Folk Religions in Modern Israel: Sacred Space in the Holy Land

Galit Hasan-Rokem

Israel is a country of many cultures and languages and of several religions. The majority of the population adheres to the Jewish religion. The Moslem and the Christian religions come next in size, in that order. Similarly to many other countries in the region, religion fills a more central role in the public sphere of Israel than in most Western countries. It also influences the private sphere immensely, as for example in the matter of marriages and funerals which in most cases are conducted by state employees who have been appointed by the religious establishments of each of the official religions. We are thus discussing religion in a context where it matters highly. Power, welfare and the very right to reside in the country are connected with religion. Symbols of statehood and collective identity are lent from religious texts, objects and rituals. The symbol of the state, the seven-armed golden candelabra, suggests the memory of the temples of Solomon and Herod where a similar one was standing.

All three monotheistic religions living side by side in Israel have vast and aged literary and scholastic traditions. The Bible, the New Testament and the Quran have all been interpreted by generations of students and teachers. They have all served as the foundation for the ethical and philosophical systems relevant for their adherents. But alongside the institutionalized and canonized forms of reverence each religion has also developed, not necessary in opposition to the official forms of religious life, forms of piety and rituals which we usually term folk religion.

The student of contemporary folk religion may very well be an educated witness to processes which in the traditional texts of religion have become stabilized articulations and forms of behavior and expression. That is to say, what historically was considered folk religion, or even a transgressive practice, at a certain point in time, may later have become accepted as part and parcel of the canonized religion. It is the ray of light directed into the dynamic emergence of present life that enables us to distinguish between different levels of institutionalization and sort out those phenomena which are fit to be called folk religion. They are characterized by an ongoing negotiation with those forms of religion that are experienced as received and sacred. The practices usually classed as folk religious draw our attention to the interfaces of religion with magic, cult and charisma. Openness and change distinguish them. Their participants are involved in constant negotiations about their relevance and legitimacy. The present essay is rooted in the theoretical necessity to deconstruct much of the dichotomous thinking that conceives of a clear-cut separation of folk religion from the institutionalized forms of religion.

Scholarly treatments of the three religions of the book in Israel have dwelt at length and in depth on the historical connections and the phenomenological similarities between

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them. These are well known facts. Less known is perhaps the fact that the folk religious expressions of the three religions also show many parallels and correspondences.

The basic premise of folk religion in Israel takes into account the historical sacred geography of the country. The practices, beliefs and narratives related to various sites in the land are witness to the generative power of the holy energy of *numen*, which is reinforced by the power of a common historical experience and by shared myths. The allocation of Biblical, New Testamental or Quranic events and memories to certain locales in the country is to a great extent common to the different denominations. A concentrated example of this is the tomb of King David on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. All three religions revere the place, although they choose different points in time for their practices, as well as varied modes of veneration. Whereas Jews celebrate commemorative meals on Shavuot, the date of King David's death, Christians also revere the adjacent room of the Last Supper of the King's descendant, Jesus.

In other cases the space may be shared but the event or figure that is venerated on the spot may be different. Bethlehem is since ancient times a place in which sacred women's memory is worshipped. Jews commemorate there the untimely death of the matriarch Rachel, the beloved second wife of Jacob, at the birth of her son. Her tomb is situated just outside the city, on the road leading from Hebron to Jerusalem. From there, at the roadside, her presence has watched her offspring's wanderings in and out of Jerusalem, calling for heavenly mercy at times of plight. For Christians Bethlehem is the location of the most magnificent of miracles which ever happened, the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary. Her motherly look on the Infant is bestowed over millions in the whole world. Bethlehem has thus traditionally been seen as the city of holy mothers.

For Christians the obvious high point of the year in Bethlehem is Christmas, for each Christian church in its own date. Roman Catholics, Protestants, Greek Orthodox and Armenians have their own dates for celebrating the birth of the Savior. Jewish pilgrimage to Rachel's tomb is a quotidian matter and devoid of most signs of official religion. Women and men recite there canonized Psalms and prayers as well as individually articulated private wishes and anxieties. Red threads that have been tied around the sepulcher are later cut into smaller pieces and worn around the wrist to ensure the fulfillment of those wishes and the alleviation of anxieties.

Other biblical figures and events are specifically worshipped by one group and not shared by others. Thus Nebi Shu'eib, the shrine of biblical Jethro – the father-in-law of Moses –, is most revered by the Druse, whilst viewed by the others as interesting but not necessarily sacred.

For many generations Palestinian Arab local traditions have allocated folk religious values to a great number of tombs, trees, springs and mountains in the various parts of the country, from the Galilee to the southern part of the Mediterranean coast. These have been thoroughly studied by the great ethnographer Tawfik Canaan in numerous articles and books. The folk religious beliefs related to these sites vary from spirits and demons residing in them, to curative powers invested in them.

Jewish folk religious beliefs connected with localities in Israel display a complex historical consciousness. Next after the biblical stratum of narrative attributions, there are sites connected with events from the Maccabean and rabbinic eras. Those include the Wailing Wall around which in addition to normative prayers, rituals of the life cycle, and rituals of the year cycle, a specific custom of writing 'letters to God' and tucking them

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between the stones has developed through the ages. In its capacity of *Axis Mundi,* as the sole remnant of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, the place is understood to grant direct access to the Divine.

The same locale is for the Moslems the site of commemoration of the binding of Al-Buraq, the horse of the prophet Mohammed who ascended from there to heaven. This tradition too marks the spot as a direct opening of heaven. Such is the case also in the ancient rabbinic tradition according to which the heaven above Mount Moriah – the site of the Temple – was the point at which the angels who moved up and down on a ladder in Jacob's dream entered back into heaven.

Moslems and Jews alike revere Mount Moriah as the place where their common father Abraham was ready to fulfill God's order and sacrifice his son. For the Jews the son to be sacrificed was Isaac, for the Moslems Ismail. Only a short walk's distance away most Christians worship at the Holy Sepulcher the sacrifice of the Son of God. The tombs of the matriarchs and the patriarchs in Hebron constitute another such shared sacred territory, mainly for Jews and Moslems.

Accounts from late antique and medieval rabbinical texts as well as from medieval and early modern travelogues written by pilgrims tell about graves of various holy persons. In the sixteenth century Jewish mystics who studied and practiced Kabbalah mysticism lived in the town of Safed in the Upper Galilee. They also venerated the shrine of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai in adjacent Meron, as well as some other holy graves in the area and around the Lake of Galilee, the Kinnereth.

The shrine Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai in Meron has become the destination for the most popular pilgrimage for Jews in Israel. Masses congregate there for the holiday of Lag Ba-Omer in the spring. The date has traditionally been allocated as a break in the seven week long period of moderate mourning, practicing only a part of the customs of mourners, for the disciples of Rabbi Aqiva who were killed by a plague in the second century of the Common Era. The commemoration at Meron relates, however, to the assumed death date of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai.

The celebration at Meron comprises Jews of various ethnic groups, of European as well as of North African and Asian origin. Rituals concentrate around the shrine where prayers are recited. The peripheral activities mainly include the trimming of the hair of boys aged three who are thus initiated into the first discernible stage of their male identity. Ritual slaughtering of animals for food, and big meals also belong to the ceremonial behavior of the event.

The North African groups of Jews in Israel, and especially those who originate in Morocco, have played a dominant role in shaping the folk religious culture in present Israel. Jews in many lands of the Diaspora venerated holy tombs in their homelands. The Jews of Iraq and Iran had a wealth of sacred shrines of biblical figures, such as the prophets Ezekiel, Habakuk and Daniel, as well as Esther and Mordechai whose tombs are in the city of Hamadan in Iran. Many of these places were also sacred in the eyes of the Moslem majority population. North African Jews lived in close interaction with the evolvement of Moslem *maraboutism* which attributed great amount of *baraqa,* sacred energy and blessing, to the graves of holy men and in some cases of holy women. Numerous sacred graves were venerated by Jews in North Africa, some of the best known being the shrine of Rabbi Joseph Ha-Maaravi near Qabes in Tunisia, and the shrine of Moroccan Rabbi Yaakov Abouhatsira in Damhur in Egypt.

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A number of North African rabbis who led their communities in their immigration to Israel or who followed them, died in the new country and were buried there. The graves of some of them became sites of pilgrimage and veneration, such as the grave of Rabbi Hayyim Huri in Be'er-Sheva, and later of Rabbi Israel Abouhatsira in Netivot. The pilgrimage to the latter in early spring has grown in importance and is today second in size and fame only to the event in Meron mentioned above.

Following their immigration to Israel, predominantly in the early' fifties of the twentieth century, the North African Jews had a rich tradition of beliefs and narratives concerning their saints but almost no locations to practice the rituals connected with them. In the dynamic and fast development of Jewish society in Israel the Moroccan Jews especially, as other Jews from Arab countries, experienced relative disadvantage of status and cultural discrimination.

In the wake of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 sacred space earned a heightened role in public discourse. The primary interest of this discourse was directed at the sites associated with biblical narratives and figures on the then West Bank of the Kingdom of Jordan, today partly the territory of the emerging Palestinian State.

In parallel a number of Moroccan Jews began to experience revelations, mainly through dreams in which the saints of their former homeland appeared to them, instructing them to set up shrines for them in their private domains. The phenomenon was predominant in the so-called 'development towns', mainly situated in the periphery and characterized by many social problems, especially unemployment. Such sanctuaries are now functioning among other places in a neighborhood of Safed in the Galilee, in Bet-Shean in the Jordan Valley, and in Ashdod on the coast of the Mediterranean.

Some shrines coincide with saints' tombs revered by Moslems, and are identified with a sacred figure from the historical-mythological past. Such is the tomb of Dan, one of the patriarch Jacob's sons, near Bet-Shemesh in the mountains near Jerusalem. Another case of an ancient personage now revered in accordance with North African Jewish custom is Honi Ha-Meagel. This legendary figure from the first century of the Common Era, famous for his rain magic, is allegedly buried in the Galilean town of Hatsor, largely inhabited by immigrants from North Africa.

The rituals mostly associated with these shrines are the annual pilgrimages, usually commemorating the anniversary of the saint's death. In addition, the sites serve for individual prayer and pilgrimage in association with personal events, such as happiness and grief, but mostly in situations of dire need. Prayers for fertility, marriage partners and health are among the most frequent objectives for turning to a saint's power. But also slighter needs, such as lost objects, may be treated in this manner.

The saints' powers are often mediated through persons initiated in dreams in which they were told to erect a site in order to create a spatial representation of the holy person. The site thus reconnects the narratives and belief traditions of yore with a living practice of folk religion. The dreaming mediator or medium gains a privileged position in her or his community and may turn the care of the site into his or her main occupation.

The constituencies of folk religious practitioners and mediators often cross the borders of the official religions. Jews have been recorded to consult Moslem dream interpreters in the Bethlehem area. Moslem and Christian individuals in situations of distress do not shun a visit to a Jewish shrine, not necessarily even one with an Arab substratum.

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The worship of saints in Israel has been studied broadly and systematically by a number of noted Israeli anthropologists and folklorists, among them Issachar Ben-Ami, Yoram Bilu, Harvey Goldberg and Alex Weingrod.

In addition to the covering of the Holy Land with immigrated sacred space, mainly of Moroccan origin, folk religion in Israel today also contains a clearly diasporic constituent. The numerous adherents, many of them in Israel, of the late Rabbi Shneeurson of Brooklyn, the Lubavitscher Rebbe, who was the head of the Habad Hassidic movement which had its roots in East Europe, still direct their thoughts to his mansion in New York. A fraction of the movement's members hold it true that the rabbi is not really dead, or that he will soon perform a second coming.

Another fast growing Orthodox movement with distinguished folk religious practices is that of the Bratslav Hassidim, who worship the memory of the late Rabbi Nahman who lived in the eighteenth century. His grave in Uman in Ukraine already attracted his followers in the Soviet period, when they had to penetrate the Iron Curtain with ingenious methods. Today with the open borders and the rapid expansion of the Bratslav movement, the pilgrimages to Uman have attained the dimensions of mass tourism, including the emergence of a system of local hospitality for the visitors.

Initially at odds with the normative religious system, the various folk religious institutions have moved closer to the center of religious practices and authorities. The political efficacy of the folk religious phenomenon is considerable. Certain political parties have harnessed persons and objects related to folk veneration to gain more voters and public opinion. Folk religion is on the cutting edge of the crucial interaction between modernity and traditional society as it emerges in Israel today. Folk medicine, often but not always related to saint worship, proposes a frequent and significant competition, or addition, to conventional medicine. Folk practices constitute an alternative trajectory of gaining knowledge to the means of knowing through scientific and rational means.

In a situation of peaceful political relations between the peoples of the region the similarity and historical connections between the folk religious traditions of the adherents of the three major religions of the country, Jewish, Moslem and Christian, may create a common folk religious sub-culture. The future effects of such a development are naturally unforeseeable.

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