, low-cut tops. At the end of the hall, next to the kitchen, there’s a lit-up window where they’re giving out bottles of soft drink, plastic cups, and cellophane-wrapped rolls. Women get up, go out, talk, move around, walk in front of the screen displaying the rabbi’s lecture. A fat woman with a beribboned kerchief on her head circulates with the yeshiva’s collection box, and from time to time she calls out the name of a woman for whom a man is waiting outside. Ten minutes after sitting down I turn to the woman sitting behind me, who has her daughters with her, and ask: “Do the rolls cost money?” “No, dear,” she replies. “Go help yourself, they’re still passing them out.”

Only at the end of Rabbi Zer’s talk, when I went outside for a break, did I realize that it was a special day, the *hilula*—festival— of King David. Now I understood why there was a live band in the men’s hall upstairs, why they were passing out food, and why

there was such a huge turnout. During the break I also found out that we were waiting for the arrival of the admor of Kalib.

Rabbi Daniel's lecture was less stormy than usual, but not without censure. He spoke of love for the Torah and its importance, in the context of the impending Shavu'ot holiday. He stressed the importance of the book of Psalms, attributed to King David, who was born and died on Shavu'ot. Each Friday, for the last 30 years, Rabbi Zer has read the book of Psalms throughout the night. It is no wonder that he named his yeshiva "Or David," and that he holds an annual celebration of the king.

But even on festival days some things must be said.

What's the thing that most bothers Yossi Sarid [the leader of the left-wing, secularist Meretz party]? He can't bear to look at a Torah Jew. He and his friends are always saying that we want money, money, that we're blackmailing, blackmailing, why? For our private pockets? No! For Torah schools, for yeshivot. It's ok to give to kibbutzim? They funnel them money quietly, quietly, but it's not for us, for Torah schools, no. On the way home today I heard on the radio, non-religious people call in and say, what does he want, that Yossi Sarid? The money is going to good places. Take a look how the Torah schools look, I have Torah schools. Do you want to know where? In prefab caravans. If I've got so much money, would my pupils be sitting in caravans? Now is the time to register children for next year, if you send them to non-religious schools your diamonds will turn into thorn bushes, if you send them to Torah schools, you'll turn thorn bushes into diamonds.

At the mention of Yossi Sarid (followed by Tommy Lapid and Yosef Pritzki of the Shinui party), the crowd boos.

All those lobster-eaters can't tell us what to do. What are they so happy about, why are they pleased? The streets are full of depravity, crime, prostitution, addicts. I don't sleep at night, I worry, and they're pleased.

When Rabbi Zer begins an auction of silver items—candlesticks and the like—I go out for a bit to chat with the girls. Bracha had already gone home with her kids. I spoke to Shoshi.

“So, are you working?”

“Yes, I found a job.”

“Where, in your field?”

“Yes, I'm doing bookkeeping in the supermarket on HaShomer Street in Bnei Brak. You know where it is?”

“No. But how is it?”

“Look, it's interesting and I learn something each day, but the conditions are awful, 17 shekels an hour. I get there at 9:30 and leave at 5, so it comes out to 2,400 a month. They don't pay for transportation or anything else, and whoever complains, he fires. He says to me: ‘I'm a private business and if you don't like it you can leave.’ But I'm learning this way—now I understand why everyone wants someone with experience—even how to talk with clients, how to answer, important things. Only what, before Pesach he didn't even let me out an hour early, my poor mother and sister had to do the whole house themselves.

I go back into the lower hall. A vocalist is singing a nice Mizrahi song, and then he sings “Look at Me,” by the popular Mizrahi vocalist Eyal Golan, but with different words: “Look at him, look at him, Rabbi Daniel Zer has such beautiful eyes.” The audience joins in, the men signing upstairs and the women downstairs. Suddenly the musical style switches to Ashkenazi, accompanying the entry of the admor of Kalib. I know his face from the rabbinical portraits sold on Haredi streets. He’s the admor without a sect, the rabbi without a beard.

The admor is dressed in a brown coat with gold embroidery. He sits quietly for about twenty minutes while Rabbi Zer concludes the auction. The technical crew spends a long time adjusting the microphone before the guest speaks. In the meantime, the camera focuses on his countenance, which radiates something very strong. His smooth, white skin, the shadows of his eyes, and silky hair, against the screen’s blue background, produce a picture that rivets my eyes.

When the admor begins to speak, the audience falls silent, and the silence grows even more profound because at first no one can make out what he is saying. It’s not clear whether he is speaking Ashkenazi Hebrew with a heavy Hungarian accent, or some sort of *loyshen koydesh*, the jargon of the study hall. Some of the women giggle uncomfortably. Someone says: “Stop it, don’t laugh!” By his third sentence, he has already reached his destination. He is already “there.”

My brothers and friends, sacred congregation, 56 years ago I went to Auschwitz. My sister went in there and she was with child, they said to her, give the child and you can go, she was delicate, she told them, God gave me the child, I will not be parted from him, and so she became a martyr.

He speaks gently, and even if the audience doesn't catch every word, they slowly get caught up in the story's rhythm, as well as its horror. From time to time the camera leaves his face, and his voice is heard against an empty, blue background. Women quickly send their children up to the main hall to report on the mistake, and the admor's face quickly appears again.

Today there are 2 million children they don't allow to be born, and that's not in the camps, God forbid, it's here in Israel. That's why I brought with me today an important guest, very famous, Dr. Eli Schussheim, he's chairman of the Efrat organization, an organization that prevents abortions. When a child dies, God forbid, we mourn him. Right? And here we have millions who aren't even allowed to be born. So I ask all of you to get down and sit on the floor for two minutes in mourning for all those millions. And I will get down first.

The rabbi apparently sits on the floor—sitting on the floor rather than on a chair is a Jewish mourning custom—because his face disappears again. The women, dependent on the broadcast, are unsure what to do. Then his voice repeats “get down, get down.” There may well have been some confusion in the men's hall as well. The women hesitate for a moment, and the woman next to me tells her other neighbor: “I think he wants us to sit on the ground.” The women quickly push the plastic chairs aside and sit on the floor. About thirty women remain seated, however, I among them. The speaker system emits a heavy silence for a minute. When the admor begins to speak again, the women slowly get up and sit back down in their chairs.

The admor continues: “Eighteen years ago a sweet *avrech* approached me and said to me, rabbi, I want to work on *teshuva*. I told him, fine, and do you know who that sweet *avrech* was? It was Rabbi Daniel Zer.”

The men applaud, and the women follow suit. One of the older women lets out the undulating *kululu* cry that Mizrahi women make at celebrations. Towards the end of his talk, after he has told an endless, tedious, and not entirely comprehensible miracle story about money that was lost and was returned, he makes two requests of the audience in connection with the Shavu’ot holiday: “1. Speak with 25 people you know, family and friends, about *teshuva*, about *kashrut*, about the Sabbath, about family purity; 2. Now, when you go home, open the closet, and every dress you have that doesn’t cover your body, take scissors and make garbage out of it, that way you will increase purity in the world.”

The admor takes a small bundle of dollars from his pocket and counts them. “One, two...six, I am giving six dollars to Rabbi Zer, so that he can sell each dollar for 18 or a 180 dollars, or 1,800 dollars and...[18 is the value of the Hebrew letters that form the word *hai* (life), so its customary to give charity in sums that contain the number 18 or are multiples of it]” He smiles. “Good, afterwards I’ll sign them.”

I want to hear Dr. Schussheim, the director of the Efrat anti-abortion organization. But it is already 12:30 a.m. and I’m tired. I don’t have the strength to sit through another six auctions. I go out. Two woman walk in front of me. One dressed modestly and wears a white kerchief on her head. Next to her is a woman of about 40 in black pants, a black shirt, and clogs. Her long, loose, curls are dyed with lighter stripes. The second woman says to her friend:

“Did you see his face? What radiance, it’s hard to believe that he’s eighty, he’s really an ageless man, let’s see, maybe now I’ve got reception on my cell phone.”

8. FIFTY-SIX YEARS AGO I WENT TO AUSCHWITZ

I will read and analyze the King David celebration of 2000 as theater. A dramatic performance has a place, a time, actors, an audience, and a script. I used rhetoric to read Rabbi Zer’s enterprise. That now broadens as the voice heard from the stage develops into a performance.

Place and Time

The ethnography begins in the time needed for a transition from the viewer’s routine life to the site at which the performance occurs. It is not a long journey—just five minutes. The street leading to the yeshiva is a kind of corridor down which the audience proceeds on its way to the auditorium. One can estimate the size of the crowd according to the parking situation, and so develop expectations about the evening. The street itself is on the neighborhood’s northern margin, the seam between it and the Bnei Brak industrial zone, the train depot, and the tangential Ayalon shopping mall. Long four-story blocks of public housing projects, built in the 1960s and later given a face lift, stretch along one side of the street. On the other side, fences enclose small factories, warehouses, and auto repair shops. The fences serve as billboards for pasting up notices of all kinds. In this area, especially because of its proximity to the yeshiva, the notices announce the Jewish equivalent of revival meetings, lectures by rabbis, women’s evenings. The newest poster announces Shas’s annual convocation.

The King David celebration, marked as Rabbi Daniel Zer's special holiday, took place on the fourth of Sivan, the day before Shavu'ot, the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, and the day on which King David was born and died. Tradition assigns David authorship of the book of Psalms, the text that Rabbi Zer has appropriated as a marker of his own devotion. In the religious enterprise, each entrepreneur must make himself stand out. In the process of constituting the special place of Rabbi Zer and his operations within the enterprise, the book of Psalms, King David, and Shavu'ot have become his salient symbols.

The celebration is conducted inside the yeshiva, in two principal sites. The first is the central hall, a few steps up from street level, in which the speakers and the male audience are located. I could not observe this site directly, or walk through the foyer leading to it. The second site is located below street level, where a parallel event takes place, through the mediation of closed-circuit video cameras. The cameras transfer the event from above to below, broadcasting a narrow field of view and projecting it on the large screen placed in front of rows of white plastic chairs. Like the other women, I watched those parts of the celebration that the camera chose to show, and from which my imagination fashioned a model of the event as a whole. Significant encounters took place at the margins of these sites. Families arrive together and separate by sex. Couples and groups of friends also arrive, and passersby are urged to enter. The participants spend most of their time in one or the other of the two halls, but there is constant traffic in and out. In the women's area, some of the audience passes the time in the foyer that serves as a "religion boutique." There you can combine casual conversation with examination of merchandise, shopping, and reading or leafing through a book. No few women stand

outside on the access road leading down to the lower hall. They delay going in, or going home, chatting, talking on their cell phones, meeting up with acquaintances, stretching out the event for a while longer.

These areas, and the events that take place in them, broaden the drama and stretch the boundaries of the event into the street, the corridors, and conversations inside the cars before and after the lecture. These secular conversations penetrate the pedagogical/religious/spiritual event, and enable it to flow into the quotidian. A woman speaking with a friend can feel that she is doing so in the framework of Rabbi Zer's lecture, and the rabbi's words can be part of the woman's routine. The lecture always begins at 10:30 and ends after midnight. This time, because of the festival, there's no way of knowing when it will end. There's a sense that the event constructs itself without temporal boundaries.

The Audience

The audience is not necessarily "local." Not everyone who comes to hear Rabbi Zer on Wednesdays lives in Pardes Katz. People come from the nearby suburbs of Petach Tikva, Ramat Gan, from other parts of Bnei Brak, and from places farther afield, like Ramat Ha-Sharon and Netanya. Every so often the rabbi comments on the nature and extent of his public, and from conversations with the women I encountered I learned that some of them were not from Pardes Katz. But the nature of my field work, which led me to the Or David yeshiva, meant that the only women I knew well were from the neighborhood itself. These are the women with whom I took the course at the community center, the ones who "sent" me to hear the rabbi when I asked where women in the neighborhood study Torah. On the night of the King David festival I met two of them on

the access drive. Bracha³⁵ was the one who pressed me the most to attend the rabbi's talks, but I did not meet her there until that night. She'd given birth to two boys, one after the other, and that obviously made it difficult for her to get out of the house. This time, for the King David festival, she apparently made a special effort. Even so, she did not enter the hall; instead, she spent her time on the margins. Neither had I met Shoshi, who was single, on previous Wednesday nights. Perhaps her attendance was less regular because she grew up in a Haredi home. In any case, she also decided that the festival was a good reason to break out of her usual routine. Shoshi presented me to the other women who were with her as "a friend of ours from the course." They did not ask what course, and she didn't remember my name.³⁶ Where we stand, there's no need for precise affiliation—the hall takes in a variegated crowd, and it's not easy to stand out as a stranger. There are more women in non-religious dress, more children, more noise.

Three-quarters of an hour went by before I realized that I was at a celebration. The refreshments, the music, and the character of the crowd did not lead me to that conclusion—it was the girls outside who told me. The women inside were clearly expecting a different kind of event, and they gladly enjoyed the food and the atmosphere.

The ruckus of the women and children, the calls from outside, and the cell phone conversations continued even during the rabbi's talk, as if to show that the real show today belonged to the other actor, who had not yet arrived. Nevertheless, the audience did not leave Rabbi Zer on his own when he derided and mocked his political nemeses, Yossi Sarid, Tomy Lapid, and Joseph Paritzky. The applause, laughter, and catcalls showed that, despite the noise, the audience was in touch with the rabbi and knew what to do and when.

The audience settled down a bit when the admor of Kalib arrived. It may well be that some members of the audience had heard or seen him before. If you know how to read Haredi placards like the one advertising the King David festival, you know that the title “admor” means both Ashkenazi and Hasid. Other members of the audience are presumably seeing him for the first time. He’s an elderly man, of exceptional appearance, who speaks Hebrew with a heavy Ashkenazi accent. His first few sentences intensify the silence. He is difficult to understand, and it’s not clear at first what language he is using. Even when he turned out to be speaking Hebrew, it remained strange. He was almost funny, a kind of type specimen of Ashkenazi, almost a caricature. Some of the women around me giggled uncomfortably and whispered among themselves. Someone else took up herself to discipline them: “Stop it, don’t laugh!” In other words, yes, it’s funny, but it’s not polite to laugh.

The admor’s speech, and his phantasmagoric appearance, calm the crowd and induce it to listen, but the discomfort is not over. When the admor asks the listeners to play their part in the show, the alienation and uneasiness reach their height. None of those present in either hall expected to receive an active role beyond the usual singing, interjections, giggles, and amens. The audience knows that it will be asked to contribute money, to donate a few coins, or sign a bank order, perhaps even participate in an auction. But most likely those who left home to attend the celebration of King David didn’t think they’d find themselves in mourning. The ritual that the admor impressed on them is unfamiliar, even though each one is well acquainted with the customs of mourning. They know that you don’t mourn a baby who dies before he is 30 days old, so clearly you can’t mourn a baby who hasn’t been born yet. The two minutes that the

admor asked to spend on the floor in memory of the millions of babies whose births are prevented was his own bold initiative. It caught the women unprepared. When the admor descended to the floor, he disappeared from the screen, leaving a huge, empty, blue field. The playwright and director vanished, leaving unclear instructions. In a short time, after hearing the admor say “I will get down first,” the women around me began to retranslate the instructions for themselves. “I think he wants us to sit on the ground,” one of them said, and most of them did. The hall fell silent. I remained sitting in my seat with the pregnant and elderly women. Quiet and startled, angry for the first time since I began attending Rabbi Zer’s lectures, I tried to imagine that little old man, and the very large Rabbi Zer, sitting side by side on the floor.

When voices began coming over the loudspeakers, the women pulled themselves up off the floor, adjusted their chairs, and resealed themselves. With the hard part behind them, they continued to listen to the admor, who told them about his first encounter with their rabbi. When they heard him praise the rabbi, they joined the applauding audience above, and one of the older women gave the traditional ululation of joy. Fifty-six years ago, the admor of Kalib went to Auschwitz, and now Sephardi women are kululuing him in Pardes Katz.

Having opened the audiences hearts and soothed their souls, the director was in a position to ask the audience to participate in the play’s next act, the auction of objects and of dollar bills signed by the admor. Dr. Schussheim sat beside the admor, waiting for his turn to speak. But I, like some others in the audience—like the two women in whose footsteps I followed—was tired. I left the auditorium without knowing how the play ended.

The Principal Players

Rabbi Zer. The regular Wednesday lectures are built around a single protagonist: Rabbi Zer. True, at around midnight the kabbalist Haham Avraham usually appears, but his presence there (which I did not investigate) seems to be a reinforcement or complement to Rabbi Zer. He represents the non-halachic, mystical, spiritual aspect of Judaism; he makes his way into the yeshiva, places himself next to the rabbi, and remains silent. The double presence on the stage demonstrates that they accept each other, but the major force within the yeshiva is clearly Rabbi Zer. For the King David celebration, the rabbi invited another hero, who himself brought a supporting player. The admor of Kalib is a familiar guest. But for the purposes of his specific lecture, he brought an expert. If the above positioning of the speakers is as witnesses, then Dr. Schussheim is the expert witness.

Rabbi Daniel Zer serves this time as the warm-up act for the admor and his guest. Like every warm-up band, he offers his best-known hits, and the audience, like the fans of a star, never tires of them. He performs his familiar tirades against Yossi Sarid and the Shinui party, he once more refers to the kibbutzim, which the Haredim still vilify even though the collectives are in financial collapse, and he repeats the standard description of the persecution of Haredim by those who accuse them of being money-hungry. He offers, and the audience accepts (with laughter, with silence, with apathy). But beyond this predictable hit parade, the rabbi directs his words precisely to the temporal context. The end of the school year has arrived, and it's time to think about next year. School registration is a critical element in the back-to-religion enterprise. The rabbi tells his audience that the children in his Torah schools must study in substandard prefab

classrooms, a sign that they do not receive the sums of money that the secularists claim they receive. But if parents send their children to well-equipped public schools, their children will turn from diamonds into thorns. But if they are not put off by the prefab classrooms and from the man who runs them, they have an opportunity to bring about a miracle in which thorns are converted to diamonds. Yossi Sarid is happy and Tommy Lapid pleased, the rabbi says, but about what? The street he sees outside is the source of all evil, a dangerous place that keeps him awake at night. The “lobster-eaters”³⁷ who seek to control the public space are unacceptable to him. He is worried about the way they run the country, and offers his listeners a way out. Rabbi Zer appears here in his regular role, with a contextual variation seeking to direct parents to choosing his schools for the education of their children.

The admor of Kalib. I’ve already noted the special status of this beardless Hasidic “rebbe” who, unlike other Hasidic leaders, has no court and no disciples. He is the only Ashkenazi, and the only Hasid, who speaks regularly at the Sephardi Or David yeshiva. Yet neither of these two things is mentioned or noted in any way during his visit. Other than a few random remarks by women who mentioned how Ashkenazi he looked and sounded, his ethnicity is not an issue. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that choosing him as a frequent guest star derives from his status as a witness-victim, who represents a fixed state of marginality. The admor has the mannerisms of a king without a kingdom, a man who moves between Europe, the United States, and Israel, between Bnei Brak and Jerusalem, who speaks to any audience willing to listen to him. He goes from community

to community as a cripple of the Jewish condition, as a refugee from the knife of anti-Semitism. A brand saved from the fire.

On the face of it, it is odd that Rabbi Zer invites the ultimate Ashkenazi into his sanctuary. He's the whitest, most blue-eyed, most heavily accented, most Holocaust guest possible. The Holocaust holds a special place in the complicated relations between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews in Israel. At one extreme, Mizrahim have insulted Holocaust survivors with statements like "Too bad Hitler didn't finish the job." At another, later, extreme, Mizrahim have expressed alienation and criticism of the commotion surrounding Holocaust Day and its massive presence in the educational system. The principal and teachers of affiliated with Kedma, a school that once operated in the Ha-Tikva quarter, a Tel Aviv neighborhood with a predominantly Mizrahi population, tried to create an alternative way of marking the day. They sought to emphasize the themes of racism and human suffering, and to use the lessons of the Holocaust to cross the borders of nation and ethnicity towards a universal experience.³⁸ The admor of Kalib is the perfect Holocaust archetype for Rabbi Zer to bring to his yeshiva. He's different from the others, from the margin of the margins, and in any case close to me/us.

Like the kabbalist Haham Avraham, the admor comes to Rabbi Zer's stage. The rabbi bows his head to receive the admor's blessing, but the admor responds with praise for the rabbi's work. His fantastic appearance magnifies his air of holiness, and he is accepted as a super-human figure, a source of blessing. He is a man who died "there" and was reborn, but he is also a general saint. The admor is so Ashkenazi—he so fits the stereotype of the older generation that has almost entirely passed away, that he is stripped of his Ashkenazi nature. By positioning himself as a witness-victim, marginal and

transcendent to the Ashkenazi hegemony, he appears before “my brothers and friends, sacred congregation.”

Dr. Schusheim. An “important guest, very famous,” the admor says of his guest. Dr. Schusheim heads Efrat, an anti-abortion organization. I cannot report on his talk or the nature of his appearance because I was not in the hall when he spoke. But by mentioning him in his opening remarks, the admor marked the centrality of the abortion issue to that evening. It also demonstrated the admor’s professionalism, since he brought a famous expert, a doctor, to speak about the subject. The nature of the issue, and its social and political linkages, will be discussed as part of the “script.”

The Script

Rabbi Zer was responsible for the celebration’s opening scene. His text did not lead inevitably to the rest of the evening, and contained no indication what was about to happen. The rabbi’s lines focused on reconstituting the significance of the weekly gathering in his sanctuary. He cleaned and refreshed his line of targets (the government, non-religious Jews, left-wingers, the street, impurity, crime, prostitutes, drug addicts), and he directed the audience towards the future, in connection with the education of their children.

And children were indeed in the center of the play prepared by the admor of Kalib. Children, the thread linking the Holocaust, the generation of victims, Zionism, immigrants. For the children, for the generations to come, so that their lives will be better and different. Those children, anonymous and present, are the reason. For them we must mobilize, clean out the breathing tubes of the next, unknown generation, not yet born, or

not allowed to be born, the babies who were killed, or are being killed now. No questions can be asked about children, their existence is protected by a kind of taboo. Just as the admor's sister received her fetus from God and could not hand it over to the Nazis, a Yemenite mother could not give up her child to the Zionist authorities for adoption. In both cases, the children had to be taken by force. Children who were born, and who could turn into diamonds, are turned into thorns by public schools. Those who are in Torah schools are persecuted by the Zionists and forced to study in shoddy prefab structures. Even at home they have no tranquility, because the state, which once encouraged large families with child allowances, decided in the summer of 2003 to cut the allowances. These children are the unseen heroes at the center of the play, and they are joined, perhaps, by the children the admor himself never had. In an unusual, dramatic, and bold move, he forces the crowd to mourn for them. He calls on his listeners to sit on the floor for two minutes to mourn them. I do not know how it looked in the upper auditorium, and how the men sitting on the yeshiva's benches were able to find room on the floor. Below, in the women's hall, the rabbi's request had a unique effect.

The fact that the sermons reach the women through technological mediation elicits two opposing reactions from the women. On the one hand, they ignore the fact that they are not present at "the event" itself but rather at a broadcast of it. As far as they are concerned, they are in the yeshiva, they see the rabbi, hear the music, see the audience of men when the cameraman chooses to move his lens away from the rabbi to wander over the faces of the men in the hall. On the other hand, they take advantage of the fact that they are not really present at the event in order to turn around, chat, get up, go out, come back in, talk on their cell phones, put their feet up on empty chairs. In this, they

reorganize their distance from the focal point in a way that makes them more comfortable and relaxed. The screen is the locus of the event, and both chairs and gazes are directed at it. But turning away from it, and ignoring what is happening there for a short time, is not perceived as disrespectful. The admor's sudden disappearance from the screen may have been taken at first to be a technical glitch. But the women quickly realized that his disappearance was part of the script, and that they must continue to listen to his voice. When I understood the admor's request, it was clear to me that I would not sit on the floor. During my field work, I don't always know what to do with my body, with my heart, or with my thoughts. But this time I knew immediately that I could not do it. I hoped that there would be other women who, for one reason or another, would not get down, so that my body would not be the only one left on a chair. My opposition to the admor of Kalib's manipulation would dissolve later on, but in this specific context I felt no problem with standing out. None of the other women questioned the choice that I and some other women made.

When the admor returned to his chair, the play continued. He told a confused story I was unable to reconstruct later, something about a miracle, and afterwards proceeded to the third part of the drama, which also involved addressing the audience and conducting a direct dialogue with it.

Jules Henry writes in his classic work *On Education*³⁹ that educational manipulations are often accomplished in a situation of vulnerability that follows the creation of trust. The teacher-guide-rabbi produces an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect that can involve some kind of common experience. After this, when the

pupils-learners feel that they are in a safe environment, the manipulation begins. This praxis is a fundamental tool of many educators, and it appears here as well.

The joint mourning ceremony conducted by the audience and the admor, and the fact that the admor sat on the floor with his listeners and shared a significant and painful chapter of his life with them, helped build an atmosphere of cooperation, openness, and empathy. Within this atmosphere, based on Holocaust victims and the absent presence of millions of unborn children, float *teshuva*, observance of the dietary laws, the Sabbath, family purity—and low-cut dresses and shirts. The audience went a considerable distance with him. It descended to the ground, and got up. Now he asked it to take a few more steps. Facing open hearts, within an atmosphere of empathy, the admor asked his listeners to be envoys of the experience to twenty-five more people, before the advent of the approaching holiday. And he instructed each member of the audience, upon arriving home, when the spirit of the evening was still with him or her, to open the closet and slash and destroy every immodest garment. It's reasonable to assume that the admor knew that most of his listeners would not carry out his directives, but from his point of view they must be said, and they are the drama's climax. Without such requests, the Holocaust story and mourning ritual are liable to be sacrilegious. Only a demand to return to religion can justify what came before.

The resumption of the auction motif constituted a diversion, a shopping circus that relieved the tension, returned Rabbi Zer to center stage, and brought the audience back to the familiar atmosphere of the celebration of a holy man. I do not know if anyone there was concerned that Dr. Schussheim still waited for his turn. For my purposes, the play ended the moment I walked out in the footsteps of the women who had marveled at

the admor's radiant face and who hoped that outside the basement floor they'd be able to get reception for their cell phones.

Less than a year later, with the approach of the spring that brought, with bitter regularity, the perfume of new flowers and national days of remembrance, I recorded the following ethnography. I present it immediately after the celebration of King David in order to illuminate other aspect of the Holocaust show in the Mizrahi arena.

9. IF I FALL ASLEEP AT ELEVEN, CAN I STAND UP AT TWELVE?

The Eve of Holocaust Day, April 18, 2001. It was the eve of Israel's official national Holocaust memorial day. I stayed home until 10:30, watching a film by Efrayim Sidon and Micha Friedman about Mezeritch, an East European town once known in the Jewish world as "Little America"—the name of the film. It portrayed an exilic Garden of Eden where Jewish culture and commerce flourished, where love bloomed, and where political debates raged. I am very fond of the documentaries that appear on television on the nights of Holocaust Day and Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers. I can spend hours watching them. But it was Wednesday, so I had to go to Pardes Katz to see if Rabbi Zer was speaking (I assumed he was) and to hear whether he would mention Holocaust Day (I assumed he wouldn't). The streets were empty so the drive was shorter than usual. But around the yeshiva the streets were packed with parked cars. There was a lecture, and not just an ordinary one.

I have to park a distance away and walk. About a hundred women are in the hall, many of them young girls in normative Haredi dress, their hair uncovered, of course,

since they are not married. There are also girls in knee-length skirts and high platform shoes, without socks—religious but not Haredi. A small number are in pants. An older woman sits in front of me with her two daughters. Her head is covered in the same way that my grandmother used to cover hers when she attended synagogue on holidays, or when she visited the cemetery. In other words, the kerchief had been tied by a woman who knew that she had to wear one but for whom this was not a part of her daily attire. Her teenage girls sprawled on the plastic chairs, their feet up on an empty seats. One is playing with her cell phone and the other is drowsing. Next to me sits a girl in non-religious dress. She is attentive and taut. Behind me is a heavy woman whose hair is covered completely by a tightly-tied kerchief. She also listens with interest, although she does not join in the applause. The woman sitting at the entrance interrupts her chat when I pass by and waves a charity box at me. I show her my empty hands, in which I have only my car keys. “So sign a bank order,” she suggests, proffering some papers. I shake my head weakly and slide into the auditorium.

Rabbi Zer

Why wait for six million to die to stop believing in God, isn't six thousand enough? Sixty isn't enough, six, one? One baby who's killed in an accident isn't enough to ask where God is? I could teach any non-religious Jew such sacrilege that he'd remain an atheist all his life, after all, to speak sacrilege you need to know Torah. If you read kabala, there are sacrilegious questions there that you shouldn't know about. But you need to know how to read and to know where the answers are. So what if they ask where God was, the

people who were there, the admors and the righteous men and the scholars, the school children, they went into the furnaces and the gas chambers without asking where God was. They went and chanted “*Shema Yisrael.*” They read psalms. We, sixty years later, we ask where God was. For them it was clear.

They tell of the great Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman, who, in the pit of death with his students, told them let us go to heaven prepared, without any pollution in our hearts. It was the eve of the Sabbath and they ascended to heaven singing “*Lecha dodi likrat kala*” [a song sung in synagogue on the Sabbath eve, literally: “Go, my beloved, towards the bride”]. That’s what they did, in the pit, they sang [the rabbi sings, weeping, an Ashkenazi melody]. After the Holocaust, one Yom Kippur, there was a gathering of Haredim, important admors and hundreds of worshippers came, and they assigned a simple Jew to recite the *kaddish* prayer. And do you know how the *kaddish* goes? May God’s great name be magnified and ascend, in other words, it’s a song in praise of God, magnifying his name. And this simple Jew stands [the rabbi again tearfully chants an Ashkenazi melody], the Holy One, blessed be he, what do I ask of you, what do I request—and the worshippers are fearful, what will this simple man say—my father was killed in the Holocaust, my mother was killed, all my brothers and sisters were killed in the Holocaust, my wife was killed and my children were killed, what do I ask of you, my Lord? May your Holy Name be magnified and sanctified!!!

And do you know what kind of Yom Kippur they had? How the gates of heaven opened? So I don’t need reasons to stop believing. I can give you

reasons. Non-religious Jews look for reasons to sleep well at night. Sleep, sleep well. A rabbi from Hadera once told me that a non-religious guy called him and wanted to come ask him questions about the Torah. The rabbi agreed. The man was an aircraft mechanic. Before they began the conversation, the rabbi asked him, "Say, can I ask you a few questions about aircraft engines?" "You've studied the subject?" the guest asked. "No," the rabbi replied. "So how do you want me to talk to you, it's very complicated." "So how can you," the rabbi said to him, "ask me questions about the Torah without having studied it in all its length and breadth?"

The non-religious have questions, [I say] study first. They ask me, so how is it that righteous men died in the Holocaust. I tell them, when God burns the thorns away he also burns the flowers, sometimes they go first, sometimes God takes one righteous person instead of two thousand atheists. The Hafetz Hayyim said that the Torah is like, if you go for a walk, see Beilinson Hospital, you go in, walk around, you aren't acquainted with it, you don't know, you see a big, brightly-lit room and go in. You don't know it's an operating room. Suddenly you see that they're sawing a man's legs off, and you scream "murderers, murderers!" From your point of view you're right, what do you know, you see that they're taking off someone's legs, that's cruel, it's horrible. But the doctors know what they're doing. They're saving someone from gangrene. That's the way the Holocaust is. Believing Haredim know that God is a doctor, but a person who doesn't know anything shouts where's God, shouts murder.

The Holocaust made us grow again, and after it the state of Israel was founded, the state of Israel was founded!

Now I want to talk about the siren. You know, in just a few hours the photographers and journalists will start combing the streets for Haredim who don't stand still when the memorial siren goes off. What, we don't hurt? The Haredim don't feel pain that admors and righteous men and scholars and Torah school children were killed? It hurts! But it's not our ritual, it's not our way to mourn. What is that siren? It's something the Germans invented, do you understand? They made the Holocaust and they invented the memorial siren. What, we don't love soldiers? Look at those soldiers, who stops to give them rides? No one, but when there's a war they grab them, they spoil them and then they forget them. In the yeshivot they study all day and all night when there's a war, all Jews are responsible for each other, did they talk about that? Did they write about it in the newspapers? No, of course not, after all, we hate soldiers. We don't stand for the siren.

It's 11:30 p.m. Haham Avraham, the kabalist, arrives. The audience upstairs sees him and stands in his honor. The women stand up as well. Everyone stands and applauds, except for me and the girl sitting in front of me, the one with the cell phone. The kabalist takes his place and everyone sits down. The rabbi continues:

I don't stop someone who's driving on the Sabbath, because he'll say to me "It's a democracy, it's my right, what, are you crazy?" But they stop me, they tell me to stand, that's democracy? But in this case, so that there will be peace

among the Jews, if I am in the street, I stand. What do I do [while I'm standing]? I recite Mishna to raise up the souls of the victims. If I'm at home, I don't stand. What's the siren? If I fall asleep at eleven, can I stand up at twelve instead? Like, what is this? [The audience laughs.] With us, if you missed your morning prayers, you can make them up. And if you are especially dutiful, should you stand for five minutes? Ten? [The audience laughs.] They tell you be at one with the victims, how to be alone? I never understood. What are you supposed to do? [The women laugh again.]

You look at them, it's worse than the Holocaust, much worse. There they took the body but not the soul, here they leave the body but burn the soul. You see clothes, cars, everything, but there's no soul—the soul has been burned in a living body. That's destruction of the Jewish people. Herzl, today they showed me a manuscript, Herzl, the one whose picture is in the Knesset and in all the stores. Do you know that he wanted us to be Christians? He suggested that we covert to Christianity and be like all the gentiles, that's their Herzl. But we got through the Inquisition and we'll get through this, too. The non-religious left-wingers in the government, they want to destroy the Jewish people. But we will overcome them.

On the way out I make a quick calculation. Next Wednesday night will be the eve of Memorial Day, when Israel mourns its fallen soldiers. I don't think I'll come. I've had enough.

10. ZIONISM, HOLOCAUST, INDEPENDENCE

Israel's memorial day season begins a week after the end of Pesach. Holocaust Day is followed a week later by Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers, which immediately precedes Independence Day. On the two days of mourning, a central national ritual is a two-minute siren blast, heard throughout the country. In memory of those dead in the Holocaust and in the country's wars, Israelis stop whatever they are doing and stand silently, with bowed heads, as the siren sounds. The siren marks the beginning of the official national ceremonies at Holocaust memorials and military cemeteries, and of smaller ceremonies in public schools. But Haredi rabbis do not recognize the authority of Israel's state institutions to establish days of commemoration, and have ruled that to stand silently while a siren sounds is to observe a gentile custom, which the Torah forbids. Each year, the press and non-Haredi community (including religious Zionists) sharply criticize the Haredi refusal to join the national ritual consensus on these emotional days of public mourning.

Non-religious Jews whose children have completed their formal education can let both traditional and new holidays pass without ceremony. In recent years, I have usually observed Holocaust Day and Memorial Day by watching documentaries on television. These are films made by the second or third generation to Holocaust survivors and by the families of fallen soldiers or of the victims of terror attacks. Sometimes I try to shake off the compulsion to glue myself to the television screen on the evenings of these commemorations (like traditional Jewish holidays, these days begin and end at sundown), but the voice of the Israeli collective inside me will not let me go.

On the eve of Holocaust Day 2001, I saw a film typical of the recent crop of memorial documentaries. These are works that search for what was not seen, what was not spoken of, the other Holocaust. Sidon and Friedman tried to recreate the full sweep of life in Mezeritch before the World War II, a town full of colorful, creative, loving, and thinking characters. The diaspora did not appear in the film as a place where the Holocaust was about to happen, as place from which to flee to the land of Israel. The film's name, "Little America," implied that America was the paradise Jews longed for, and that Mezeritch was its Polish earthly incarnation. The documentary did not omit the Holocaust and its horrors, but its principal message that a very Jewish, yet modern, educated, and political fabric of life had been forgotten somewhere between the Holocaust and Zionism. I felt very comfortable in front of the television screen. The film moved me. It was interesting and made me laugh. It was definitely "my Holocaust" that evening, but I wanted to check out "their Holocaust."

It was easy to get to Pardes Katz. The mall intersection was empty because the stores were closed, but all the parking spaces around the yeshiva were taken. "There's nothing to do," the rabbi will later say, "everything else is closed, so let's go hear the rabbi."

The Zionist state has established holidays and days of remembrance beyond those set by ancient Jewish sources and traditions.⁴⁰ These days, and the rituals surrounding them, are a source of unease for some communities. Despite the rabbi's complex attitude to the values expressed by these days, he declares that "One of the good things about Holocaust Day, maybe the only good thing, is that people come hear Torah because they have no choice." This time he arranges his Holocaust, which has made an appearance any

number of times during my attendance at his lectures, around the tension between the two memorial days. It's no coincidence that Holocaust Day, Memorial Day, and Independence Day are close to each other on the calendar. They symbolize the transition from Holocaust to self-determination, a transition central to Zionist pedagogy. Rabbi Zer moves constantly between Zionism and the Holocaust, between those who survived and those who were burned, between children and rabbis, between soldiers and wars, democracy and the memorial siren, body and soul. But he devotes most of his energy to the traditional Haredi discourse on the Holocaust—the question of whether it proves that God does not exist. Everything he says is directed at this issue, almost without any specifically Sephardi references. While it is only made explicit at the end of his talk, the Sephardi context is implied throughout. The rabbi handles the reasons that the Holocaust might counter faith by addressing the basic questions: how many, who, what, and how. He asks how many people need to die to make us doubt, who is permitted to doubt divine providence, and when. But the toughest question is why.

It is possible to disregard the why question, because there is no requirement to understand God's ways—if anything, the opposite is true. On the other hand, the nature of religious life makes it difficult simply to shrug one's shoulders, as the Orthodox Israeli Jewish philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz did when confronted with the Holocaust—especially when heretical claims are coming from outside. Rabbi Zer does not evade the question. He offers two answers. The first is quantitative. It may be, he said, that God's equation is that the death of a rabbi and two religious school children can come in place of thousands of non-religious Jews. In other words, when God takes the life of a righteous man, he saves the lives of simpler, less righteous people. This is not a new form

of accounting—it has appeared in other contexts. It is interesting here for two reasons. One has to do with the numbers—six million deaths are difficult to ignore. The second has to do with what the survivors—those whom God has allowed to live by taking the lives of others—are supposed to feel. The rabbi does not count the people of Mezeritch shown in Sidon’s and Friedman’s film, who did not return from the camps. They apparently died for no reasons, since they were neither saints, rabbis, nor children who studied Torah. What remains are those who died for the sake of Sidon’s and Friedman’s parents, and for the non-religious Jews who remained alive. The same calculation that refuses to question God’s existence because of the number of victims, and which sees one child killed in an automobile accident a sufficient reason to ask that question, turns into a different equation, in which a single righteous person equals thousands of non-practicing Jews.

But that does not exhaust all the reasons why the Holocaust happened. The rabbi concludes his parable of the doctor who cuts off a patient’s legs to save his life by segueing into the narrative of Holocaust and self-determination, and that is the second “why” question. “The Holocaust made us grow again, and after it the state of Israel was founded, the state of Israel was founded!” he shouted. The rabbi has no trouble depicting the Holocaust as a necessary evil for the production of the state of Israel—in other words, adopting the Zionist view and repeating it to his audience. This should be no surprise. His easy movement between Zionism, citing the state of Israel as a miracle, and his piercing criticism of life in that state, is characteristic of current Haredi discourse as a whole, and of Sephardi Haredi discourse in particular.

From the question of “why,” the rabbi proceeds to the question of “how.” How should the state be run, what should its substance be, how should it remember its dead, how should it respect its life. Here he returns to the critical discourse that deconstructs democratic Zionist thinking and touches on the Israeli public’s sacred cows. From a situation of “yes to the Holocaust and yes to Zionism,” the rabbi deconstructs those affirmatives and reassembles them. First, he demands some of the death for his own camp. The deaths of rabbis and pupils at religious schools (mostly Ashkenazi, but not just) is sufficient proof that the Haredim also feel the Holocaust’s pain. As for independence, it’s not only non-religious Jews who love the country’s soldiers. On the contrary, the non-religious Jews are hypocritical. When there’s a war they grab the soldiers and give them rides, but when things are calm they leave hitchhiking soldiers standing at the intersections. The Haredim, in contrast, pray for the soldiers in times of trouble and war, but that, the rabbi charges, never gets written up in the press. In this move, the rabbi seeks to connect to pain, concern, and love for Israel. He will not allow himself to be pushed out of the circle of those who hurt. (At other lectures during the al-Aqsa Intifada, prayers were indeed recited for the soldiers and victims of terrorist operations.)

The Haredim stand outside Israel’s public space because of ritual—because of the ceremonies that the state has chosen to mark its mourning, and especially the siren. The siren has turned into two minutes of discord. Should one stand or not stand? Journalists who search for Haredim who continue to walk down the streets in their neighborhoods, such as Jerusalem’s Mea Shearim and Bnei Brak, have turned this historical matter into a burning current issue. Aware of the old issue’s new representative status, the rabbi uses

his usual methods: laughter and seriousness. For the sake of peace between Jews, he stands still when he is in a public space, but he does not stand when he is at home. By juxtaposing the siren ceremony with prayer, he pokes fun at it. A Jew who has missed a prayer can make it up, and if he wants to be strict with himself he can make his prayers long, add to them, pray with greater devotion. But here? The rabbi laughs: “And if you are especially dutiful, should you stand for five minutes? Ten?”

The imposition of the ceremony’s compulsiveness, and its placement at the center of Israeli experience, angers him. “That’s democracy?” he asks. They force him to stand and do not allow him to make others stand. In other words, his status as an Israeli is conditional on him standing during the siren, but he cannot demand that another Jew stand (that is, not travel) on the Sabbath, which is his ritual.

The ritual imposition of memorial days,⁴¹ outbursts of laughter during the siren, the inability to feel sorry for people we did not know, awkwardness and even alienation, were all set free in the women’s auditorium when the rabbi mocked the siren and the moment of silence. But that was not enough. Towards the end of his talk the rabbi put back together the package that he had disassembled. The new wrapping did not take in the narrative of Holocaust and independence, but rather created a parallel between the Holocaust and Zionism, and even portrayed Zionism as worse than the Holocaust itself. Like the texts that Ozeri quotes from the newspapers of the “tent sanctuary” that Uzi Meshulam’s disciples erected, Rabbi Zer equates Zionism with the forced conversion of Jews to another religion. Anyone who looks at the outcome of the Zionist project might be confused and be captivated by its capitalist appearance—cars, clothes, and bodies—

but its people are actually walking dead. The body exists, but there is no soul. And that, says the rabbi, is “worse than the Holocaust.”

Out of the series of historical catastrophes that threatened but failed to destroy the Jewish people, Rabbi Zer cites the Inquisition—the great Sephardi Holocaust. It appears as the ultimate spiritual and physical destruction. Jews were required to give up their faith, and if they did not, they were tortured, murdered, or sent into exile.

There is considerable support here for Zuckerman’s claim that Holocaust discourse is constantly expanding, embracing ever more comparisons and images. The rabbi’s talk does not broaden the Holocaust to include other nations or other lands. The Jews have sole claim to determine the Holocaust’s lessons, and only those who own it can use it. The rabbi does have a critique of the Zionist Holocaust discourse that demonstrates its manipulations while proposing to make it universal. But he does deconstruct the accepted discourse in order to empower it. More Jews can now participate in the Holocaust games. A certain democratization takes place—the ownership of this historical asset is shared out more widely. But that was not where Zuckerman was aiming his critique. Along the way, Rabbi Zer plants thoughts about the Zionist hegemony, but what he offers in the matter of the Holocaust and Zionism loses its subversive and opposition power because of the potency of the desire to join the established discourse.

The complexity described in the above selections, which depict how the Holocaust and Zionism play in the Sephardi arena, will receive a certain twist below. It’s a twist that is not foreign to the location where it occurs, but it takes on a special cast because of the difficult time in which it took place.

11. LET'S ALL RECITE *SHEMA YISRAEL* TOGETHER

I told my children that if they see a suicide terrorist or car bomb they should recite *Shema Yisrael*. I taught them to say *Shema Yisrael*, it's pretty simple (Orly Kastel-Blum, *Ha'aretz* Friday magazine, April 5, 2002, p. 26).

Independence Day 5762, April 17, 2002. Two years have gone by since I first heard the admor of Kalib speak at Or David.. During them, he has visited the yeshiva several times. But this visit, the night after Independence Day 2002, came when the “situation”—the conflict with the Palestinians—reached one of its most awful peaks. One terror attack follows another. Blood flows, and there is no sign that it will stop.

I have no desire to go to Pardes Katz. But despite that, at 10:30 p.m. I change from pants into a skirt and get in the car. The parking area isn't full yet, and it looks as if the crowd heading in is younger than usual. Today was a day off, so maybe that has made it possible for other kinds of people to come. At the entrance I pass by the charity women, who also distribute application forms that enable you to become a friend of the yeshiva (by signing a bank order). I take a place in the middle of the hall. This time there are a lot of teenage girls, some of whom are not dressed “modestly.” A girl in tight black pants later passes out the drinks. Her midriff shows above her short skirt. The auditorium is not full. I wait to see how the rabbi will address the holiday, and what he will say about “the situation.”

The rabbi opens: “Today we have a special guest, an old visitor here but a special guest, the admor of Kalib. Today he participated in a lot of gatherings all around the country. He was just now in Petach Tikva.”

I politely ask for a piece of paper from the girl sitting behind me, and a pen from another neighbor. I put a plastic chair on my lap and write in the dark. For some reason, I didn't bring anything to these events. As if I've deliberately avoided carrying any objects that would betray my purposes. The following selection is reconstructed from my notes, which filled every blank spot on that piece of paper. The admor spoke, as he always did, in Ashkenazi Hebrew, in a soft singsong. As during his previous visit, he was dressed in a brown cloak embroidered with white and gold, and as always his ageless face shone on the screen. His sidelocks stroked his smooth cheeks, which refused to grow a beard, his blue eyes smiled, grew sad, and closed. His Ashkenazi lilt flowed through the hall filled with Sephardim, who had come for all kinds of reasons, but also because they were Mizrahim.

The admor of Kalib

Today we will open the Holy Ark and say *Shema Yisrael*. We will all say it together. At times like these we must comfort each other, not be against, not be contrary. Together, I now come from Petach Tikva, so many people, I wish I could fly. Fly from place to place, so I could go everywhere I am invited, people want to be together.

There was a king in a city, and they made him a big parade, crowds came to see his carriage go by. And then, when he went by, one man threw a stone at it, at the carriage. Soldiers grabbed him and brought him before the king, and they asked the king permission to kill him. Then the king said: "No. Take him to my palace." So it was. Half a year later they saw him walking in the palace

and weeping. They asked him, why are you weeping? He said: “I didn’t know the king, so I threw a stone, but now that I know him, I realize what a great king he is, what a good and wise king.” That is how one needs to get to know God, and all those who are against, they are frightened, or jealous. And people open stores on Shabbat, that brings about bloodshed, the blood of Israel is shed.

I now want to say something to President Bush. I have an American passport but I live in the Land of Israel. So I will speak to him now. [The admor switches to English, spoken with a heavy Yiddish accent.] Dear Mr. President Bush. Why don’t you understand us? Why do you waste millions to try to capture Bin Laden but you don’t allow us to capture those who are killing us?

The admor continues to speak in English and the women behind me try to translate his words for each other, while giggling at the admor’s unexpected initiative to take advantage of Rabb Zer’s satellite broadcast from Pardes Katz to speak with President Bush. The admor glances from time to time at a piece of paper he holds in front of him, as if he is trying to order his remarks. But his torrent of words does not show much evidence of order. Nevertheless, he builds up suspense towards the recitation of *Shema Yisrael* and reiterates every so often that the ark will soon be opened.

“People ask me how I am building a Haredi Holocaust Museum, so I tell them, there are people in Jerusalem who throw stones, so I gather up those stones and build. It will be the only place like it in the world.”

Suddenly he draws a cell phone out of his pocket, looks at it, and tells the audience: “Here, I’ve got a call from the Ramat Yisrael neighborhood, they wanted me to come but I can’t, so I will greet them this way.”

The admor holds the device to his mouth, but also angled towards the audience, and offers the gathering in Ramat Yisrael his blessing for a good life and health, that they may approach God and help others approach him, and the women say “Amen.”

“So now I will sing *Shema Yisrael* and you will sing with me.”

The admor begins to sing. Some of the women rise and sing with him. The singing is a bit weak, and there doesn’t seem to be a lot of enthusiasm in the upper hall, either, because the camera shows men gesturing to others to sing louder. Some members of the audience may be disappointed. They came to hear a talk by Rabbi Daniel Zer and instead find themselves listening to a little Ashkenazi with a funny voice. At one point I heard a woman behind me say to her friend: “Ashkenazi, Sephardi, what difference does it make?”

It’s already 11:15 p.m., and the hall is almost full now. The admor continues:

Our holy land, people don’t know. Every stone here is a diamond, how can people leave here, how? I tell everyone who speaks to me, from politics, from the army, I tell all of them, you have to give the soldiers something when they finish, you have to give them something. Afterwards they go sail around the world and never return. You have to invest everything here in the Land of Israel. We need to bless the soldiers so that they return home safely, healthy and whole, that there be no bloodshed, that all the injured be healed [the women say a louder “Amen” than usual].

They told me about a Jew who went to India, not religious at all. Before he got on the airplane someone came to him and said to him that there were Jews in the place he was going, and that they don't have bitter herbs for Pesach. So he asked him to give some to them. And there in India some of those Jews came to him to take the bitter herbs and they invited him to have the Seder with them. And when he came back he said that he had never seen such a thing in his life, what people, what faith, and he is now with God's help coming closer to Judaism. It's not easy, so you see how something sweet came out of the bitter herbs.

The admor pauses for a moment and takes a deep breath.

Now I will speak to heaven. The Holy One, Blessed Be He, look around, you will see so many Torah schools for children, so many *kolelim* and yeshivot, there was never so much Torah study among the Jewish people, it's worth your while to save the Jewish people. Sovereign of the universe, builder of worlds, each of us is an entire world, have mercy on us, give us strength, save us from all the gentiles who are attacking us. I plead to the people now not to fight, don't fight for seats [in the cabinet]. I don't belong to any party, I ask for unity, among rabbis, among the great scholars, let us convene together as a court of this world, we have power. God has regard for a court of this world.

We will conclude in a few more minutes, but I want to teach you a song that I wrote, it's in Yiddish but they translated it for me into Hebrew. [He begins to

sing and the women clap hands.] “Only faith in the Creator of the world/Dear Jews, beloved Jews/Believe, believe in the Creator of all worlds/Then it will be good for you today and tomorrow as well/In this world and the next world.

The men upstairs get into the spirit, and the women below try to follow and repeat the song together. As usual, there is a lot of chatter, cell phones ring unapologetically, women go out to take calls or carry on their conversations in their seats. Every so often someone shushes the women, but they quickly resume their chatter. The admor goes on tossing other songs and the women repeat his words, even to the point of adopting his Ashkenazi pronunciation. The songs include current popular songs with religious messages, such as “God, We Love You” and musical settings for passages from the Torah or prayer book. Then the admor says that he will presently open the Holy Ark, and that he is delighted to do it here, because Rabbi Daniel is dear to him and also has a birthday. The audience shouts and immediately breaks into the song “Our Rabbi Daniel Atones for All.”

At this point the two rabbis approach each other, turn their backs to the audience and their faces towards the ark. The audience falls silent when the admor’s small hand pulls aside the purple curtain that covers the ark, revealing two ugly formica slabs that cover the ark’s metal doors. The doors open to reveal the Torah scrolls inside. A wave of excitement runs through the room. Some of the women raise their arms and turn their palms towards the scrolls on the screen. The admor first recites a psalm—he chants a verse, and the women repeat it. The young woman next to me is familiar with the verses and the prayer, and she recites the lines with self-assurance and in the standard modern

Hebrew accent. The admor pauses a moment and then begins to recite the *Shema Yisrael* prayer.

I close my eyes. There are some 300 women below, about 500 men above, almost a thousand Jews saying *Shema Yisrael* together. I decide to join in. Actually, it's hard to say that I decided. I recall a newspaper interview with the young, non-religious writer Orly Kastel-Blum. She taught her children to say *Shema Yisrael*. The verse rolls off my tongue word by word. I don't say it to myself, I recite it, not in a loud voice, not shouting, but definitely out loud: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad.*" I think I can only pronounce this sentence with my eyes closed, only in a big crowd like this one, but without seeing it. It's the first time I've done something with them, gone along with them with my eyes closed.

The admor turns back towards the audience, and Rabbi Zer bends his head before him. The admor blesses the rabbi. Then the admor begins a Hasidic melody. It's not clear what he's saying or what language he's singing in. But the tune is soft and pleasant, almost familiar, burnt into me somewhere, and he sings well. He sings and sings while behind him they close the ark, he sings and sings, and the woman behind me says to her friend: "It's in Yiddish," and the friend replies: "Look how calm he is, how quiet he is, what a darling."

The Guest Star's Comfort Show

At one of the most deadly junctures of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, on a special date, the admor of Kalib receives the podium, and once again he creates an exceptional drama. On each of his previous visits he had exhorted the audience to begin with the recitation of *Shema Yisrael*. The recitation has become a trademark of his, and of his

projects. But this time the recitation of the prayer took on a special aspect. My participation in the event reminded me of a cassette tape that circulated in Haredi community after the first Gulf War.⁴² At that time, religious communities prayed for God's intercession because of the fear that Iraq would fire chemical weapons at Israel. The cassette described one of those prayer services. It took place in Mea She'arim, the central Haredi neighborhood in Jerusalem, on the eve of the war. The synagogue was filled with worshippers supplicating heaven. At the end of the service, one of the men turned to the women's section and invited them to come into the main sanctuary after the men left, so that they could pray before the Holy Ark. The woman whose voice appears on the cassette described a powerful scene of prayer, and noted that an elderly woman pushed her head into the ark and shouted to God for mercy. When the women left the synagogue, one of the neighborhood's elders said that he didn't remember anything like it since the time when Nazi German's army was deployed on the Egyptian border during World War II.

As noted, Zuckerman's book centers on the link between the Gulf War and the Holocaust. While he did not include the Haredi community in his study, this link was made there as well, and received a specific cultural shift. On Independence Day 2002, the Holocaust went (almost) without mention. But the admor of Kalib, one of the Holocaust's most prominent representatives in the Haredi world, was the star of the evening. Like other Israeli celebrities, he appeared all over the country on the holiday, went from one event to another, and tried to supply the huge demand for his show. The witness, the survivor, the man building a Holocaust museum from the hateful stones thrown on the

streets of the capital,⁴³ came to the Or David yeshiva to open the Holy Ark and recite *Shema Yisrael*.

I made the same transition this Independence Day that I made on Holocaust Day—from my Independence Day to theirs. It was obvious that the members of the audience celebrated the holiday in a large variety of ways. It's reasonable to assume that most of them attended a cookout—the ritual that has for some time been the most popular way of celebrating the day. We spent Wednesday night, after the holiday, together, our anxiety at the situation accented by the meaning of the holiday. The program the rabbi prepared for us was meant to achieve his usual goals. But in this special context, tonight's program sought also to provide some comfort.

During the three years in which I intermittently attended Rabbi Zer's Wednesday night talks, the ark was never opened and no public prayer was recited—and certainly there was no recitation of *Shema Yisrael*.⁴⁴ This time the ark opened.

The admor, introduced as a special guest, wanted to begin the comfort show with a call for unity—not to be against, not to be contrary. But it quickly became clear that the call was a one-sided one. The contrary people (who don't know the “king”) are those who open their stores on the Sabbath—thanks to rulings by Israel's Supreme Court—and they cause blood to be spilled in the streets. The simple link between desecration of the Sabbath (or of the standards of modest dress) and terror does not require any special effort on the part of the admor. He said it in the same breath as the summer approached with evil tidings and the Shavu'ot holiday approached with good tidings. Nevertheless, he constructed some bridges that he sought to cross on his way towards the others—towards

soldiers, towards discharged soldiers who turn into world-tramping backpackers, towards the government in its struggles with the American administration, and to the glorious beauty of the Land of Israel, the Holy Land. He placed this togetherness that he fashioned before God, and added to it Torah scholars and children at Torah schools, and called on God in heaven to look down on this huge crowd, in the lower court, and to save it from the gentiles.

The togetherness allowed the admor and his audience to connect to other audiences. He noted his American citizenship, but he defended the Land of Israel and censured those who leave it. He championed Israeli soldiers, and requested support for them from all willing to listen.⁴⁵ In addition to all these communities that the admor embraced, he used his cell phone to add another one, the Ramat Yisrael neighborhood. The admor hoped that this heterogeneous multitude will make an impression on God.

The ceremony of comfort and supplication was well constructed and progressed slowly. The admor promised from the beginning that he would open the ark and that everyone would say *Shema Yisrael* together with him. But much time passed and many things were said until the promise was kept. Parables were told, accusations made, and supplications offered. Music was interspersed among them. The admor sang his songs and taught the Sephardi audience a song that he wrote in Yiddish and had translated into Hebrew. The audience joined him in these transitions with good will and a certain amount of cooperation. They listened to him and sang along. But only when the admor offered familiar hits and connected the event to Rabbi Zer's birthday did the audience really get enthusiastic. In those moments, about an hour and a half after the show began, the admor and rabbi came together and stood in the eye of the camera that broadcast the

event to us. They turned their backs to the audience and their faces to the ark. The silence that fell over the auditorium, and the picture on the screen, had their effect. The admor recited a psalm and only then began *Shema Yisrael*. At that moment it seemed to me that all those present were preparing themselves for slaughter—the *Shema* prayer is, after all, the one traditionally recited by Jews who are murdered for affirming their Jewish faith and nationality. Everyone declaimed the sentence required of any Jew who dies a martyr. The *Shema Yisrael* that Kastel-Blum taught her children to say was the only gift she could give them on their final road as Jews. It defeated me. I joined in. The vulnerability that Jules Henry wrote of reached an acute level. The political circumstances, the admor's linkage with the Zionist discourse, and his manipulation of the ritual were too strong. The despairing anxiety I had felt on Independence Day 2002 found an outlet for a moment in the crowd that recited *Shema Yisrael*. I closed my eyes so as not to see myself, to see myself from inside, and perhaps to take advantage of this fine opportunity to say my first *Shema*.

When the admor conducted his “two-minute mourning” on Holocaust Day, I remained in my seat while the rest of the women descended to the floor. Perhaps I am like Rabbi Zer, who remains seated in his home when Israel's citizens stand for the memorial siren. We both use our bodies to mark ourselves for ourselves. During the entire period I attended Rabbi Zer's talks, I always abstained from joining in the “amens” and the applause, but this time I closed my eyes and recited *Shema Yisrael*. My mother never taught me that sentence. But because of the political reality surrounding the audience at the yeshiva and I—which came upon us because we were Israelis and Jews—

and because we had led ourselves into this situation, I, in the most innocent and absurd way, joined in the prayer.

12. THEY HAVE THREE DAYS EACH YEAR: INDEPENDENCE DAY, MOTHERS DAY, AND THE DAY RABIN WAS SHOT

Today we will talk about Holocaust Day and Independence Day. I'd prefer not to talk about them at all, it's really not worth wasting a lesson on the subject. But because people use these days to assail the Haredim about the siren and about Independence Day, I have to talk about it. They have three days each year: Independence Day, Mothers Day, and the day Rabin was shot. On those days they have their eyes on us. We try to bring love, to bring unity, and they want a quarrel, anything not, God forbid, to get close to the Haredim. The situation requires us to talk about it. (Rabbi Daniel Zer, sermon on Holocaust Day and Memorial Day, at <http://rabenu.co.il>)

These three days, which are new commemorations that are not part of the Jewish tradition, symbolize the spaces of belonging, exclusion, conflict, and convergence in which the text of this part of the book moves.

When Rabbi Zer groups Mothers Day with Independence Day and the anniversary of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, he is being critical. Mothers Day is marked principally in preschools and the lower classes of elementary schools (and in shopping malls). By speaking of it in the same breath as Israel's national day and its newest day of mourning, the rabbi seeks to highlight the illogic and eclecticism of

Israel's non-traditional commemorations. He also seeks to reveal the values that lie behind marking these days officially.

Mothers Day signifies the family, romantic love, marital intimacy, and consumerism, the central subjects of the earlier sections of this chapter. That discussion concluded by pointing out the *teshuva* industry's double gambit, one that recasts the stereotypical Mizrahi images of the punk and the slut. It labels all men and women who are not approaching religious observance as such, while stressing that these punks and sluts always have seats reserved for them in the normative community. The critique contained in the rhetoric of Rabbi Zer, who is both a unique and a characteristic representative of the *teshuva* industry, was directed against the popular values of those who were the subjects of his talks. He mocked the common use of terms like "love," "relationship," "happiness," and "wealth." As far as he is concerned, the entire normal and aspiring structure of these values, as expressed in the lives of his listeners, and as they appear in the media and in popular culture, must be changed. The rabbi proposes an entirely different way of life for the individual and the family. But happiness and love are not absent from his program. On the contrary, he cannot offer an alternative that does not include them. If the Jewish people accepts his plan, everyone will have them, and they will have a new and enduring savor.

That is not the rabbi's approach when it comes to the Holocaust and Israel's independence. True, he criticizes the hegemony that manages them and mocks "their holidays," but in fact he seeks to gain, for himself and for his community, a place and esteem within them. Independence Day and the anniversary of Rabin's assassination

could be interpreted as national days, but they should not be confused. The rabbi collects Holocaust Day and Memorial Day into a single commemoration, national, historical, and with unifying potential that needs to be worked on. The day of Rabin's assassination is the most recent addition to the calendar and is marked as a day that creates divisions within Israeli society.⁴⁶

This section of Part II tracks Rabbi Zer's rhetoric in the thematic space of Holocaust and nationality. He presents movement in these spaces of discourse as a waste of time. In his view, it would be better to talk about real matters, such as Torah, but "the situation requires" him to address national and historical memory. This "situation," which compels him to speak, is part of the rabbi's message—because the compulsion comes out of persecution. Haredim are persecuted for not obeying the national imperative, so they must defend themselves and assert why they need not accept all of Zionism's imperatives and why Haredim are in fact more Zionist than the Zionists. Such paradoxes are not rare in religious discourse,⁴⁷ and they need not be taken as proof of irrationality. On the contrary, this intricacy should be followed in order to sum up its motives, contents, and outcomes.

Such a summary should return to the claim made at the beginning of this chapter that Haredi discourse on the Holocaust and nationalism in fact challenge the hegemonic discourse on these subjects. But the expansion that he conducts, as well as the partial deconstruction of the discourse's boundaries, do not seek to set aside the Jewish status as permanent victim. Rather, it seems to enlarge the list of those who can claim the title. This intra-Jewish deconstruction has critical value within the nation, but it cannot and is

not interested in cutting loose from the experience of persecution and consequences it produces. Children serve as a metaphor for this move, beyond their actual, historical fate, because they symbolize the nation's future. The children are Haredi children who were persecuted and taunted for what they were. They are also the Mizrahi Haredi children who are not allowed to be what they are, who were changed, given a different education, and abandoned on society's margins, or who were kidnapped and sold. These are the children who appear in the texts of the Mishkenot Ha-Ohalim organization,⁴⁸ who compare Zionism to Nazism. They are the people who come up in the admor's ceremony as Jewish children whom the Nazis killed, alongside the Jewish children that Israeli Zionism does not allow to be born. All these children are the future of the Jewish people, they are the rough diamonds. Those of them who attend Torah schools will be polished and will shine. Those who go to public schools will turn into thorns.

The sociologist Natan Sznajder has shown that organizations founded (largely in the nineteenth century in the West) to protect children from cruelty and neglect were the springboard for compassion to become part of the public disposition in the modern age. Compassion for the other has become a parameter that marks the norm of capitalist democratic civil society.⁴⁹ Haredi society's obsessive preoccupation with children makes double use of this compassion. On the one hand, it seeks to broaden the discourse of compassion to include Haredi and Mizrahi children, as well as children who were born and died and children who were never born. On the other hand, all these children are Jews. Empathy and compassion do not go beyond the bounds of the nation. In this case, the Haredi discourse is not all that distant from the Zionist discourse or the Holocaust discourse as presented by Moshe Zuckerman.

The struggle is thus (also) over the story, or narrative, that Harding has marked as the conversion software of the fundamentalist believer. The Zionist story extricates itself from the situation of victimhood through national self-determination and independence. Nevertheless, it does not give up the permanence of this situation, and the unlimited legitimacy that it provides to use force to prevent repetitions of the Holocaust. The Haredi story is not all that different from the Zionist story. The main difference is the way of getting out, which for Haredim can only be the Torah and observance of its precepts. But within this, and as a result of the critique it contains, Haredim and Mizrahi Haredim seek a place of honor in the niche of the victims. Aryeh Der'i sought for himself the highest place when he argued that Zionist persecuted him with the same force it used against Nazi criminals like Demjanjuk and Eichmann. So, in a convoluted way, by placing himself beside these Nazis, he lent greater force to the persecution he experienced and the extent of the sacrifice he was required to make.

The situation of persecution and victimhood is thus a sweeping one. The Zionist solutions to this situation did not prove themselves, certainly not at the height of the Intifada, when terror had the upper hand over Israel's hard-line stance and dissolved it from within. A life based on the Torah, the rabbi said, is the only way to escape death and/or victimhood. Yet the circle is not broken: the discourse of victimhood, the witnesses, the persecuted, and the saved spin in the carousel. The demand for equality as citizens of the state of Israel sounds more like a demand to be included in the list of actual and potential victims. While there is the shadow of a promise of some sort of serenity to be found in a life based on the Torah, it's a life that drips blood. The critique that can be gathered along the unraveling of the Zionist discourse on the Holocaust and

nation is not insignificant. The rabbi can point to the state's failure in education, to ethnic discrimination, to the aloofness of some members of the Knesset, to the tyranny of democracy, and more.

But this critique, unlike that he made against consumerism and romance, is mobilized for national purposes. He still considers the state to be the great achievement that came out of the Holocaust, and he maintains that the Jews are still victims. The admor of Kalib blesses the soldiers and asks the president of the United States to allow the sovereign state of Israel to pursue its enemies. At the same time, he recites with the public the prayer that is most closely linked to martyrdom. A martyr's death is a passive death, the kind that Zionism sought to remove from Jewish practice. The Holocaust discourse, linked to terror and the state, creates an apolitical and ahistorical space—a continuum of Jews persecuted for being Jews, for existing.

Haredim and Mizrahi Haredim seek a connection to the Holocaust and Jewish nationalism. But the anniversary of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination remains a national area that they are not anxious to push themselves into.⁵⁰ Even though Rabin was the ultimate soldier and the chief of staff when Israel took Jerusalem's Old City in the Six Day War, the decoding of his murder and its commemoration grounded old social segmentations in new ways. Vizitzky- Seroussi has shown this via the different modes of memorializing Rabin in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem.⁵¹ Rapoport has demonstrated the segmentation created between veteran Israelis and immigrants from the former Soviet Union.⁵² The segmentation between the supporters and opponents of the Oslo peace process, which had been suspended to a certain extent, came to the fore again before the Intifada of 2000, and

reached one of its climaxes when Rabin's memorial in Tel Aviv was vandalized in November 2003. Rabbi Zer says nothing about the day itself, but he says the most important thing. It is a day of discord. A day that makes distinctions, that labels, that tries, with new desperation, to distinguish between the "good guys" and the "bad guys," the correct from the mistaken. But, the rabbi says, it's no use. They want discord (because otherwise the truth will come out and non-religious Jews will start turning Haredi), and we want love (knowing the truth as we do). And below this obvious religious/non-religious distinction lies the social stratum on which the discord lies: between left and right, between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, between veteran Israelis and immigrants, between poor and well-off. Rabbi Zer was not in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv at the memorial convocation, but presumably he can imagine quite easily the nature of the crowd that gathered there. He knows that it's a crowd very different from the one that comes to his sanctuary, and he also understands that Rabin memorial day serves today as marker in Israeli society. The rabbi points out that marker, which hides behind a "national day." He criticizes it and rebuilds it. We are part of the persecuted people, part of the eternal victimhood, and therefore part of Zionist nationality. But we are not the part that you want us to be.

The audience that comes to hear Rabbi Zer's lectures is exposed to specific knowledge. While it is varied and presented in a complex way, the rabbi's pedagogy strives towards a single destination: religious observance in its Haredi form. The knowledge he offers his listeners, men and women, is meant to constitute a critical perspective that will reveal the "truth." From that point, the road to *teshuva* is meant to be

short. Yet my observations reveal that many people continue to attend the open lectures without walking the *teshuva* road to its end.

Some of the women who interested me were in the audience. They were religious, Haredi women who viewed the kind of knowledge the rabbi offered as part of their world of knowledge. They attend the lectures regularly, sit beside women who are Haredi and women who are not, and listen to the lesson. For some of them, it is their only religious education as adults. In the neighborhood where the lectures are held, there are no organized frameworks in which women study Judaism. The range of content and pedagogy that Rabbi Zer offers have been presented in this part of my book in order to sketch out the contours of the religious education to which these adult women are exposed. In addition to the quality of this religious education and the picture of the world that it offers, the fact that they sit alongside women who are not Haredi marks them as permanently newly-religious, always *hozrot be-teshuva*. The Sephardi audience is reproduced in Rabbi Zer's sanctuary as an audience without boundaries. This refusal to acknowledge boundaries is a critique of the sectorial understanding of Israeli society that has often been presented in sociological studies.⁵³ The Haredi women I sought to follow are part of a mixed community with a heterogeneous template of knowledge. The next part of the book will thus present how the neighborhood's religious and Haredi women cope with other content worlds. These were placed before them during a vocational course taught at the local community center. Here, too, the population included Haredi, religious, traditional, and other women. There were Ashkenazi women, Sephardi women, veteran Israelis and immigrants. The content that these courses offered in their knowledge worlds was of great importance. Describing and analyzing them will help

create a profile of the Sephardi-Haredi woman—her identity, the ways she places herself in the spaces of knowledge, occupations, and professions.

Notes

¹ The tune was borrowed from a song called “We Love You God.”

² At special events, before holidays, celebrations of great rabbis or righteous men, and during the month of *selichot*—the special supplications of repentance recited during the month preceding the High Holidays—the number of women can exceed 300. On ordinary evenings, some 70-150 attend.

³ Harding 2000.

⁴ In Israel, this process is generally called *hazara be-teshuva*, “returning in repentance,” although among Mizrahim the term *le-hit’hazek*, “to strengthen oneself,” is often used instead. The latter term is meant to denote that the conversion process is not binary, from nothing to everything, but rather a continuum. The Mizrahi home is depicted as one that kept more traditions than Ashkenazi homes did, and Mizrahim are said to have undergone secularization only in the last generation. Such statements are open to debate. Scholars point to secularization processes that began in Iraq, North Africa, and elsewhere before the migration to Israel (Tsur 2000, Shenhav 2003, Khazzoom 2002). Nevertheless, it would not be wrong to say that non-religious Mizrahi families have maintained halachic tradition to a greater extent than non-religious Ashkenazim have (the stereotype is that non-religious Mizrahim still recite the *kiddush*—the Sabbath and holiday blessing over wine, observe the dietary laws, fast on Yom Kippur, and in many cases the women observe *nidda* and immerse themselves in a ritual bath after their periods). The parallel process in the American literature on Protestants is being “born again.” Clearly, this term is very different from the Jewish terms “return” or “strengthening,” since it requires the rebirth of the convert and not a return to a place, or the reinforcement of an existing place.

⁵ An interesting comparison between the structure of Shas and church structure has been made by Bekerman and Fisher (2001). In the comparison I conduct, I have chosen a specific test case from church system studied by Harding. Its precision makes it possible to consider details, beyond the general claim of similarity between the cases. A variety of anthropological studies were available for comparison, but Harding’s was the most appropriate for my needs. In this context, note should be made of contemporary Protestantism, which movement that has grown at an almost

unprecedented rate on the American continent. It has been studied by, among others, Kimon Howland Sargeant (2000). His work indicates that this movement provides a comprehensive response to current age's cultural leanings towards a new spirituality ("New Age"), to the need for spiritual healing, and to the desire for authentic originality.

⁶ On "others" and the carnival, see Tsur 2000.

⁷ Harding's study concluded before the election of President George W. Bush in 2000. While she did not aspire to make political predictions, her study certainly marked the cultural-conservative-religious trend that characterizes the United States during the first half of the first decade of the third millennium.

⁸ Bilsky 2001.

⁹ The most critical text would seem to be Arendt 2000.

¹⁰ The Haredi world maintains a sharp distinction between ethnic groups, and many Hasidic sects do not accept *hozerim be-teshuva*—even Ashkenazi ones.

¹¹ For the change that has taken place in the religious and Haredi world-view, see Sheleg 2000, Sivan and Kaplan 2003.

¹² It is hardly surprising that Yoav Peled's choice of subtitle for his book on Shas was "The Challenge of Being Israeli" (Peled 2001c).

¹³ Some modern religious Jews refrain from using such expressions, and many Haredim from the community's central core do not feel themselves required to speak this way. It should be kept in mind, however, that unlike a Christian, the dress and some of the customs of believing Jews are inevitably expressed in public. Even drinking a glass of water requires the telltale murmur of a blessing.

¹⁴ Rabbi Zer is recalling Israeli movie theaters of the 1960s, when he used to frequent them. At that time it was common practice for rowdies to make noise and cause disturbances by rolling glass soft drink bottles down the aisles.

¹⁵ Spelman 1997.

¹⁶ By this, Sandoval means women who represent the Third World that exists within the United States. These are women of color whose experience is of being outside of both the patriarchal and white feminist systems.

¹⁷ Sandoval 2000.

¹⁸ Barthes 1978.

¹⁹ On the third space, see Bhabha 1994.

²⁰ This is the title of the cassette tape from which this selection is taken. It is cassette number 10, dated 2000.

²¹ On this and other charged stories, see Zakowitz and Shinan 1992.

²² The rejection of the image of the eyes is not based here on mystical or halachic discourse. It is rather directed at popular Mizrahi discourse (where the Arabic word *ayouni*, “my eyes,” is often used) in which the eyes are portrayed as an essential organ that the speaker compares to the object of his love: “You, my son, are like my eyes,” or “I’m willing to give both my eyes for you.”

²³ It is not surprising that the rabbi does not speak about a mother’s love for her daughter. He reinforces the notion that mothers are meant to raise sons, and this is even before we get to the Oedipal complex. In the larger context of impartial childcare, see Meira Weiss’s book *Conditional Love: Parents’ Attitudes Toward Handicapped Children* (1994), which deconstructs this definitive assumption. In some cases, Weiss demonstrates, parents abandon and reject children.

²⁴ The biblical story of rape the Mishna refers to depicts the woman as a victim. Zakowitz and Shinan (1992) compare the story of Amnon and Tamar to the story of Potifar’s wife, who tries to seduce Joseph in a similar poetic movement.

²⁵ On the 15th of Av as a holiday, see Goldberg 2003, p. 275.

²⁶ In my previous studies I have already noted that this is a charged time (El-Or 1994, 2002, El-Or and Neria 2004). During this period Haredim travel around the country and have picnics at vacation sites. Each year, rabbis issue warnings, restrictions, and prohibitions meant to establish the period’s character and limit the options for leisure activities. In 2003, in the heart of a Haredi neighborhood

in Jerusalem, a suicide bomber blew himself up in a bus containing dozens of people who were on their way back from praying at the Western Wall. Despite the general restraint that characterized the interpretation of the event, and the general call for repentance, one rabbi said that the cause might well have been “too much sailing and kayaking on the Jordan.”

²⁷ At this time, the daily press had reported about women’s sex tours in Thailand.

²⁸ Rabbi Zer is one factor in the “Haredization” of Sephardi society. On this change, and its extensions into the enterprise of halacha, Jewish law, the prayer book, and other areas, see Zohar 2001, Lau 2002, Leon 1999.

²⁹ The Shema Yisrael Encyclopedia: Documenting and Memorializing Acts of Self-Sacrifice in the Years of Wrath 1939-1945, in the Ghettoes, Labor Camps, Concentration Camps, and Death Camps (Bnei Brak 2004).

³⁰ Kaplan 2001.

³¹ Zuckerman 1993.

³² *ibid.*, p. 17.

³³ Ozeri 2002, 2003.

³⁴ The way World War II and the Holocaust were experienced by non-Ashkenazi Jews is also a type of broadening and alternative gaze. The Ben Zvi Institute devoted three issues of its journal *Pe’amim* to this subject. These present a broad range of studies tracing the less-known history of how Nazism affected Sephardi Jews in the Balkans, Italy, Greece, North Africa, Bukhara, Caucasian Jews, and the Jews of the Middle East. *Pe’amim* 27, 28, 29 (1986).

³⁵ Bracha’s biography appears in Chapter 4.

³⁶ My conversation with Shoshi about her job will not be analyzed here, so as not to get off my principal subject. But a comment on Pesach cleaning is in order. Housework, and especially cleaning, talk of cleaning, and the experience of cleaning, fill a special place in the lives of women of the Mizrahi lower-middle class. In the biographical section of this book, Aya talks about the cleaning she did at her kibbutz, and Bracha relates how she used to clean the house before her

mother returned home from work. The girls of the Or Hayyim boarding school also tell about their pre-Pesach cleaning. One of the organizers of the neighborhood women's club also stated one of its goals as "getting the women out of the bleach."

³⁷ The particular unclean animal that Haredi leaders characterize non-religious Jews as eating changes over time. Rabbi Eliezer Menachem Shach, a prominent Haredi leader two decades ago, once accused kibbutzim of eating rabbits. This time the kibbutzim get money from the government, and parliamentarians who seek to deny the Haredim government subsidies represent the Yuppie generation of lobster-eaters.

³⁸ Barkai and Levy 1998.

³⁹ Henry 1972.

⁴⁰ On the process of setting symbolic days and ceremonies, see Azariyahu 1995.

⁴¹ The siren, and standing in silence, have been addressed in Israeli theater and cinema. One example is David Ma'ayan's *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Educational institutions have proposed a number of alternatives (Lomsky-Feder 2004).

⁴² For the full contents of the cassette and an analysis of it, see El-Or 1997.

⁴³ Note the parallel between the stones thrown by the man who watched the king's procession and the stones that Haredim in Jerusalem throw at cars that drive by their neighborhoods on the Sabbath. In an oblique way, the admor was criticizing this act and atoning for it by ostensibly taking the stones and using them to build a "palace" of the Holocaust.

⁴⁴ Presumably there were similar events that I missed, but they, too, were certainly not routine.

⁴⁵ The women responded to the admor's blessing for the safety of the soldiers and wounded victims of terror attacks with a resounding "amen." Unlike the Ashkenazi-Haredi community, the religious Sephardi community is not alienated from the army. Many of the women in the hall, it is reasonable to assume, had family members serving in the military.

⁴⁶ On the establishment of this day of commemoration, on the management of Rabin's memory, and its sites, see Vizitzky-Seroussi 2002.

⁴⁷ On the place and uses of paradoxes in religious discourse, see El-Or 1994, pp. 135-206.

⁴⁸ “We will sell one Mizrahi child from each family. The primitives from the Oriental communities won’t notice,” *Ohalei Ya’akov*, issue 6, quoted in Ozeri 2002.

⁴⁹ Sznaider’s claim conflicts with more common arguments that the modern age destroyed the remnants of public compassion, or that it uses compassion as cover for disciplining and policing actions (Sznaider 2001).

⁵⁰ On decoding Rabin’s assassination and its national and religious context, see El-Or 2002, pp. 53-86.

⁵¹ Vizitzky-Seroussi 2002.

⁵² Rapoport 2000.

⁵³ See, for example, Kimmerling 2004.