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Imported Rituals: *Zaddiq* Veneration in Israel

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“Rabbi Ifargan is approaching! Please make room to let him pass! Women! Move aside! The Rabbi will not enter the place if you stay so thickly crowded! Please, please...”

The request resonates from the loudspeakers into the forested dark valley in the Galilee region of Israel. Women reluctantly give up their places in front of the big metal fireplace where hundreds of candles are burning. Rabbiⁱ Ifargan, a young Jewish orthodox man, clad in a black cloak and a hat comes in followed by a dozen young men. It is slightly after midnight and freezing cold. The “*Tikkun Hazot*”ⁱⁱ ritual is about to begin on a mountain slope by the grave of *Zaddiq*ⁱⁱⁱ Yonatan ben Uziel. An elderly man who is holding the microphone starts singing popular religious songs^{iv}. The crowd joins in loudly. About 300 people are standing on the muddy ground, far away from their warm beds. They are waiting for the Rabbi to start his prayers.

In immigration societies, two different strands constantly intertwine. On the one hand, immigrants seek their special ethnic identity, tending to socialize among themselves, while on the other, they are a part of the larger society, influencing it and influenced by it. In this paper, I will discuss the stories of 5 pilgrims in Israel who currently participate repetitively in rituals held at sites where sacred graves exist. I will show how for second and third-generation Moroccan-immigrants in Israel, such pilgrimages enhance continuity with their ancestor heritage. For other pilgrims it is a new tradition they choose to embrace.

Israel is an immigrant society. By 1948 the Jewish population of Israel was estimated at about 700,000. In 50 years the number has risen to about 5,000,000. Immigration of Jews, in waves, was the main reason for this population increase. In the 50s and 60s, most immigrants were from Northern Africa, especially from Morocco. These immigrants encountered a society composed mainly by people of European origin. The official cultural policy was called “The melting pot” and aimed to create one cultural entity. The result was that North-African immigrants had to conform to the mainstream ideas and give up many of their traditions. Two decades later, composing about a third of the Jewish population in Israel, the groups of North-African origin started a struggle to recover some of their lost heritage. By the year 2000, the Israeli cultural arena became more diverse.

My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted mainly in the years 1998 and 1999, with a few follow-ups during 2000 and 2001. My main focus is on a nightly ceremony conducted in the vicinity of *Zaddiq* graves in the northern and southern regions of Israel. A *Zaddiq* is a righteous person who cures ill people and helps those in need. This is accomplished by miracles, attributed to his faith in God and his distinct and holy way of life. In some aspects it is a Jewish parallel to a Christian or a Muslim saint.

Groups of young people, living in “Gush Dan” (the greater Tel Aviv metropolis) journey to *Zaddiq* graves to ask for help from God and the *Zaddiq*’s spirit. *Tikkun* rituals, held there, are believed to help solve personal problems. I focus mainly on participants whose lifestyles are based on rationalistic assumptions. Most of them work in Hi-tech professions and describe themselves as secular. In contemporary Israel, there is a very sharp distinction between observant and secular Jews. People who declare themselves

secular are not supposed to observe religious restrictions or perform traditional rituals. However, reality is more complex and many “secular” Israelis practice Jewish tradition to some extent. Secular people can observe “*Yom Kipur*”^v, “*Pesah*”^{vi}, and “*Rosh Hashana*”^{vii}, but going on a pilgrimage to *Zaddiq* graves has an aura of conflict since this ritual is not one of the mainstream rituals. Therefore, one of my concerns addresses the conflict between the rational aspect of the participants’ daily life and the mysticism of their nightly tours. Such contradiction could be problematic for pilgrims in the act of attending the rituals, and also depreciate their social legitimacy.

Most regular pilgrims to *Zaddiq* graves in Israel are observant Moroccan elderly women, coming during the day, in kinship or neighborhood groups. *Zaddiq* veneration was a very common practice in Morocco by Jews as well as by Muslims. Research of *Zaddiq* veneration in Israel (For example: Deshen ,1977,. Shokeid, 1977, 1998,. Vingrod, 1998,. Bilu, 1993,. Bilu and Ben Ari, 1990,. Sered,1988) usually concludes that pilgrimage to *Zaddiq* graves, as many other North African traditions, helps first and second-generation immigrants in their search for a unique group identity. However, this is true mainly for daily pilgrimages and for yearly events marking the date of a *Zaddiq*’s death^{viii}. The groups I accompanied attended another, smaller scale ritual called “*Tikkun Hazot*”. Individuals or pairs travel three hours from Tel Aviv to the grave site independently or by a tour bus with a guide. During the ride, the guide tells anecdotes from Jewish mysticism literature and folk beliefs. The ritual itself is governed by the Rabbi and his helpers.

However problematic it is for them, these secular young people continue to attend the *Tikkun* ritual. Several characteristics of the event might help understand its special

appeal. The supportive atmosphere of the pilgrimage^{ix} attracts young people who feel that life in an urban society leads to loneliness. *Zaddiq* veneration at nighttime provides a context and site where they can connect to strangers for a designated period of time. Night creates a different time zone^x, thus, reducing the dissonance between the mysticism inherent in the ritual and their everyday life. It also enables the pilgrims to create a social compartmentalization between their daily work and social environment apart from *Zaddiq* veneration activities. The tour guides and the Rabbi all present the religious aspects of the ritual in a manner that helps create a comfortable feeling among the participants. The Rabbi does not preach in a prescriptive or proselytizing manner, so travelers to *Zaddiq* graves could embrace the mystic practices as much as they desired without feeling that their secular daily lifestyle was threatened.

Among the Moroccan origin pilgrims, Brajot^{xi} was quite outstanding. She was a woman aged around 45 who lived in northern Tel–Aviv. She was always well dressed when I met her, her eyes blue, and by her appearance she resembled a person of European origin. She herself remarked many times that people did not recognize her as “Moroccan”, and therefore scrutinized Moroccan traditions freely in front of her. Her friends and workmates thought that *Zaddiq* veneration was a dangerous superstition that caused harm to naïve believers. Brajot told me that her interest in *Zaddiq* veneration started with a story told by her grandmother. Her grandmother had given birth to four dead babies in Morocco until her family advised her to travel to the grave of a Jewish *Zaddiq* that was in a remote region of Morocco. After the strenuous pilgrimage, her fifth baby was born alive. Such stories were told by many people I interviewed, but what was more interesting about Brajot was the way she described her new interest in *Zaddiqim*.

She said that her husband worked with a man who was very religious. This friend was married for 15 years and could not have children with his wife. They underwent all sorts of medical treatments but could not manage to get pregnant. Brajot was excited to find out that an organized tour to Morocco went to the famous *Zaddiq's* grave where her grandmother visited. Brajot decided to go on that tour and promised this man that she would pray for his sake. She reported being very excited at the grave, feeling as if the skies were opening for her. She prayed and lit candles. After that, she told her husband to pick some pomegranates that grew in the yard. Upon their return to Israel, the husband gave the fruit to his friend. The next fertility treatment of the couple was successful. Brajot said that her husband thought it was a coincidence and laughed when she called it a miracle. However, for her, *Zaddiq* veneration was like a therapeutic activity. She said that while some people go to their shrink, she goes to the *Zaddiq's* grave. Brajot's own pilgrimage experience in Morocco has symmetric parallels to her Grandmother's. However, her grandmother solved her own fertility problems, while Brajot served as a kind of healer for a friend's wife. This might be a way to detach herself from this religious activity, while, at the same time, narrating a unique identity-forming story.

Brajot and other Moroccan second- and third- generation immigrants tried to experience some of their ancestral or childhood practices, while living in a social environment that still opposes such activities. Some traditional practices are nostalgic for them. They enjoy touching this old sensation again, but do not intend to change their current way of life. Malachi, a young TV producer of Tunisian origins came to film the *Tikkun* ceremony with me. Before this event, he did not know such rituals still existed. After the *Tikkun* he told me, with an emotional tone, that as soon as he heard the melody of

the prayer, something moved in his stomach. It was the same kind of melody he used to hear in the synagogue^{xii} of his childhood.

This kind of nostalgic connectedness between northern African immigrants and their homeland traditions attracts them to *Zaddiq* veneration and to the *Tikkun* ceremony. The *Tikkun*, which is an isolated event, separated in time and space, lends them an opportunity to practice something they consider to be a lost heritage. Brajot was very proud of her mystic activities. She talked freely about miracles she was part of and of the spiritual experiences she had. However, she added *Zaddiq* veneration to a list of more socially acceptable activities, like going to a psychologist. Other pilgrims reported that they hid their participation in *Tikkun* ceremonies from their friends and relatives, for fear of being laughed at. They said that they were afraid of being stigmatized as “primitive North African immigrants”.

A different group of people in the *Zaddiq* veneration circle consisted of people who also attended *Tikkun* ceremonies often, but had no close relatives who practiced *Zaddiq* veneration. They were usually of European origin and from secular families, and they worked in the hi-tech industry. The fact that they worked with sophisticated technology was, for most of them, a marker of their being a part of the modern world, although they used practices that are considered part of a more traditional worldview. They described this mystic practice of *Tikkun* ceremony as one of many spiritual activities available for all. Spiritual activity has become quite fashionable in Israel’s secular population in recent years. For some participants, *Zaddiq* veneration is merely a part of “new age” tendencies^{xiii}. In the following paragraphs I will tell the stories of three such individuals.

Dina recalled traveling to the *Tikkun* at least 10 times. She was 25 years old, blond and thin, dressed usually in jeans and a t-shirt. She lived with her parents and worked as a computer manager for the municipality of a Tel Aviv satellite-town. She said that it was better if her father never knew about her *Zaddiq* veneration activity, since he might confront her angrily and try to stop her from going there in the future. She hoped that the *Zaddiq* would help her find the right man to marry. The site where *Tikkun* takes place-- Yonatan ben Uziel's grave-- is considered the best grave for finding a proper match. She hid her nightly journeys from her friends and even from her new boy friend. Whenever her cellphone rang she was nervous and would not answer. She did not want anybody to hear the religious songs that were being sung on the bus, or to have to explain where she was.

Another frequent participant was Galit. She was 21 years old with many piercings and hair dyed red. She asked me not to film her, since she thought her friends might find it odd to see her in a *Zaddiq* pilgrimage. She said they considered her a party-girl who breaks the traditional rules and is into celebrating and enjoying life. She felt that if her inner belief in the *Zaddiq* was exposed she might lose her special image and be treated as a two faced person

Oren was a man in his late thirties, tall and very thin. He worked for the most advanced cellular telephone-company in Israel. He had no formal academic education but used many scientific terms and examples in his speech. Every few months he attended a *Tikkun*. He said it elevated his spirit and cleansed his soul. He also reported many other spiritual practices he engaged in: Yoga, Reiki healing, and reading such mystical Jewish texts as "*Sefer Hazoar*". He praised science as a most important tool for

understanding the world, but said that even in physics there is a mystical aspect.

According to him, the Quantum Theory shows that the person conducting an experiment can influence the way particles move. This for him was the key to understanding the limits of science. For Oren, rational thought was effective as long as it could explain things. Whenever events exceeded the explanatory power of science and reason, he turned to mystic powers and liked to tell of “medical miracles” that, as the story goes, happened to people after attending *Zaddiq* graves.

Oren, Galit and Dina are not of Moroccan origin, but they were attracted to this tradition and attended *Tikkun* ceremonies many times. For them it is a ritual that serves their personal needs. It is not connected to their ethnic identity. They all used different strategies to separate their daily life and their *Zaddiq* veneration activity. While Oren separated the realms of perception philosophically, Dina and Galit made a geographic and social separation which enabled them to deal with each section of their lives at a time. They all tended to “embrace their role” as *Tikkun* participants (to use Ervin Goffman’s (1982) term). They participated in the *Tikkun* event wholeheartedly. They came many times and they talked about an inner strength they got from being there. Usually they stood as close as possible to the fire and the Rabbi, they prayed, lit candles and sang according to what was indicated by the Rabbi and his helpers. They believed that these events changed their life for the better. They also expressed their acceptance of the night’s hardship as a part of the self-improvement the whole event is about. To use Victor Turner’s term, they got into a “flow” (Turner, 1977) with the event, and at least while attending it, did not have any internal conflict or contradictions. Most of them

praised Rabbi Ifargan as being an extraordinary man who is the key for the ceremony's success. They never doubted his authenticity or intentions.

The five stories tell us how immigrants keep their homeland traditions, while enabling others in the same society to enjoy these traditions for their own purposes. However, the picture is not so bright for all of the Israeli society. Prejudice and stigmas still affect many third and fourth-generation immigrants from Northern Africa, and statistics still show that their numbers are low in higher economic and educational positions in the country. In the press, *Zaddiq* veneration activities are still treated with criticism, or amusement. *Tikkun Hazot* ceremony is a unique example of the huge diversity of life styles and worldviews available to locals and immigrants in late modernity. However, their availability does not mean that these rituals are completely legitimate. This might be the reason why many third-generation Northern- African immigrants in Israel would not consider attending this kind of events to continue their ethnic heritage.

Notes:

ⁱ Rabbi is the name given to Jewish religious leaders.

ⁱⁱ “*Tikkun Hazot*” is the Hebrew name of that mystical ritual. The literal meaning is “the reparation of midnight”. Sometimes it is just called “*Tikkun*”. Later I will describe in more detail the specific context. The formal religious meaning is discussed by Tishbi (1991).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Zaddiq* is a Hebrew word referring to a pious man that dedicated his life for religious study and ritual. After his death he is considered to have entered heaven and due to his dedicated life got closer to god himself. The term is discussed in the paper later.

^{iv} By this I mean songs that are about faith in God but are usually not considered official prayers.

^v Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, a holy day in which many Jewish people fast, mediate, and ask for repentance.

^{vi} A seven days holiday that celebrates the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt.

^{vii} Jewish New Year.

^{viii} These are called -- *Hilula*

^{ix} “Pilgrimage” is a term that has gone through the deconstruction process so immanent in post modern social research. Discussion of this problematic term is found at Eade and Sallnow (1991a), Morinis (1992), and Nolan & Nolan (1989). I use it here for the act of traveling to a holy site for a religious ritual.

^x The meaning of timing for social activities is discussed by Zerubabel (1981.)

^{xi} This is a pseudonym that means in Hebrew, similarly to her real name, “Blessing”, or “Good luck”. It is not a common name and she feels it has a special meaning for her life narrative.

^{xii} The Jewish praying place, like the church for Christian people.

^{xiii} Herthinton (1996) discusses other groups of “new age pilgrims” traveling to traditional sacred sites.

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