

Jew Age:
Jewish Praxis in Israeli New Age Discourse¹
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New Age phenomena are increasingly present and legitimated in Israel, although quantitative data are sparse. The origins of New Age phenomena in Israel may be located along an axis, ranging from shared global (Western) forms to home-grown cultural products. Analyses of selected qualitative data at the local level explore the various relational approaches between New Age and traditional Jewish praxis along a secondary axis, ranging from indifference and opposition to adaptation and preservation. Indicative examples from the field suggest that, at the margins of established Israeli identities, a new minority group identity, that is of a unique local character, is distinguishable: what may be termed “Jew Age”.

1. The New Age in Israel

In the course of its global spread, the New Age has not passed over Israeli society. During the last decade, New Age phenomena have grown strong in Israel, both in number and social standing; that is, in their legitimation. However, much in the same manner that the New Age has been late in arriving in Israel in comparison with Western countries, local scholarly research of it has also been delayed, and to date, very little has been published.²

In this paper, we shall explore the various origins of Israeli New Age, both imports from the West and local products. We focus on one significant local issue: the attitude towards binding Jewish practices – *halacha*, or Jewish law (which we define in this article broadly, to also include *minhag*, “custom”). After discussing the general New Age discourse in Israel, and in a similar manner to Kemp’s examination (2001) of the Christaquarian group – an etic category that is not used emically for self-identification, but as a useful analytical category – we suggest that a segment of this discourse be termed “Jew Age”. We believe this will shed light upon wider issues: Israeli society, the New Age and the nature of glocality.

Virtually no reliable quantitative data on the extent of Israeli New Age phenomena exists, but several examples can hint at both the extent and the penetration of these into the mainstream.³ A survey conducted in 2000 found that over a third of Israelis have used complementary and alternative medicine (“CAM”), and between 6,000 and 10,000 people enrol annually in colleges training CAM practitioners, colleges that had trained over 110,000 people by 1999 (Fadlon 2005: 28, 34; Ruah-Midbar 2006: 207).⁴ Each year dozens of New Age festivals take place, with the major festival drawing over 50,000 participants (Ruah-Midbar 2006: 144-146) – the size of an average Israeli town.

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The principal New Age magazines in the country, *Hayim Aherim*, (“Other Life”) and *Dereh Ha-Osher* (“Way of Bliss”) reported in 2007 that they had 12,000 and 15,000 subscribers, respectively. Many New Age books have become national bestsellers, among them the translated version of Robin Sharma’s *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* which sold 181,000 copies, and the Hebrew *Badulina* by Gabi Nitzan, which sold 150,000.⁵ Two political parties that are partially identified with New Age beliefs gained, jointly, over 90,000 votes in the 2006 parliamentary elections (about 2.8% of all valid votes), even though Israeli voters traditionally avoid parties with subject-specific agendas, fearing that their vote will go to waste.

The New Age in Israel is fed by imported phenomena from the West (particularly the United States), but also includes original, local creations. The imported phenomena include international lecturers visiting Israel, books sold in either the original language or translated into Hebrew (sometimes with minor adaptations to suit local tastes⁶), physical and cognitive training methods imported by Israelis who have studied them abroad, and more. The local phenomena can be divided into two groups – the first includes Israeli phenomena that lack unique local characteristics (i.e. they almost completely parallel non-Israeli New Age phenomena), while the other includes phenomena with a uniquely local flavour, whether Israeli, Jewish or both.

This last group includes, among others, New Age festivals that take place during Jewish holidays⁷ and a healing technique based on local Israeli plants. Local New Age texts are also concerned with context-specific themes, such as the special status of the Jewish People, or the ongoing confrontation with the Arab world. Other phenomena combine New Age ideas with Jewish ones, such as a Jewish form of Reiki, or the comparison of Kabbalistic doctrines detailing the relationship between the *Sfirot*⁸ and the human body with New Age doctrines dealing with the *Chakras*⁹ in the human body.

Describing the range between the global and the local in Israeli New Age may highlight the nature of New Age cultural products, as well as the characteristics of the local culture assimilating and processing these products. In order to examine this issue, we have assembled indicative cultural products that appear in the New Age public sphere, which are accessible to all Israelis (although, practically speaking, whose audience is almost exclusively Jews): articles published in public journals and newspapers, books, major web sites and interviews we have conducted with spiritual teachers.¹⁰

Before we move on to discussing the range between the global and the local in Israeli New Age, let us briefly present some theoretical conceptualizations related to globalization, as well as aspects specific to the Israeli context.

3. Local culture: Jewish Israeliness

Jewish praxis is a fertile issue to examine, both because of its significance in Israeli culture and its potential contradiction with several elements in New Age ideology. While Judaism – as we shall discuss shortly – emphasizes religious practices and law over faith, New Age largely supports the reverse. A famous American spiritual teacher in the global New Age, Neale Donald Walsch, sets forth the maxim “There’s nothing we have to do.” Walsch, speaking on behalf of God, continues (2003:362):

[...]top trying to use “doingness” to solve your problems, but rather, move to, and come from a state of being which would cause your experience of those “problems” to disappear, and the conditions themselves to thus evaporate.

In addition to the New Age’s objection to placing behaviour over belief (here termed “doingness” and “being”), it is also averse to binding law (or creed)¹², and calls for personal choice in lifestyle, obligations and beliefs. Israeli society, however, is saturated with perceptions of its Jewish origin, which is based upon an encompassing system of binding religious law: *halacha*.

There are other unique characteristics of Israeli society that derive, in part, from the Jewish nature of the state of Israel, such as the tendency to maintain cultural and ethnic distinctions. Still other characteristics originate from historical, sociological and political contexts. Firstly, Israeli society is composed of traditional and conservative forces on the one hand, and progressive, secular, and rational forces that crave globalization, on the other. Secondly, both of these forces – especially their disposition towards cultural isolation or openness – are not only affected by religion, but also by a collective cultural consciousness of victimhood – the result of years of anti-Semitic persecutions culminating in the Holocaust. A third factor is the commonly held perception of threat shared by the citizens of a country engaged in an ongoing military dispute with its neighbours (see, for example, Yuchtman-Yaar 2002). All of these factors can impede the absorption of global influences into Israeli society, and thus should be taken into account when examining the penetration of global New Age culture into the local scene.

This picture, already complex as it is, should be augmented by two further factors. The first is the dynamic and unstable nature of Israeli culture, and specifically, the decrease in the dominance of the Zionist meta-narrative over the last two decades (Kimmerling 2001; Ram 2007) and the weakening of cultural and economic centralism (Shafir & Peled 2000). The other factor is the variety of groups that make up Israeli society, the product of massive immigration waves from around the world: North Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, North American and more. The classic division of the social sciences (as well as in public opinion) between ultra-Orthodox, modern/Zionist Orthodox, traditional Jews and the secular, has come under much public and scholarly dispute as of late,¹³ as it fails to capture the social and cultural complexity in attitudes towards religion in general, and *halacha* in particular. These

two factors take part in reshaping Israeli collective identity, as well as the identities of various groups within this collective. One of the groups whose identity is being re-forged is the hegemonic, secular group. At the same time as the hegemonic narrative with which they have been identified is on the decline, members of this secular group have turned to the New Age – of which they compose the majority of adherents.

Examining attitudes towards *halacha* (which is identified mostly with non-hegemonic groups in Israel) in the glocal discourse of the Israeli New Age provides us with a good vantage point from which to examine the issues of localism versus globalism, secularism versus religiosity and tensions of values in Israeli society. Next, we shall describe and demonstrate attitudes towards *halacha* in Israeli New Age discourse, which can be placed on an axis stretching from indifference to the complete embrace of traditional Jewish law. This axis parallels the global/local axis, and also reflects the distinctions between various Israeli identity groups. Finally, we shall assess the nature of glocalised Israeli New Age, and its cultural and social implications.

Judaism, as a praxis-oriented religion, is set apart from the dominant religion of the West, Christianity. The practical observance of *halacha* binds every observant Jew, and is at the core of religious Jewish identity, with faith-oriented laws forming only a minor part of the codex, and even then to be usually expressed through some form of practice (such as declarations of faith). To a large extent, the nature of one's Jewishness is determined – by the individual, the community and the religious establishment – by the practices one performs, and not by one's beliefs. Because of its visibility, *halacha* is one of the major criteria used to distinguish between various Jewish groups and movements around the world – especially in Israel.

Over the years, many *halachic* schools have developed within the Jewish world, and have produced a variety of *halachic* corpora. These reflect distinctions between denominations or communities differentiated by such factors as history, ethnicity, geography, ideology and more. Thus, a prominent characteristic of the *halachic* discourse has always been a culture of dispute (*tarbut ha'mahloket*); that is, a norm of dispute between differing opinions on interpretations of various elements (or details) of *halacha*.¹⁴

Halachic corpora also distinguish between various degrees of Jewish praxis – mostly between those less and more binding. As this distinction is uncommon in Israeli public and New Age discourses (which are mostly secular), we include within *halacha* – usually a word marking practices considered binding in any case – also practices termed *minhag* (lit. “custom”) which are limited in their validity: in other words, we discuss all practices perceived as originating from Jewish law.¹⁵

As the major figures in Israeli New Age scene are secular, a few words about the status of *halacha* among the secular are in order. The Zionist ethos upon which the state of Israel was founded was, to be sure, Jewish – but it was no less modern, Western and secular. Hence, while the Israeli public sphere was shaped in such a

manner that even the secular public is acquainted with many Jewish laws and traditions that belong to the *halachic* corpora,¹⁶ this acquaintance tends to be superficial and folkloristic.¹⁷ Thus, while the *halacha* is perceived as “religious,” the Jewish practices performed by secular Israelis are often perceived as “national.”

Let us demonstrate this phenomenon with the *Sabbath* (Saturday), the traditional Jewish day of rest. The Jewish nature of Israel is reflected in public institutions (schools, government offices, public transportation, etc) being closed on the Sabbath. Most of the population doesn't work on the Sabbath, and private shopping centres have legal limitations regulating their operation. All of this has three major implications on the way the secular public perceives the Sabbath. First of all, much criticism is raised on what is perceived as “religious coercion” (a much repeated phrase in the secular discourse) and an unethical intrusion of the religious establishment in both politics and private matters. Secondly, a superficial understanding of *halachic* practice ensues, as the secular Israeli is only exposed to practices taking place within the public sphere, but is left ignorant of both the logic behind these practices and its manifestations within the private sphere. Thirdly, the logic behind practices associated with the Sabbath becomes translated (or even invented) by secular Israelis into values they can identify with, such as social rights and welfare (e.g. a mandatory day of rest will prevent employers from forcing their employees to work seven days a week), or culture (e.g. a day dedicated to reading books or going to the theatre). Often, suggestions on how to improve the observance of the Sabbath rules is raised by the secular public – but only in light of these secular values, and not in accordance to *halachic* logic.

4. Attitudes towards *halacha* in Israeli New Age discourse

The situation described above causes a paradox in regard to spiritual-religious identity and praxis among New Agers in Israel – who are mostly secular. These secular New Agers are hostile towards *halacha* and what they perceive as its orthodox logic: a religious community and establishment following a total and detailed prescription as to how to live. On the other hand, as detailed above, they do maintain some form of Jewish praxis, and when secular New Agers are interested in exploring or deepening their religious-spiritual identity in a Jewish manner, the path that most naturally lends itself is through the *halacha*.¹⁸ Thus, upon its arrival in Israel, the New Age encounters a local characteristic substantially different from those prevalent in other Western societies, which are Christian in origin.¹⁹ As *halacha* offers a connection to religion based on praxis rather than dogma, the encounter between Israeli New Age and Jewish identity – be it confrontational or approving – will become manifest through the attitude towards *halacha*. Concurrently, while Israeli New Agers will approach Judaism through *halachic* angles, their increased interest in religion (stemming from their New Age activities) will also bring them to perceive Jewish praxis as a spiritual activity much in the manner of New Age spirituality.

This insight will have bearing on the local manifestation of the global New Age criticism towards religious establishments. While in Christian societies this criticism focuses on objections to dogmatism and religious mediation, in Israel the emphasis is on the perceived totalistic, systematic and bureaucratic nature of religion. These differing perceptions of religion and of the religious establishment will also be reflected in the opposite case, that of approval: an Israeli New Ager who wishes to strengthen his religious-spiritual identity will do so in practical terms, while a Christian New Ager will lean towards faith-based terminology.

To demonstrate: in his criticism of religious establishments,²⁰ the Israeli channel Ilan Aviv stresses the “particular path” and the “commandments” while downplaying issues of faith (that are only implied by the word “truth”):

The truth resides in the heart of every person and cannot exist in a book or any other external source.

Religions have offered believers one particular path, through which they'll find “the thing” they miss most and crave.

Religions promise people assured results after fulfilling “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” commandments, and in fact sell a false sense of security.

Another example is the words of the Israeli channel Shelly (pseudonym), who criticizes the religious establishment and offers a spiritual alternative she deems superior. Her main criticism is towards what she sees as orthodox *halacha*'s demands for rigidity, obedience and practice (doing), and the alternative she suggests involves development and a personal path:

Nothing is permanent, and people look for something that is permanent. That's the problem, that's what I think brings about idolatry. The search for stability. “What? Give me a permanent God, give me a law. Give me something I know [...] won't change all of the time - because I lack the strength to deal with any more changes”. Okay? And this belief of growth, of development, it's a free belief. A liberal belief. The more common belief is a belief of obedience. Okay? So when you talk with me about religions you're talking with me about a form of obedience. [...] Telling a child, “Don't pee your pants,” that's a form of obedience. He obeys, and in the long run it's for his own good. But it's a form of obedience. [...] I think a process of personal growth can't exist in obedience. Obedience can only take you to a pre-determined place. You're being measured according to a determined scale.

This example expresses opposition to *halacha*, and can be placed close to one end of the axis of possible attitudes towards *halacha* in the inter-cultural encounter between Israeli society and the New Age. Close to the opposite end of the axis is situated an attitude of renewal or adaptation of *halacha* within a New Age framework (*figure 2*). As opposed to these two options, both hybrid products of the inter-cultural encounter

(Nederveen Pieterse 1995), at the extreme ends of the axis are two non-hybrid attitudes – one being indifference towards *halacha* and a complete embrace of the global New Age culture, the other, preservation of the orthodox *halachic* praxis and its complete embrace (with or without slight New Age nuances).²¹

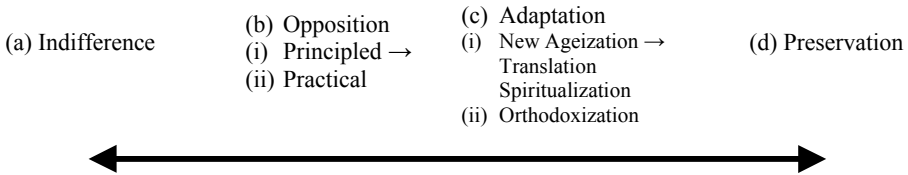


Figure 2: Attitudinal Axis: Possible attitudes towards *halacha* in Israeli New Age

4(a) Indifference

Empirically, the relative weight of each of the four attitudes depicted above is far from equal: most of the New Age discourse in Israel is characterized by indifference towards *halacha*.²² This derives from the secular public's encounter with *halacha*, which may be frequent, but also not driven by personal choice, and lacking significant meaning. The encounter is such a commonplace and trivial one as to become almost "transparent." The attitude of indifference is widespread since most of those turning to New Age spirituality are secular, members of a public for which *halacha* does not supply significant content for the formation of spiritual identity (at the very least, this is the case before they turn to spiritual seeking). More importantly, New Age spiritual seekers testify that they prefer values such as personal choice, spontaneity and universalism which they perceive as contradicting the orthodox *halachic* logic. For the same reason, the opposite end of the axis, *halachic* preservation (to be discussed below), is also marginal in New Age discourse.

Among New Agers in Israel, some refer to Jewish and *halachic* issues more and some less, but the majority do not refer to them at all. Very few, located at the margins of the discourse, make them their focus. The spiritual content of this discourse, it appears, is based more on extra-Jewish and global sources than on local ones. In the course of this article we will focus on the segment of the attitudinal axis (figure 2) ranging from opposition to adaptation, but we must make it clear in advance that the phenomena discussed within this segment make for a minor portion of Israeli New Age.

4(b) Opposition

Opposition to *halacha* within Israeli New Age discourse can be divided into two central types: (i) the stronger Principled opposition, and (ii) the milder Practical opposition.

Principled opposition might be aimed at various perceived aspects of *halachic* Judaism. For instance, Shelly's words above express an opposition to what she terms "idolatry": prescriptivity, permanence and obedience in the religious realm. Similarly, Ilan Aviv expresses²³ a common secular Israeli theme of opposition to "religious coercion," which he contrasts with the spiritual emphasis on freedom and personal choice:

My message to all religions is clear: "remove your control and reveal the truth to all men as they are all created in His image which is an infinity of light, freedom and love. Inflexible rules are for those who fear this freedom and for rulers, the time has come for peace and love – every man doing whatever is good in his own eyes."²⁴

Aviv also criticizes²⁵ the particular and segregated identity *halachic* behaviour creates, preferring a universal and global identity:

Some people reach the erroneous conclusion that the Jewish people are the most exalted and the gentiles are inferior, and this is an idea that comes from total ignorance and a lack of understanding of our spiritual role as a Jewish people.²⁶ [...] The creator is one love, and division is for man alone. Were it that we would love without barriers of religion, gender and race!

Another Israeli channel, Shai Tubali, brings²⁷ the words of an entity called 'The Buddha of Orion – The Representative of the Galactic Creators', which perceives, according to an evolutionary logic, Judaism and *halacha* as redundant. He explains (in a manner similar to the Pauline attitude) that Christianity – itself now obsolete – has already abolished the necessity for the legal limitations Judaism has placed:

It is important that you understand why we created Judaism in the first place. [...] The objective was to reach a level of abstraction in the perception of divinity. [...] In order to establish a stable relationship with this abstract and external perception of divinity, we used what is known here as the Bible, which is to us a book of codes and ciphers we have worked upon extensively.

[...] But what seemed so tidy and nice in the days of Moses fell into complete ruin with the coming of Jesus. [...] Jesus began speaking of the connection with that external perception of divinity as a connection based on love. And love, as is well known, has no rules, has no frameworks, has no limitations and has no patterns.

Practical opposition expresses a partial identification with the religious-*halachic* logic, and contends itself with criticism of its orthodox version. Practical opposition comes in various degrees of harshness. The harshest version is similar to the evolutionary approach mentioned above, but is milder in tone: it recognizes *halachic* Judaism as a form of positive spiritual seeking, but also presents this form as

outdated and inferior to the New Age version of the spiritual quest. For instance, the channel Adi (pseudonym) has this to say:

In my opinion it's very sad if someone needs religion. [...] When you're a baby and you can't control your body wastes, you need a diaper. But it's terribly sad if at the age of 40 you'll still walk around with a diaper. [...] Everything has its time. I think humanity has already grown up. It doesn't need diapers. [...] If someone steals and murders, he also won't be religious, and if a religious person does this, it's even sadder, ten times as sad, it only shows how unnecessary religion is, how it doesn't help in his case.

We can see that practical opposition based on an evolutionary approach sees the *halacha* as a tool applicable only to a lower level of spiritual development. This tool is aimed at positive spiritual goals (such as preventing one from murdering and stealing), but a developed spiritual person does not need the inflexible *halachic* code. Furthermore, not only does the *halachic* tool fail to guarantee spiritual achievements, sometimes it does not even assure minimal practical results.

Practical opposition also appears in a version less hostile to religion and religious people. The anger and hate typical of the secular discourse in Israel are replaced in this case with a softened attitude – arrogance is maintained, but *halachic* Judaism's contribution to spiritual development is acknowledged. Let us quote Adi again, this time reinterpreting the orthodox approach in light of her own spiritual experiences:

I've become much softer. Once I really hated religious people, I couldn't stand it when someone came over to hand me a brochure or something, or [put it] on my car. [...] Today I'm much softer, and I say, okay, to each his own. I can understand them more. Once there was no place in my life for God, angels. Today, when I'm familiar [with them], I say that the difference isn't so big after all, only they live in a sort of framework that's very tight and clear – do this, don't do that – where the laws are clear.

In her closing words, Adi singles out the *halachic* aspect as the main (perhaps the only) aspect separating her from religious Jews. As we can see, both types of practical oppositions – the evolutionary as well as the softened versions – assume the existence of spiritual degrees, where traditional religiosity is perceived as occupying a lower rung than New Age. However, the amount of criticism towards this lower rung changes among the versions – some will see traditional religion as an obsolete option, others will acknowledge its limited relevance (for inferior people, for instance).

Other voices express criticism of the religious establishment²⁸ and not of the idea of *halacha*, which is perceived as a legitimate and even welcome tool, though not in the manner used by the orthodox establishment. One of these voices can be found in a book by Zeev Aviraz (2002:93), a channel expressing the objection of the archangel

Raphael to the establishment's attempt to impose the *halacha* as the only alternative, thus preventing personal choice:

Prayers as well as commandments are a tool for connecting to the light. As the truth is one and there is no other, no level of connection a person can perform in order connect to the light is invalid. The tools of commandments and prayer are a gift man in [the *sfira* of] *Malchut* has received from the Creator. Using them in their precise form gives a person the tools to experience the light, receive it and use it. But there is no impediment to a person using other tools that according to his feeling and understanding are proper tools to bring about the same connection that the tools of prayers and commandments provide. [...] By forcing a person to choose only the tools of prayer and commandments, you create in him an internal opposition to this coercion. After all, it is obvious that prayers and commandments performed not out of love of the Creator and an understanding of their purpose are invalid and worthless, and cannot help a person performing them in this manner to develop his connection to the Creator.

The end of this text presents an attitude towards commandments prevailing in Israeli New Age discourse: that there is no merit in performing commandments without proper understanding and intent, which are perceived as the essence of the commandments (and sometimes even as a substitute to actually keeping them). This attitude is very different than the prevailing one in the classical *halachic* discourse: while the issue of whether commandments require intent or not is under debate in *halachic* corpora, in the case of practically fulfilled commandments (as opposed to orally fulfilled ones, such as prayer) it is usually sufficient to carry out the practical aspects of the commandment, without measuring its religious or spiritual influence on internal states (faith, intent, understanding, feeling, etc). However, an emphasis on these internal aspects is more prominent in Kabbalistic *halachic* texts, and, in fact, New Age discourse conforms to the spirit of these Kabbalistic texts.²⁹

Even the New Age neo-Orthodoxy in Israel, a marginal group within New Age discourse, sometimes finds itself along the axis as expressing opposition to *halacha*, and this on the basis of a harsh criticism of the religious establishment. Rabbi Mordechai Gafni, formerly one of the leaders of Jewish Renewal in Israel, expresses³⁰ – much like the secular Aviraz – criticism of the religious establishment, but to his objection to religious coercion he adds criticism of the religious establishment's involvement in politics, and its preoccupation with technical and insipid matters:

Judaism should be released from all establishments. Establishments are a desecration of God's Name. If buses are required to drive on the Sabbath for the non-orthodox majority, then let there be buses. And if the needs of this majority require civilian matrimones³¹, civilian matrimones should exist. And if homosexuals and lesbians want to live together in love, then matrimones between them should exist. Only if we let go of all the bonds of

the religious establishments, Judaism can compete freely in the market of ideas, without covering itself with bureaucratic superiority. [...]

The main issue all of the major Rabbis are dealing with now, whether tuna is a *kosher* fish or not, is not – to me – an essential Jewish question. An essential Jewish question is a question that shapes life.

Of all of the examples presented above, Gafni represents a slim margin of the Israeli New Age that express a true interest in the orthodox version of *halacha*. Even though he shares the New Age criticism of *halacha* and the religious establishment, he is hoping for a *halachic* revolution within the establishment; whereas others do not see it as a (potential) part of their spiritual world. At the same time, Gafni sees himself – unlike the other speakers – as part of the religious world, and so seeks to save *halacha* by having it revised by the religious establishment so as to express significant content. The approaches opposing *halacha* usually show an interest in the *halachic* world so marginal it borders on indifference. Gafni, on the other hand, deals with the possibility of combining New Age spirituality with *halacha*, and so brings us closer to our next category along the axis – adaptation.

4(c) Adaptation

If we take another look at our axis, we can see that the further we move from the ends, the hybrid aspect of the cultural products becomes more pronounced, and the need arises to identify the various cultural ingredients and their measures in the final mixture. We call the most hybrid segment in the inter-cultural encounter between Israeli secular Judaism and the New Age on the issue of *halacha* “Adaptation,” as it is a process that combines values and ideas from different cultural fields.

Analytically, there are two extremes to the possible hybrid products expressing an adaptation of *halacha* and New Age, and in each one the final ‘compound’ is shaped by one culture more than the other. It would also have been possible to present a median category (which could have been called “Combination”) comprised of cultural products in which the *halacha* and the New Age exist contiguously without one being considered superior to the other. In these cases, no contradiction or tension between the two cultures exists. However, in order to study the Israeli New Age’s attitude towards *halacha*, it is more productive to examine the products expressing value-based judgments – and we shall open with such examples – which are, in any case, more prevalent.

One of the most productive methods of identifying the cultural encounter and the ingredients of the finished product is through an explicit clash between values identified with the different cultures. Let us present two examples of this clash of values relating to a *halachic* issue, both taken from a book in which the “Ari”³² is channeled through Shula Israeli. Following each, we shall offer generalizations on common interpretive strategies in this discourse, and the methods of cultural value decisions. The first example deals with the commandment forbidding the

consumption of leavened food during the holiday of Passover, which is presented as being in conflict with the value of personal liberty.

Nature has a new nativity, beginning with the spring and representing liberty and freedom. It was not a coincidence that the spring was chosen as the time for the exodus of the people of Israel from the yoke of slavery in Egypt, as this is a nativity for the whole universe – the entire Hall of Creation! At that moment, the freedom of choice gained a meaning in time and space! Thus, a full circle has been circumnavigated by the leading people, the spearhead for all of the peoples of the land, the Hebrews – the people of Israel, that came into freedom during spring, heading for independence in their homeland, the land of Israel!

If they have not left Egypt at that time, they would have had to wait a whole year until the next spring. And so, before they and their slavers change their mind, they did well in taking their few possessions and hastening to leave. During this haste they baked the *matzot* [unleavened bread] as provisions for the road and in order to commemorate this important moment: of deciding and executing, [and] since then and up to this very day – we are meticulous in eating *matzot*!

And if you asked [before] “Is it necessary to be meticulous in avoiding the consumption of leavened food during the holiday of Passover?” I will tell you this: extreme meticulousness is not necessary! But it is certainly important to continue this commemoration of the eating of the *matzah*! Because this is the commemoration of freedom and the exodus into freedom that are the true meaning and the kernel of what is most important to people and to the whole of humanity! And the leading Jewish people, they must be very meticulous in preserving the freedom of choice given by G-d! (Israeli 2004:168)

Firstly, the nature of the Passover holiday arising from the text corresponds with the secular Israeli way of celebrating the holiday: emphasizing the renewal of nature during spring and the idea of national independence. These subjects came to characterize Passover at the inception of Zionism³³ – which sought to bring the Jewish people back to their homeland, establishing agricultural communities and an independent national regime. Secular Zionism’s emphasis on Judaism as a national – rather than religious – identity is also expressed in the text, in the marked absence of *halachic* and faith-oriented meanings of Passover (such as the removal of leavened bread from the house on the eve of Passover, the stories of the parting of the Red Sea and the ten Plagues of Egypt, God’s role as Israel’s saviour etc).

Secondly, even though the text does not ignore the tension between two practical and principled alternatives, both are presented as Jewish options: observing the commandment forbidding the consumption of leavened foods, or observing the value of freedom that is the essence of Passover, the holiday of liberty. That the speaker is

– ostensibly – a Jewish religious authority,³⁴ the Ari, makes this presentation of both values as equally Jewish (while still opposed) plausible.

In Jewish tradition, Passover is presented as the holiday of liberty in different manners: historically (Israel's exodus from Egypt), socially (freedom from slavery), nationally (independence) and personally (the free individual). Despite this variety of approaches, presenting personal liberty as being in conflict with the observance of the commandments is almost unheard of in traditional texts.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) pointed out that traditions renew themselves by dredging up materials from the wide reservoir of preserved tradition, “reviving” ideas and texts that were “dormant” in order to legitimize renovations in the living culture – a living culture that cannot help but “forget” parts of the huge reservoir of preserved tradition. In the discourse we are examining, the criterion for choosing which materials will be “revived” out of the preserved tradition is their correspondence with New Age cultural values.

We find that the text performs a double manoeuvre in presenting personal freedom as a Jewish value clashing with another Jewish value, that of not consuming leavened foods. First, it “revives” a known Jewish idea about the connection between Passover and freedom (including personal freedom). In this manner, the New Age value of personal empowerment and freedom of choice is presented as a natural ingredient in the cultural make up of Jewish *halacha*. The text then uses the ambiguous nature of the word “freedom” in order to depart from the word's accepted meaning in the context of Passover and into different, contemporary and New Age-oriented meanings, without the latter being perceived as foreign cultural elements. In this manner, the text casually binds the exodus of the Jewish people to national liberty (the common meaning of the festival of liberty in Zionism) with personal freedom of choice (an existing, yet marginal, meaning in the Jewish tradition; a substantial value in New Age culture) applied also in the *halachic* realm (which is already an interpretive innovation).

This interpretive strategy enables the author to present the rejection of the importance of the prohibition of consuming unleavened bread as not only plausible, but also as spiritually and religiously superior. The prohibition is presented as a symbolic practice meant to commemorate the value of freedom, and so it becomes obvious that when the two clash – the value supersedes the symbolic practice, as the value is the goal and the practice the means. This enables the presentation of the “*halachic*” innovation as “meticulous preservation” of the commandments, which is to say, as superior religious behaviour: preserving the commandment means abstinence from leavened foods, but preserving the commandment *meticulously* means annulling this abstinence.

Another example (Israeli 2004:84-85) deals with the nature of the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur, and deals with the tension between the most prominent feature of this

holiday, a twenty-four hour fast, and the spiritual-religious principle of avoiding asceticism:

During the Day of Atonement, the gates of Heaven are more open than ever [...]. Hence, you will do well if during the Day of Atonement you will sit with your families and enjoy the holiness of this day. You will do well if you go to the synagogues and there express a genuine prayer, coming from within the heart and soul. Praise the Lord for all there is, and ask for all the good you can imagine! [...] Do no torment yourselves! Love the Day of Atonement, sanctify it, love yourselves, love the members of your family, town and homeland. Love each other! Go outside, celebrate the sanctity of life, with all the good your heart knows! [...]

Presumably, you will want to know about the fast of this day, and as I have said in the beginning of my words: do not torment your body on this day of all days. Eat lightly so that your happiness and thanksgiving in this day is amplified, without unnecessary asceticism. Asceticism, brings about unnecessary anger, evil and suffering in life, and does not bring about any form of atonement for bad deeds. This is not how our G-d wishes to see us, as He comes entirely from love.

If you wish to fast – it is better that you do so on another day, when you give a break to your digestive system, for the health of the body and its Holy Temple.

Be healthy! Be joyous in life!

Here, as well, the secular Israeli attitude to the Jewish holidays is apparent. The Day of Atonement is celebrated by this sector mostly as a family gathering, and occasionally with an exceptional visit to the synagogue, characterized by passive observance of the proceedings – as most secular Israeli are not familiar with the "rules of the game," including use of the prayer book. At least publicly, the entire country avoids driving a car and working on the Day of Atonement, and all Jews observe the fast.³⁵ As this is the only day of the year in which all public and private institutions and businesses are closed, it is regarded as particularly spiritual and religious even by the secular public.

Thus, even though the secular are familiar with the holiday and they understand the day is of special spiritual significance, their familiarity is folkloristic in nature and characterized by ignorance of religious traditions in general and *halacha* in particular. This is also true of the text above, and this ignorance allows it to present the idea of asceticism as contradictory to the nature of the holiday, and offers joy as a suitable substitute, in spite of explicit religious sources that command afflicting the soul during this day.³⁶

In effect, the text assumes this to be a spiritual day, and debates which of three alternatives is the most suitable to mark such an occasion. The possibility of asceticism (including fasting) as a spiritual path is suggested and then rejected as lacking spiritual merit, destructive to virtuous behaviour and against God's wishes. The possibility of fasting as a spiritual path is also raised (although certainly not as an obligatory one) so long as it does not involve self-affliction, but is aimed at physical health. The third alternative for celebrating the spirituality of the day is the one recommended: an experience of love and a celebration of the sanctity of life. The first alternative is, in fact, the classical Jewish manner in which the Day of Atonement is commemorated, and it includes the fast as one of the afflictions demanded by *halacha*. The concept of a divine requirement for self-affliction as a path of atonement and spiritual development clearly contradicts the New Age spirit and its perception of God as loving and benevolent. The final alternative, however, is clearly in the spirit of the New Age. Even though the concepts of love, the sanctity of life and bodily pleasures are not unusual in Jewish texts, they are not the ones typically used in the context of the Day of Atonement, and – at least partially – contradict its very nature.

As we can see, in this text the Day of Atonement has become distinctly New Age in spirit. Apart from the motifs already mentioned, a New Age approach to *halacha* can be identified in the emphasizing of free choice (*should* one fast) and personal variations (when to fast and to what degree). Furthermore, the traditional *raison d'être* of the commandment – fasting as an ascetic expression – is replaced by an understanding of the fast as a way to achieve physical health.

The interpretive deviation from the holiday's precepts is more pronounced here than it was for Passover. In both cases, however, the interpretive technique brought about annulment of a commandment in the name of a principle supposedly underlying it: for Passover – the prohibition of the consumption of leavened foods was interpreted as expressing the value of liberty; for the Day of Atonement – the fast was interpreted as expressing a way to spiritual advancement. In *halachic* corpora it is not unusual to find annulment of commandments in the name of principles and values considered the cause of these commandments as well as superior to them, but the secular-Jewish New Age interpretation is less restricted than those of all previous generations. This is because of two characteristics that separate this interpretation from classic writers in *halachic* corpora: the first being lack of knowledge, the second lack of commitment to tradition, the religious establishment and *halacha*.

In both of the aforementioned examples, values typical to *halachic* Judaism were presented as opposed to dominant values in the New Age culture (although all of these were presented as Jewish values), and in both cases the latter were preferred. In spite of the New Age's "victory" in the encounter with traditional Judaism, it is important to mention that engaging in *halachic* considerations on the basis of new (or "foreign") cultural values is not a novelty in Jewish *halachic* corpora. This being the case, and while these examples present innovative content, they are not based on a new interpretive strategy: presenting new values as Jewish is a known traditional

technique, and thus, to use Gadamarian terminology, a technique the New Age chooses to “revive” from Jewish tradition – another local feature of Israeli New Age. Let us outline this technique: first, it is possible to “trace” the new cultural values within the existing plethora of Jewish corpora. For instance, in the case of a New Age interpretation for the Day of Atonement, it would have been possible to mention that the holiday is already presented as a “Festival” in the *Mishnah* (tractate *Ta’anit* 4:8), and an attempt to persuade people to avoid ascetic behaviour during holidays is already present in Nehemiah (8:9-12).

Secondly, shifting the focus to the principle behind *halacha* enables one to change the religious practice, and even to cancel the commandment altogether. The underlying principle allowing for this kind of *halachic* ruling can be the *raison d’être* of the commandments (in Hebrew, *ta’amy ha’mitzvot*)³⁷, or a “meta-*halachic*” principle expressing the moral foundation of the *halachic* world, which can override any specific commandment in case of a contradiction between the two. Meta-*halachic* principles made drastic changes possible in the history of *halacha*. For example, the principle “Her ways [i.e. the Torah’s] are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17) enables (and even obligates) the annulment of commandments threatening – according to a *halachic* adjudicator – the peace; and the principle “We make no decree upon the community unless the majority are able to abide by it” (Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Avodah Zarah*, folio 36a) enables (and even obligates) the annulment of commandments the adjudicator believes will not be followed by the majority of the congregation.³⁸ In fact, the texts presented above place the New Age values as the *raisons d’être* of the commandments, or assume they are Jewish meta-*halachic* principles, only they do not make the effort of phrasing this in traditional language.

As the aforementioned examples have demonstrated, in texts presenting a clash between traditional Jewish values and values that deviate from the classic Jewish interpretation but express the New Age spirit – the latter emerge triumphant. Furthermore, even in other cases, where the *halacha* is discussed without a clash of values being expressed, one can recognize a tendency to what may be termed the “New Ageization” of the *halacha*. In these cases, Jewish religious practices are translated, understood, rephrased or legitimized with the use of a New Age discourse and logic.

One style of New Ageization of the *halacha* is “Translation” of religious and spiritual terms to New Age discourse. Examples abound in the description of the sanctity of objects, places and texts – and especially the explanations supplied for the *halachic* practices associated with them. For instance, the ritual reading of the Book of Psalms is explained in the New Age discourse³⁹ as “creating reality”, a means to “raise one’s vibrations” and produce a “change in the sub-cellular level” that brings about “evolutionary progress” and a possibility to “excite and open the heart”. Thus, the ritual reading is presented as “healing method” and a means to “magnetize” a quality of good living. The sanctity attributed to the Book of Psalms in the Jewish

tradition is translated in the New Age discourse as an “energetic cipher” or “energetic combinations” of the letters that compose psalms.

Likewise, New Agers validate the practice of placing phylacteries by claiming that it can improve a person’s spiritual level, and using a technology that allows “aura photography,” they have confirmed that the aura’s composition changes while performing this practice.⁴⁰ Furthermore, a study of acupuncture identifying the pressure points of the phylacteries on the hand and forehead with acupuncture points of mental and spiritual significance is often quoted (Schram 2002:70). Even though the New Age validation of *halachic* practices allegedly strengthens their significance, in fact it removes them from their traditional context, thus weakening their binding nature. As a result, in the New Age discourse, Jewish practices are no longer presented with a recommendation to observe them in their traditional form (the placing of phylacteries, for instance, is not presented as a practice required every day during the morning prayer service).

Sometimes, the New Age translation of customs and binding practices even details the “proper” manner in which these should be followed. For instance, one can find discussions of the proper phrasing of rhetorical rituals (prayers, declarations of faith, blessings⁴¹ and so on) with the rules determined by the New Age’s spirit. For instance, Zohar (pseudonym) explained in one of her workshops how one should phrase a note containing a wish, placed within the Wailing Wall⁴²: the wish has to be personal; one should focus on the quality one seeks and not the means to achieve it (e.g. serenity and not money); the phrasing should use the present tense (“I am rich” and not “I want to be rich”) and one should be precise. However, the physical gestures traditionally associated with the placing of the note (e.g. not turning your back on the Wailing Wall) Zohar dismissed as insignificant.

Another manner of New Ageization of the *halacha* is through “Spiritualization” of practices; that is, the execution of commandments in the spiritual/mental realm rather than the practical/physical one. This tendency to spiritualize is surely an expression of New Ageization, though a similar tendency can be found in Jewish texts throughout the ages, especially in mystical schools of thought. However, there are several important differences. In Kabbalah, the spiritualization of a commandment expresses itself in a more systematic manner – in accordance with a certain paradigm that is applied to all of the commandments. New Age discourse, as we shall see, offers a form of spiritualization that is non-systematic and non-binding, but rather eclectic and contingent. Furthermore, spiritualization in Jewish (Kabbalistic or other) texts usually does not breach or cancel the practical *halachic* frame, but rather adds another dimension to it. Finally, while the tendency to substitute – rather than add – a spiritual dimension to the commandment is relatively rare in classic Jewish texts (Idel 1988), in the New Age discourse it is quite common.

Let us open with an example⁴³ of a spiritualized execution of a religious practice related to the Day of Atonement – people asking for forgiveness from each other before the holiday:

We will now perform a process of cleansing which will help us prepare for the holiday [...]

In your mind's eye see your father and examine which three wrongs you did to him and mark these down, ask for forgiveness for all you did and when you feel complete with this bless him.... do the same with your mother... now move on to your brothers and sisters and people you feel estranged from and angry with.

Do this also with the Lord and also with yourselves. [...]

If all of the attention during this day goes to activities and the contents become the activity itself and not the self examination, of [relationships] between people, between a person and himself, and between a person and his God, nothing happens.

This segment proposes that the request for forgiveness should be performed using guided imagery instead of an actual request for forgiveness from another person. Furthermore, the end of the segment emphasizes that spiritualized performance of the practice is superior to physically performing it. The spiritualized practice also weakens the social dimension of the *halachic* practice.

Another type of spiritualization leads, in fact, to the strengthening of *halachic* practices by making it possible to revive practices no longer performed (especially those dependent on the physical existence of the Temple in Jerusalem). For instance, in a guided imagery session led by Zohar several years ago at the foothills of the Temple Mount on the eve of the Feast of Weeks (*Shavu'ot*), the participants were asked to imagine themselves taking all that is good in their lives and presenting it as an offering of "first produce" to the high priest in the Temple. Thus, with the aid of guided imagery, it became possible to revive in the spiritual plane a biblical commandment that has not been performed for almost 2,000 years – the offering of first produce. The original time of the commandment is preserved (the Feast of Weeks) but the place (the Temple), the practice (a physical pilgrimage up the mountain) and the offering (first produce from the fields) have been spiritualized. As was to be expected, the commandment did not become a binding practice, in spite of its revival in this extended version: even though the creative spiritual experience of performing the commandment is in complete accord with the New Age spirit, its establishment within a systematic framework contradicts this spirit.

As we have demonstrated, spiritualization can bring about both the annulment of the actual practice of commandments or their partial revival. In other cases, spiritualization is not manifested only in the practical side of the commandment, but also in its theoretical side – meaning a spiritualization of the essence of the commandment takes place. In these cases, a new understanding of the commandment's essence usually brings about its abstraction, leading to the annulment of its practice and accepted meaning, and sometimes even its complete

rephrasing. A particularly common example uses the Ten Commandments as a paradigm of the *halacha* as a whole, and this in order to spiritualize the *halachic* framework and its concrete content. When the Ten Commandments are described as “cosmic codes” instead of *halachic* practices, it is easy to arrive at an interpretation satisfied in performing them according to their “inner essence which is love.”⁴⁴ Likewise, when the commandment of honouring your father and mother is understood as referring to the “cosmic” parents, practices that refer to the physical parents become unnecessary, as “The creator is the father and the divine wisdom [*binah*] is the great mother.”⁴⁵

In the two cases presented above – clash of values and New Ageization of the *halacha* – the New Age component turned out to be the dominant one in the hybrid product created by the inter-cultural encounter. In the third mode of adaptation, the end product is dominated by the Jewish-religious component, and so we propose to call it “Orthodoxization” of the New Age. These products can be found mostly in the Orthodox-New Age discourse (which should be distinguished from the neo-Orthodox Jewish Renewal).

Examples of “orthodoxized” products of Israeli New Age can be found in the presentation of the Jewish tradition using various New Age terms and practices (such as yin and yang, chakras, meditations and even “spirituality”), with the emphasis still distinctly remaining on orthodox, traditional practices. In other cases, we are dealing with traditional practices that match the New Age spirit, such as incorporating meditation or spontaneous dialogue with God into the prayers. In the context of *halacha*, we should mention the a-nomianistic⁴⁶ nature of many orthodoxized products; that is, highlighting Jewish practices that are not anti-*halachic* (antinomianistic), but are also not perceived as binding in conventional interpretations of the *halacha*. For example, there are products that emphasize adaptation of commandments related to prayers so that meditative elements are added to them – these do not contradict the *halacha*, but give it a New Age “flavour.”

It is important to mention that orthodoxized products are very marginal in Israeli New Age discourse (although they might seem prominent to Orthodox Jews), as they are considered – by orthodox Jews, not New Agers – foreign, and thus revolutionary elements, and sometimes even a threat to tradition.

4(d) Preservation

At the right hand side of our attitudinal axis (*figure 2*), we find the category of preservation, referring to cultural products expressing a full preservation of the *halacha* in its traditional versions, wearing a thin mask composed of New Age terms. Due to the external and superficial nature of the New Age elements in these products, it is hard to determine whether they should even be included in an analysis of Israeli New Age discourse. Often, the use of New Age elements in these products is both cursory and temporary, aimed at drawing “seekers” back to the fold of Orthodox Judaism. Thus, for instance, a lecture was advertised in New Age circles as

“A Return to Giving”, with the content actually dealing with “A Return to Giving Thanks to the Lord.”

Although cultural products in this category are often similar to those in the orthodoxization category, they can be distinguished both in the level of hybridity and the motivations behind their creation. Orthodoxization uses New Age terms (and sometimes ideas) in a relatively significant manner, as it emphasizes aspects of tradition that can be viewed as New Age-oriented. In opposition, preservation expresses a full convergence with the traditional approach towards *halacha*, with nothing but a change of vocabulary. The drive behind orthodoxization is a wish for real change – be it more or less profound – in traditional Judaism as well as in the New Age. The preservationists, on the other hand, are not interested in any form of change in Judaism, only in bringing secular Jews “back” to “authentic” Judaism with the claim that what they seek in New Age already exists, in a superior and more authentic manner, in their original religious identity.

5. Theoretical Summary and Interpretive Conclusions

In spite of the differences between the various theoretical categories which we have introduced, several motifs seem to dominate the discourse and reoccur in different forms. Let us describe the main characteristics of what can be labelled the “Israeli-New Age *halacha*” as it exists today. First, Israeli New Age tends to be lenient in *halachic* issues: limiting the purview of commandments, allowing their partial or symbolic execution and so on. Furthermore, there exists an obvious tendency to change, and even cancel, commandments. One can say that several tendencies already present in mystical Jewish schools – spiritualization and an emphasis on the internal aspect of praxis – appear again, in a new and unique guise, in the New Age discourse. Even though we also encountered the revival of commandments (or recommendations for acceptable substitutes and parallels to commandments), the general tendency is between anti-nomianism (i.e. an objection to *halacha* on limited and specific, or principled, grounds) and a-nomianism (i.e. indifference to *halacha*). Therefore, even suggestions for following a Jewish praxis are expressed in a manner expropriating from *halacha* its perceived character – totality, lack of personal choice, systematic regulation of all aspects of life, an emphasis on execution rather than intent and so on.

Let us return to our axis and detail the possible attitudes towards *halacha* in Israeli New Age discourse in light of the examples above. On the left end of the axis we find the category of Indifference: the lack of interest in *halachic* issues. To its right is Opposition, divided into Principled and Practical Opposition. Reoccurring themes in the expressions of Opposition – especially of the Practical kind – are an evolutionary approach which presents traditional religion (including the *halacha*) as inferior to New Age spirituality; criticism of the religious establishment, which is perceived as representing and creating the *halacha*; and alongside these, a softening of the secular hostility towards traditional religion and religious people stemming from the a sense of a common spiritual denominator.

To the right of Opposition on the axis appears the category of Adaptation. One of the central techniques with which to identify the composition of the adapted hybrid products is to locate a Clash of cultural values originating in two sources (or more). We found that when such a clash exists, New Age values overpower those of traditional *halacha*. The adapted products can be placed along a continuum that stretches from New Ageization of the *halacha* to Orthodoxization of the New Age. In products of the former type, where New Age components are more significant in the completed amalgam, we find a Translation of religious and spiritual terms to New Age discourse (whether via an explanation of the sanctity of religious artefacts or the description of the proper manner in which to perform commandments), and even a Spiritualization of the *halachic* commandments (in their mode of execution or understanding of their essence).

On the right end of the axis, beyond Orthodoxization, which is still in the Adaptation category, appears Preservation, in which category we find products that lack a genuine hybrid nature – products that actually express an orthodox perspective with New Age characteristics of a superficial nature.

Of the four main categories we offered on our axis, the most interesting and fertile was Adaptation; however, as mentioned previously, most of the discourse is characterized by Indifference – and there can be no doubt that the axis, rather than being balanced, leans heavily to the left: most hybridizations are of a clearly New Age-oriented nature. The left side of the attitudinal axis parallels the global end of the global-local axis, thus bearing witness to the mostly global nature of Israeli New Age discourse. These axes can also be collimated to the continuum of “classic” groups that compose Jewish Israeli society (in the religious context): secular, traditional, Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox. Most followers of New Age identify with the secular group, and so it is of little wonder that the axis leans towards Indifference to *halacha*. The further we move towards the right and Preservation, the more the secular identity is replaced by a traditional and even an Orthodox one (the number of New Age followers openly identifying with these latter groups is substantially smaller).

As we have applied them to the qualitative data on New Age in Israel presented above, these interpretive axes – global-local and attitudinal - may in this way shed light upon wider issues: (a) the nature of the glocality of Israeli New Age, and (b) group identities in Israeli society more generally. The final sections of this paper expand on these remarks.

5(a) Global and Local

On first sight, it would appear that the global nature of the Jewish-Israeli New Age derives from the strength of the global – even American – school in it. However, alongside the undisputed marginality of local aspects, it is important to remember that the audience for New Age in Israel is rather uniform in nature: most of it is composed of the secular middle class, a group already imbued with Western and

modern characteristics – characteristics that are originally secularized versions of Christian ideas.⁴⁷ This being the case, we can dismiss the claim that the major phenomena we have located in the encounter with the New Age culture – such as Opposition to *halacha* or Spiritualization – are created during the encounter, as these phenomena have existed in the secular Israeli public prior to this encounter. These old proclivities wear a new spiritual garb, as a result of the encounter with New Age culture, which is based upon a wide and well-formulated global cultural system. In other words, the scarcity of *halachic* motifs in Israeli New Age arises from their scarcity – in advance – in Israeli secular culture. Even though the global cultural products are minimally adapted to the tastes of the local audience, their initial appeal is their suitability – again, in advance – to certain groups in the local audience. This may also explain the limited penetration of New Age culture to certain traditional and Orthodox groups (at least for the time being).

As most of the producers of Israeli New Age discourse are secular, even in the case of products of a more hybrid nature, in which *halachic* aspects are integrated, these aspects represent the secular perception of the *halacha*. This perception is characterized by ignorance of the Jewish tradition, including the *halacha*, as well as by a folkloristic attitude towards it. The nature of Jewish practices in the lives of secular people – namely social values, the family, modernity and Zionism – is also expressed in the re-shaping of *halacha* in the New Age discourse.

In light of the above, we must join many researchers (e.g. Hammer 2001, Frisk 2001) in claiming that despite the pluralistic approach with which the New Age culture treats local cultures that it encounters, eventually its global nature overpowers the local in most cases – including that of Israel. Thus, for instance, Wouter Hanegraaff claims (2001:18-21) that eventually the New Age principle of Unity in Diversity leads to a certain cultural tyranny, and that in spite of the openness to the integration of different traditions and approaches that allegedly appears at the outset – there is no room for genuine innovations: the New Age sanctifies the right to choose, but accepts as legitimate only choices that are in line with its spirit. Hanegraaff adds that one could expect the New Age to praise the local spiritual traditions, but in fact it behaves like a missionary movement spreading a global Western-American message.

As mentioned above, the New Age in Israel is assimilated by a public already identified with Western-American globalism, so it is hardly surprising that Israeli New Age appears extremely global and barely displays characteristics identified with local traditional spirituality. In this sense, Hanegraaff is certainly correct. Furthermore, the marginality of hybrid products in the discourse, and the centrality of indifference to the local aspect we have examined – *halacha* – also give strength to Hanegraaff's claim about the global nature of the New Age in its local manifestations.

However, we must add a reservation. First, whereas the innovations we find may not be significant sociologically (at least, not at the moment), as only a small group is producing Adapted products of a unique “glocal” nature, on the level of ideas these

amount to an innovative and significant creation. These products are distinctly glocal, and do not reproduce the global New Age. Were they more widespread, they would bring about a significant change of both the New Age and Israeli-Jewish identities. Secondly, these Adapted products (as opposed to Preservation products) raise no antagonism in most Israeli New Age followers – even those opposed or indifferent to *halacha* – and are widely perceived as belonging to the New Age.

If in the course of this paper we have dealt with various interpretive techniques New Agers use in order to introduce innovations into Judaism while still presenting them as part and parcel of it, here we find the other side of the story: Jewish and *halachic* values that seep into the New Age culture are not perceived as foreign elements, because they are presented using the common rules of the discourse – for instance, ideational elements will be highlighted and *halachic* elements downplayed (as we saw in the case of Spiritualization of the essence of commandments). In other words, these glocal products are a successful and creative synthesis, in spite of the alleged contradiction between *halacha* and New Age.

5(b) Group Identities in Israel and Jew Age

The strong correspondence between the New Age discourse and its central audience in Israel – the secular – usually reproduces the existing Israeli discourse that chooses to emphasize imagined dichotomies between groups and ignore a blurring of boundaries in reality, thus strengthening existing group identities. Even though the New Age discourse is spiritually oriented, and thus similar in certain aspects to the traditional religious discourse, we scarcely find that these similarities produce genuine dialogues between people or schools of thought.

However, the similarity in discourses – such as dealing with the concept of spirituality – brings some of the New Age followers, sometimes almost in spite of themselves, to acknowledge the similarity between themselves and traditional religious groups. The New Age identity allows these people to look beyond the familiar fences, and even acknowledge their artificial and constructed nature, and thus becomes a bridge between secular New Agers and religious Israelis (see also Garb 2009). We believe these contradictory traits of the secular New Age discourse in Israel can be explained by pointing out a central feature of the relevant types of religiosity: on the one hand, an ironic picture emerges, in which the new spiritual discourse is used as ammunition in the old conflicts between groups of various religious identities within Israeli society; on the other hand, we should remember these are two very different types of religiosity – the one obeying global rules and originating in the (secularized) Christian world, the other based on a local Jewish discourse (e.g. Zaidman 2003, Heelas 1996).

The examples we presented of Israeli New Age discourse testify that even though its speakers forego certain elements that were, up until now, identified as crucial in the “package deal” of secularism, they maintain their identification with the secular group as opposed to other groups in Israel. From this we can learn that certain

components of the secular identity have become more important than others in contemporary Israel, at least in the case of New Age. To expand: New Age followers consider themselves secular in spite of their belief in the existence of a supernatural world, and in spite of their objections to the modern, scientific-rationalistic epistemology – with these two elements they have diverged from the accepted secular “creed.” However, they have not given up several other elements they perceive as more vital to their secular identity, including: opposing conservativeness alongside an ideal of innovativeness; intensive self-reflection, also characterizing (among much else) the psychologistic discourse; a strong desire for self fulfillment; and a belief in the ability of the individual to determine his own fate.⁴⁸

The post-modern condition in which the secular, modern and rationalistic meta-narrative has weakened, allows for this alleged-contradiction in the secular identity of New Agers: in an environment where it is common to doubt the existence of objective truth and the impartiality of science (i.e. to question rationalism itself), one can adopt a deeper stance of doubt (temporarily and partially, to a greater or lesser extent), in which not only scientific truths are undermined, but the very premises of Western science itself – and still call oneself secular.

The familiar “package deal” of Israeli secularism is, it seems, in a process of re-alignment. One of the major changes it is undergoing is that atheism is no longer one of its vital ingredients, and is no longer used to draw the boundaries between religious and secular Israelis. These boundaries, however, still exist, as another local basis of the Jewish secular identity stems from the *halachic* nature of Judaism; that is, faith alone is not sufficient to form a religious Jewish identity – fulfilment of the commandments is also required. Thus, even while the ingredient of faith (or, rather, lack of faith) can wither away to nothing within the “package deal” of Israeli secularism, the *halachic* ingredient preserves the existing group identities: a New Age follower can believe in God and still perceive himself (and be perceived by his environment) as secular, but it is highly doubtful that he could follow the commandments of the *halacha* and maintain this perception. This double characterization explains why the New Age does not erase the boundaries between the familiar religious groups in Israeli society, but also explains its part in the blurring of these boundaries: several ingredients of the Israeli secular “package deal” have persevered – in the context of this article, one of the most significant of these is opposition to *halacha*, while other ingredients have weakened considerably – including atheism.

If we return to the axis of attitudes towards the *halacha*, we find that the level of self-identification as a secular Israeli can be measured along the axis, from left to right. Indifference towards the *halacha*, as well as opposition to it, correspond with a secular self-identification; on the opposite end of the axis, preservation of the *halacha* does not allow for such an identification; between them, on the axis’ continuum, individuals identify themselves as secular in varying degrees of hesitation, which are dependent upon the amount of *halachic* ingredients in the hybrid amalgam of the practices they perform. This hesitation also influences those

that still self-identify as secular: the more the ingredients in the secular “package deal” are undermined, the less secularism can be an obvious and non-problematic identity option.⁴⁹

Furthermore, those that now find it difficult to identify themselves as secular can not be classified (by themselves or analytically) into any of the other group identities that exist within Israeli society: not only are the borders between these identity groups blurring, but it is also becoming more and more obvious that completely new divisions are necessary (or, at least, an addition of several new groups). It is possible that one of these groups will be what we have termed “Jew Age,” a large and significant group adapting the *halacha* (and other aspects of Judaism) to the New Age and vice versa, creating new cultural configurations and hybrid products – a group that is, at the moment, undeniably still marginal.

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² Among the very few publications in English are Zaidman (2003, 2007), Huss (2007), Garb (2009), Zaidman, Goldstein-Gidoni & Nehemya (2009) and (to a lesser degree of relevance) Arbib & Kvity (2004). Recently, an edited volume on New Age in Israel has been published in Hebrew: Tavory (2007). One of the most researched aspects of New Age in Israel is CAM (Complementary and Alternative Medicine), e.g. Fadlon (2005); Shmueli & Shuval (2004), Amir and Shuval, Judith, 2004, “Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Israel: 2000 vs. 1993”. *Israel Medical Association Journal* 6 (January), 3-8.

³ Obviously, the blurred borders of New Age phenomena prevent any of these examples from supplying conclusive evidence regarding the extent of New Age in Israel. For instance, CAM phenomena only partially correlate with New Age ones. Also, many participants in New Age festivals do not share New Age beliefs (they may come for the music, for instance), while many New Agers avoid these festivals. Nonetheless, considering all of the examples together allows us to form a general picture of the scene.

⁴ In September 2009, Israel had a population of approximately 7.5 million, 5.6 million of whom were Jews (interest in New Age is almost non-existent among the non-Jews). Children under the age of 14 constituted over a quarter of the Israeli population.

⁵ We would like to thank Avri Raviv (CEO of *Hayim Aherim*), Michal Ben-David (editor of *Derech Ha-Osher*), Keter Books and Yediots Books for supplying these figures (respectively). Incidentally, the two magazines merged in 2008.

⁶ A rather drastic example of this can be found in the Hebrew version of Lee Carroll’s first Kryon book, *The End Times* (1993): all references to Jesus, including much of the introduction of the book and half of chapter 6, were cut out; cf Carroll (1998).

⁷ E.g. an image used in the publications of the largest Israeli New Age festival, BoomBamela, combines Indian and Jewish characteristics: the head of a guru with a Star of David on his forehead, below a Hebrew inscription.

⁸ Theosophic Kabbalah describes ten *Sfirot*, forces or aspects of Divinity.

⁹ According to Vedic teachings, the human body has seven major energy centres, known (in Sanskrit) as *Chakras*.

¹⁰ In this last instance, the names of the interviewees were replaced with pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

¹¹ We are aware that cultural products exist only in local contexts, but by “global” we mean phenomena that arrive from outside of the local culture and are assimilated by it, and phenomena that exist in several cultures.

¹² We hasten to add that among the plethora of New Age phenomena, some do demand adherence to a binding code or a set of practices, but these change from one phenomenon to the next, and a fundamental objection to external authority is almost

always maintained. In other words, one is free to choose to commit oneself to a creed or leader, and even recommend that others do the same – but any attempt to create a common and binding framework will be met with hostility.

¹³ See, for instance, the volume edited by Goodman & Yona (2004).

¹⁴ See Ben-Menachem et al (2002) and Sagi (1996).

¹⁵ As we focus on practices that are *perceived* as Jewish, we make no reference to *halachic* practices that are perceived as generally (and not particularly Jewish) virtuous behaviour such as improving one's character (*avodat ha'midot*, avoiding anger, jealousy, arrogance and so on) or general commandments pertaining to relationships among men (charity, love, honesty, and so on).

¹⁶ Even though the ultra-Orthodox in Israel are only 8% of the general population (10% of the Jewish population), they are perceived (for historical and sociological reasons) by the general public as the reference point and standard setters for Jewish practice. See Levi, Levinson and Katz 2002.

¹⁷ For these reasons, Jewish praxis is more accessible and commonplace for Israeli secular Jews than for secular Jews living outside of Israel – and for the same reasons, many secular Israelis see the Jewish praxis' presence in the public sphere as religious coercion.

¹⁸ In the terms of Hannerz (1992), Israelis join the global New Age discourse through use of symbols and practices they are familiar with, including the *halacha*.

¹⁹ It would be interesting for future research to compare the local features of the Israeli New Age with local features of New Age in other non-Christian societies (for instance, Indonesia, where the prevalent religion is Islam, another praxis-oriented religion, and see Howell 2005). See also Zaidman 2007 [DK: also see further papers in this volume.]

²⁰ Taken from http://www.ahavana.co.il/articles/forum/channeling_religion.htm. Like all further quotes in this paper, this one is translated from Hebrew; and like all other further internet references, it was retrieved on June 2007.

²¹ This axis presents various analytical options, while in practice the same person can express different attitudes on different occasions.

²² While the *discourse* is characterized by indifference, this does not necessarily mean the *people* producing this discourse are indifferent to *halacha*: in New Age contexts, they make no reference to it, whether it plays an important part in their lives or not. Even if New Agers have opinions concerning *halacha*, we found that they usually do not mention these of their own accord, only when asked explicitly.

²³ Taken from www.ahavana.co.il/articles/god.htm.

²⁴ It is interesting to note that Aviv uses an expression from the Old Testament: "Every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25), but he makes two mistakes: he misquotes, replacing "right" with "good", and more importantly, he uses the expression in a positive manner, while in the original it is explicitly negative. These are both typical mistakes among secular Israelis and testify to their shallow acquaintance with Jewish sources – which we shall discuss later on. (Like all further quotes from the bible, the English version we use is the standard King James Version.)

²⁵ Taken from www.ahavana.co.il/articles/forum/channeling_religion.htm.

²⁶ Although secular Israelis tend to express opposition or indifference to *halacha*, many of them are inclined to believe in the unique status of the Jewish people. As this paper deals only with attitudes towards Jewish praxis, we will not discuss this belief further – although it is certainly worth extensive study.

²⁷ Taken from www.nrg.co.il/online/15/ART1/521/030.html.

²⁸ Which can lead to both types of opposition: principled or practical.

²⁹ In the major Kabbalistic schools, emphasis is often put on the theurgic function of commandments, in which the internal-psychological performance is as important as the physical-practical one (Idel 1988). While the Kabbalistic *halachic* approach seeks to affect the divine, the New Age approach to *halacha* (or, more precisely, to the performance of spiritual practices) focuses on the effects on the individual or the world. One can claim both approaches – and not only the classic Kabbalistic one – are theurgical, if one takes into account the (immanent) New Age identification of the individual and the world with the divine.

³⁰ In an interview to Livneh, Neri, “The Fourth Method”, *Haaretz* (weekend supplement), 2 March 2004.

³¹ There is no legal possibility for non-religious matrimonies in Israel.

³² (The spirit of) Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), also known as the haAri haKadosh (literally, ‘the holy lion’), ‘Ari’ being an acronym for *Adoneinu* (our Master) Rabbi Isaac. HaAri is the most famous of the Kabbalists of Safed, Israel in the 16th Century. His collected teachings are known as Lurianic Kabbalah.

³³ As an example of the reworking of Israeli holidays in the Zionist spirit, see Don-Yehiya (1995).

³⁴ The Ari is a Kabbalistic figure, and usually not used as a *halachic* authority – but this is a distinction most secular Jews are unaware of.

³⁵ According to Levi, Levinson & Katz (2002:b-16-17), about 70% of Israeli Jews actually fast and about 60% visit the synagogue.

³⁶ For instance, Leviticus 23:27-29: “Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement [...] and ye shall afflict your souls [...] And ye shall do no work in that same day: for it is a day of atonement, to make an atonement for you before the Lord your God. For whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people”. The biblical commandment is the affliction of the soul on this day, and already in the *Mishnah* (a collection of religious law redacted in Israel circa 200 CE) fasting was accepted as the practical expression of this commandment (alongside other afflictions. Tractate *Yoma* 8:1). It is also worth mentioning that the biblical text makes it clear that self-affliction is a pre-condition to atonement, in direct contradiction with the Ari’s channeled text.

³⁷ An example of such a discussion in relation to Passover is the *halachic* debate on the proper manner to sit (*hasava*) while performing the commandments of the holiday meal: should one sit in the ancient manner, leaning to the left; or follow the principal that was associated with such leaning in the Hellenistic age; that is, sitting in a festive and comfortable manner.

³⁸ On meta-*halachic* principles see Sagi (1998)..

³⁹ The following words in quotation marks are taken from Tamar Tov-El's channeling of the prophet Deborah: www.yoelwhiteeagle.co.il/heb/tehilim/tehilim2_2005_3.htm.

⁴⁰ See, for example, the photographs at www.hilot.co.il/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=43

⁴¹ In the Jewish religion, several daily practices (e.g. eating, using the toilet) are accompanied by ritual blessings uttered by the person performing them.

⁴² This is an example of a custom (*minhag*) that does not carry the binding nature of an actual commandment (*halacha*).

⁴³ From the website "Messages from The Valley" by Daniel Norel and Mira Cohen, here channeling the Ari: www.messarim.co.il/Index.asp?ArticleID=121&CategoryID=110&Page=1.

⁴⁴ Such an interpretation appears in the book of an Israeli channel, Ilana Bahat (2004:8-10).

⁴⁵ Aviraz (2002): 29.

⁴⁶ According to Garb (2004, especially p129), a-nomianistic tendencies have grown during the 20th Century, in accordance with a process occurring over several centuries in which these tendencies have moved from the periphery to the centre. Simultaneously, the *halacha* is gradually losing its role as a system that supplies meaning, and in the last century not one significant Kabbalistic treatise was written on the essence and meaning of the commandments. Obviously, a-nomianistic tendencies are one of the reasons why Jewish mystical schools are considered threatening by the religious establishment. See also Garb (2009).

⁴⁷ Thus, there is much similarity between secular-Jewish-Israeli New Age and secular-Christian-Western New Age phenomena. A similar claim is raised by Nederveen Pieterse (1995) in the context of the penetration of cultural motifs from the Far East to the West. For instance, cultural products produced in the 19th Century by middle class Japanese (especially paintings) were easily assimilated by Europeans of the same class at the same time.

⁴⁸ In the context of these modern ideals, and on the similarity between Expressivism and the New Age, see Heelas 2000.

⁴⁹ Among other things, this allows for the almost absurd situation in which neo-Orthodox Jews find themselves on the side of the axis expressing Opposition to *halacha* (as we have seen in the case of Rabbi Gafni), so the blurring of group identities is also expressed by people that simultaneously identify with several group identities.