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Soft Ultra-Orthodoxy: Revival Movement Activists, Synagogue Communities and the Mizrahi-Haredi *Teshuva* Movement in Israel

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Abstract: This article offers an in-depth ethnographic and historical description of how an ethnic-religious revival movement has had an impact on religious life. The article will focus on the story of one of Israel's foremost religious revival movements—the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement. We will look at the encounter between the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement activists and Mizrahi synagogue congregations, and at the outcomes of that encounter on religious infrastructures, and on the activists' religious agenda. The following questions will be addressed: How did the relationship between the activists and the synagogue congregations develop? What tensions arose and how did they turn a strict religious outlook into a soft religious approach? The article is based on many years of fieldwork in congregations exposed to the impact of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement in Israel. The fieldwork provided both a rich ethnographic inventory and an opportunity to describe a historical trend that illuminates the communal, authoritative, and gender models that originated with the encounter between the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement activists and the local synagogue congregations.

Keywords: religious revival movements; ethnicity; Ultra-Orthodoxy; Mizrachim; Teshuva; Israel



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1. Introduction

This article describes an ethnic-religious revival movement that has been active for many years in Israel, and the encounter between the movement's activists and the local synagogue congregations that serve the activists as objects of religious and political influence. While the existing research on this movement has mainly examined its political effects, which are identified with the Shas party, the present article aims to take a deeper look at the movement's impact on local synagogue congregations: how the relationship developed between the movement activists—Haredi preachers and rabbis—and the tradition-keeping worshippers in the local communities; what kinds of social tension arose from that encounter; and what kind of religious approach or worldview emerged from the encounter. I will look at the challenge that the ethno-religious revival movement posed to local forces, with an emphasis on local traditions and the congregations' moderate religious temperament. However, I will also examine in detail the way in which the *teshuva* movement, through its local manifestations, bridged the religious and social tensions to which the encounter gave rise.

The article's theoretical foundations are based on an approach applied in religious revival movement scholarship that places these movements' social impact at the center of attention. Two major trends can be identified here. One is a focus on the movements' political effects. For example, works such as [Kepel \(1994\)](#) and [Ajami \(1986\)](#) concentrated on the Islamic revival movement in the Middle East, its varied features and local manifestations, and the way in which it became a factor in the renewed political organization of believers and minorities in the face of modernization, secularization, and the appearance of competing political models within the traditional faith.

The other trend in religious revival movement research highlights the movements' religious impact and resulting religious innovation. For example, [Harding \(2000\)](#) looks at how religious language is reshaped by Moral Majority activists in the US; Hirschkind's ethnographic study ([Hirschkind 2006](#)) describes how the political agenda of Muslim preachers in Egypt translates into a moral-religious discourse that renews the attentional space of believer communities. With regard to this scholarly trend, I would like to consider the question of "soft religion"—individualist religiosity, small local traditions, everyday religious life—which was raised in the past by [Hervieu-Leger \(2000\)](#). In this context, I will try to see how the encounter between soft religion with its local manifestations and the authoritarian/organized religion embodied in the religious revival movement reshapes infrastructures at the communal level. The case of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement in Israel provides a window into that movement's impact on what I will call the "infrastructure of religious life".

By "infrastructures of religious life," I am referring to the institutional, communal, practical, religious, and conceptual system that envelops religious individuals in their everyday life. This is the system from which the individual derives their perspective on the world, whether complex or straightforward, on which their social reference point is based, and in whose framework they performs actions laden with meaning that endows them with distinctiveness: dress code, style of prayer, management of family and community life, participation in the work world.

The case of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement in Israel illuminates the interplay between a devout religious leadership that aspires to change the infrastructures of religious life, and an ethnic public that is not religiously devout and retains traditions and a moderate religious temperament. While this connection is a source of great social and religious tension, it also promotes a reshaping of the religiously devout outlook and the appearance of a "soft" religious model that I will refer to here as "soft Haredism".

Methodologically, the article is based on many years of fieldwork that I carried out in Israeli synagogue congregations exposed to the influence of the Mizrahi-Haredi ethno-religious revival movement known generally as the "Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement". Most of the fieldwork was conducted during the periods 1999–2004 and 2012–2015, and more recently between 2019–2021. These periods of fieldwork gave me not only a large body of ethnographic data, but also the ability to formulate a quasi-historical perspective on the movement's development, diversification, and, in particular, its transformation from a marginal factor in Israeli religious society to one of its most influential political and social forces. However, as noted, the present article will focus on the local impact of the movement's activists on the infrastructures of religious life.

2. Background: The Mizrahi-Haredi *Teshuva* Movement

Starting in the second half of the 1970s, it became possible to detect increased effort on the part of Israeli organizations and initiatives, as well as a burgeoning religious discourse, aimed at persuading people to view Judaism in its Orthodox form as holding the answers to the existential, political, and social questions that preoccupy today's society. A variety of factors drove this development. Among the most prominent were: the trauma of the wars in which Israeli had been involved and the existential questions raised by the outcomes of those wars; the rise of the consumer economy and the spiritual questions that arose in its wake; the crisis associated with the ideology of hegemonic Zionism, and the quest for an alternative world of meaning ([Caplan 2001](#); [Aviad 1983](#)). *Teshuva* activity in Israel was split between the two major forces in Israeli Orthodox Judaism: Religious Zionism, and the Haredi community. Religious Zionists, especially the more devout among them, regarded, and still regard, the State of Israel and the Zionist enterprise as a positive but incomplete development on the road to the Jewish People's religious redemption in the Holy Land. By contrast, the Haredim viewed, and still view, themselves as adhering to a traditional Jewish way of life that was disrupted by modernization and secularization—developments which, in their view, included Zionism. While Religious Zionism sees itself as part of

the religious future of the Zionist enterprise, the Haredim see themselves as a religious opposition to that enterprise (Brown 2010). Devout Religious Zionist circles, with which we will not be concerned in this article, viewed *teshuva* activity as yet another important part of the effort to promote the national-religious ideal of redemption. However, Religious Zionist religious outreach activity remained marginal for many years; most of it focused on enlarging and maintaining the settlement movement on the West Bank and in Gaza. By contrast, the Haredim viewed religious outreach as a major political and historical effort necessary for their demographic, symbolic, and ideological survival. Demographically, the *teshuva* movement was perceived as helping bring new people into the Haredi community, to join its ranks or to be present on its margins. Symbolically, *teshuva* activity represented the idea that hundreds of returnees to religion evince a turning of the individual heart toward the collective truth of the Haredi way. Ideologically, the *teshuva* movement was felt to constitute another chapter in the historical and ongoing struggle against modernization and secularization. However, the absorption of the *hoyrim biteshuva* (returnees to religious observance) by the Haredi camp has encountered quite a few obstacles and difficulties that pose a challenge for the *teshuva* movement, especially for the second generation of returnees (Caplan 2001).

From a sociological perspective, we can identify two major social arenas for the activity of the Haredi religious outreach movement in Israel. One is the general Israeli space, where an array of informational/promotional organizations try through various means to persuade secular individuals to become Haredi, that is, to go from non-engagement with Torah and religious observance to active participation in the *halachic* way of life. The other arena is ethnic and represents a social response to the problematic class situation to which Jewish families and communities from Islamic lands (termed “Mizrahim” by Israeli sociologists) were channeled from the 1950s onward (Smooha 2008). These families contend on a daily basis with life in peripheral localities of sparse economic opportunity, and with the devaluation of their ethnic identity (Chetrit 2000; Kachtan 2012). I will be referring to the religious outreach activity in this arena as the “Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement”. “*Teshuva*” means “return” in Hebrew and expresses the act of persuasion aimed at “turning” people’s hearts toward a lifestyle change—from secular to religious, or from *dati* (non-Haredi religious) to Haredi. The term’s “Haredi” component relates to how the Haredi outlook and way of life is represented as a source of spiritual mobility and a solution to the relevant population’s social quandary. The “Mizrahi” component refers to the outreach activity’s focus on spaces with large international Mizrahi populations seeking to escape the socioeconomic stratum in which they are caught, and to forge a better future and destiny for themselves.

The present article does not address two specific streams in the development of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement. One is the older stream of Chabad Hassidism, while the other is the relatively new branch of Breslov Hassidism. In both cases, renewal of these Hassidic movements in Israel is largely confined to young Mizrahi people’s interest in them. However, unlike the case discussed in this article, these are communities that delimit themselves within social boundaries from the outset, and that aim to reshape those who join them in a specific theological image and according to very clear patterns that would erase or at least reduce the ethnic component in their new religious identity. The case which we discuss in this article features a greater degree of religious interaction and negotiation between the *teshuva* activists and the local communities; one has the impression that their goal is not just to reduce the ethnic element but rather to make that element central and a focal point for rebuilding the infrastructures of religious life.

Up to now, the research literature on the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement has tended to concentrate on the movement’s political ramifications (Caplan 2008). Special attention has been devoted to the relationship between the religious outreach efforts with the Mizrahi community and the rise of the Mizrahi-Haredi political party Shas (Willis 1993; Lehmann and Siebzehner 2006). Shas was founded in 1984 as a political home for Mizrahi religious returnees and yeshiva students fighting the discrimination to which Mizrahim were long

subjected in Haredi society by the devout Ashkenazi circles with roots in Eastern and Central Europe. Within a decade, Shas brought the religious outreach efforts vis-à-vis non-Haredi Mizrahim under its auspices. This sponsorship of *teshuva* enabled Shas to survive and establish itself as a major political force where earlier ethnic parties had failed (Chetrit 2000). As a result, religious outreach activity transformed the foundations of Mizrahi religious life in Israel. Research on this transformation has focused, to date, on the social and religious message conveyed by charismatic lecturers and sermonizers (Sharabi 2012; El-Or 2006). My ongoing ethnographic work on the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement has been concerned with another side of that movement, one that I will be exploring at length in the following pages: its local-communal effects. To shed light on this topic, I will provide an extended ethnographic and retrospective discussion of a specific local-communal effect: the story of Ateret Chachamim, the *beit midrash* (religious study hall) of Rabbi Chaim Rabi in the city of Holon.

3. A Local Manifestation of the Mizrahi-Haredi *Teshuva* Movement

Holon is an intermediate city close to the major metropolis of Tel Aviv, with a diverse Jewish population. There are well-established, affluent neighborhoods and lower-middle-class neighborhoods, mainly on the city's outskirts, that also house disadvantaged populations from which Shas drew large-scale support and established itself in the 1990s (Peled 1998). One of these neighborhoods is Tel Giborim, where Rabbi Chaim Rabi's *teshuva* operation was based in the late 1980s.

Chaim Rabi was born in Jerusalem in the 1950s to a family with roots in Tunis. His religious education was acquired at Haredi yeshivot, where he absorbed a commitment to what he termed, per Haredi usage, *chayei Torah*—a Torah way of life, i.e., adherence to rigorous study of the Talmud and *halacha* (Jewish law) as a mission and a way of life. In the late 1980s, Rabbi Rabi embarked on an effort to strengthen religious life in Holon. For this purpose, he founded, at a long-established Tel Giborim synagogue named Ateret Chachamim, a study framework (yeshiva) that would offer religion classes to the public at large. The neighborhood was then a peripheral urban space rife with economic distress, a hub of crime, and delinquency. Many of the residents were Mizrahim who had themselves immigrated, or whose parents had immigrated, to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s from Islamic countries. The older members of this population worked in lower-middle-class occupations, as laborers, small business owners, small tradesmen. The younger Mizrahim sought means of escape from the neighborhood, from economic distress, and from the associated stigma.

At first Rabbi Rabi worked with older adults, but he was most interested in reaching the younger generation. Young people in the neighborhood were familiar with the synagogue in which his activity was based, but it was by no means a part of their everyday lives. They perceived the rabbi himself as part of a world in which they believed, but which was far from the lifestyle to which they aspired; a place where people would traditionally gather on the Sabbath and holidays only. The rabbi revitalized the synagogue and reframed it as a place not just of tradition and prayer, but also of support and salvation; he transformed it from a single-purpose venue of worship into a place where one could pray, study, and find an active social framework. His classes, which he taught regularly and with devotion, were infused with messages of empathy and with what his listeners perceived as an innocence uncommon in an environment marked by preoccupation with economic survival. Like other agents of religious revival, such as Hassan al-Banna of Egypt in the 2000s (Munson 2001), or Moussa al-Sadr of Lebanon in the 1960s (Ajami 1986), his main message was the possibility of escaping the neighborhood—but not just by moving elsewhere. Rather, one could repair life within the confines of the community. All that was necessary was a sincere return to religious tradition, and a readiness to fulfill the will of the Almighty. There was no need to leave the world of practical effort for this, i.e., to quit one's job; however, one could regard the local-yeshiva framework offered by Rabbi Rabi as something elevated, an alternative to the neighborhood's quotidian world, and one could certainly hope to ensure a better future by transferring one's children (representing the next generation) to educational

institutions aligned with the religious tradition, preferably in its Haredi form. Slowly but surely, Ateret Chachamim evolved from a small synagogue into a place that reflected and symbolized a destiny and a mission; a clearly labeled alternative to the stigmatized world of the neighborhood, one that spoke of itself in terms of “holy congregation” and “revolution”—the “*teshuva*” revolution. This optimistic message found a receptive audience among young and old alike.

Rabbi Chaim Rabi’s message of social change also had an economic dimension. Donations from the faithful of all ages who believed in the Rabbi and in the power of the activity taking place at Ateret Chachamim, began to flow in, for the purpose of supporting this small institution that the Rabbi had founded. The modest sums accumulated and, in time, were supplemented by donations from wealthy people who were captivated by the Rabbi and by the place. To this “big money” was added state assistance via Shas. The party’s local functionaries and leaders were impressed by the Rabbi’s work, and they viewed him as a potentially effective agent for the political fundraising necessary to maintain and increase the party’s power. In the late 1990s, a luxurious marble edifice was built on the site of the old synagogue, with spaces for religious studies and a variety aid, welfare, and educational activities and foundations intended for residents of the neighborhood and the city. From just another anonymous synagogue rabbi in Holon, Chaim Rabi became a neighborhood rabbi and a prominent rabbinical figure in Israel’s Mizrahi-Haredi sector.

The story of Rabbi Chaim Rabi is not the only one of its kind. There are similar cases of other Haredi rabbinical figures who together make up the new face of Israel’s Mizrahi synagogue congregations. There is the earlier example of Rabbi Reuven Elbaz of Jerusalem’s Bukharim neighborhood in the late 1970s, or Rabbi Yosef Mugrabi’s initiatives in Holon’s Jesse Cohen neighborhood in the late 1980s, or such rabbis as Yitzhak Barda of Ashkelon, Shimon Gabai of Netanya, Moshe Pinto of Petah Tikva, Shai Perry of Haifa, and many other less well-known Israeli figures.

In retrospect, we can see that Rabbi Chaim Rabi was part of a wave of Mizrahi graduates of Haredi yeshivot who, from the early 1980s on, took on religious leadership roles in non-Haredi Mizrahi congregations. Within these congregations, religious study “outposts” on the *kollel* (full-time advanced Torah study) model were established, laying the groundwork for religious outreach and reinforcement activity. In the core Haredi community, *kollelim* constituted frameworks for married yeshiva students wishing to continue their Torah studies; in these new haredizing Mizrahi communities, they also served a more diverse public, including non-Haredim seeking a foothold in what was perceived as a vehicle for spiritual mobility. As noted, the geographical locations where these initiatives arose were usually neighborhoods or areas suffering from a poor image, economic distress, and longtime societal neglect. One by one, from the bottom up, educational, outreach, and welfare institutions were founded that formed the basis for Mizrahi-Haredi communities headed by young rabbis who became sources of local authority. This wasn’t the first time that Haredi rabbis sought influence among the Mizrahi public. This kind of activity had formerly been oriented toward geographic mobility, toward extracting children and youth from their accustomed settings—their communities of origin, neighborhoods, towns, and moshavim—and moving them to the Haredi enclave communities ([Lupo 2004](#)). The new efforts used Haredi tools to reshape the religiously heterogeneous Mizrahi environments. In this way, a new community and religious model developed. The place of “tradition” as a culturally-stabilizing ethnic factor for the large wave of Mizrahi immigration to Israel ([Shokeid 1995](#)) was superseded by “Haredization” as a socially-healing religious factor in the second and third immigrant generations.

4. The *Teshuva* Rabbis: From Social “Extraction” to Religious Mission

The move from the Haredi world to the non-Haredi Mizrahi congregations has been described by *teshuva* rabbis such as Chaim Rabi as a “mission” (*shlichut*). One figure whose name repeatedly came up as a source of inspiration in this context was the spiritual leader of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Rabbis would reiterate Rabbi Yosef’s regular call for *zikui*

harabim or “granting merit to the many”—his insistence that rabbis not seclude themselves within the homogeneous personal and communal study spaces of Haredi society, but rather connect with the Mizrahi public at large so as to involve them and guide them in religious life (Leon 2008). Some of the young rabbis interpreted *zikui harabim* as a framework for ethnic distinction between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Haredim. Thus, for instance, a synagogue rabbi of this type in south Tel Aviv’s Neve Eliezer neighborhood, a place of disadvantage and economic distress, described his local community work:

“We Sephardim aren’t, thank God, like the self-isolating Ashkenazim. We live and constantly try to breathe life into what’s going on here. It’s easy to be in Bnei Brak [a predominantly Haredi city]. It’s harder to be here. But there’s a reward. There’s satisfaction from every child who comes to a Psalms class, from each person who comes to the morning prayer service, from each person who maybe thinks of registering his child for religious education after hearing a drasha [sermon]a that touched his heart on Shabbat or on a weekday”.

The rabbi referred to his presence in the neighborhood as something that was not self-evident. He could have chosen to self-segregate in order to maintain his devout lifestyle like the Ashkenazi Haredim, but he sees his ethnic identity—the fact of belonging to the “Sephardi” category—not just as a sociologically-ethnically differentiating factor, but also as something meaningful and binding from a religious and historical perspective. Was it just the desire to connect to a movement with a religious message that successfully explains the ethnic difference between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in Haredi society that colored these initiatives?

From field research that I conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I learned that the trend exemplified by Chaim Rabi-type rabbis was not propelled solely by the idea of a religious and ethnic mission. There was also a meaningful complementary motivation that had to do with the way in which these rabbis’ identity was perceived in the society from which they came and on whose behalf they acted—Haredi society.

Mizrahim, who studied in Haredi yeshivot and became rabbis and religious/synagogue leaders, shared the Haredi worldview that they had learned in the Haredi yeshivot. While they saw this outlook as key to their personal, familial, and Jewish redemption, they were not integrated equally within the frameworks of Haredi life; as partners, they were separate but not equal. The ethnic background on which their ostensibly empowering categorization as “Sephardim” was based actually functioned as a label in a low-income community that used ethnic distinctions to create an inter-group hierarchy. The ethnic tag affixed to those collectively referred to as “Sephardim” kept their children from marrying Ashkenazim or from attending, without having been strictly vetted, Ashkenazi schools with reputations for quality and experience. At most, they could be accepted on the basis of a predetermined ethnic quota. By passing beyond the yeshiva world boundaries constituted by the Ashkenazi Haredim, young Mizrahi yeshiva students could escape the strict ethnic categorization that had been imposed on them; this did not, however, cause them to abandon their faith in the Haredi way of life that, since childhood, they had embraced as the correct means of attaining closeness to God. It transformed them, in their own eyes at least, into emissaries charged with a spiritual mission; and as emissaries of Haredi society they were, first and foremost, “Haredim” to themselves and to the non-Haredi people they encountered. By means of this mission, they could even acquire status as rabbinical figures, drawing strength from their image as experts on Jewish tradition; they could also gain material compensation. Not all could do this, of course; most, in fact, did not. My ethnographic work has shown me that achieving such status required considerable boldness, an ability to identify opportunities, and a great deal of self-confidence. Analogies could often be drawn between the “secular” marketer and the religious “emissary”; market principles were operative here as well (Friedman 1993). Those who took on the emissary role laid foundations for a new religious community model that became prominent in the Mizrahi religious world: the *teshuva* community.

5. The *Teshuva* Communities: A Homogeneous Framework for Heterogeneous Religiosity

In the course of my ethnographic research (Leon 2009), I learned about the complex community work that rabbis such as Chaim Rabi needed to perform with the populations they sought in Israel's urban periphery. Their activity included daily courting (at times a Sisyphean task) of a believing, mostly Mizrahi, public capable of providing a basis for establishing new congregations inspired by the Haredi way of life. The difficulty lay in explaining the importance of the homogeneous community framework championed by the Haredim: social separatism, dress code emphasizing modesty, strict observance of Jewish law, gender separation, prioritization of Torah study over leisure activities, and all for a public whose attitude toward religious tradition was positive but which was far from adhering to the uniform, devout way of life called for by the rabbis. The regular courting and efforts at persuasion that were an inseparable part of the discourse were conducted during *halacha* classes given for the general public, at personal memorial services targeting bereaved families, Shabbat sermons in relatively well-attended synagogues, and sometimes in one-on-one conversations.

The local *teshuva* rabbis whom I heard calling for religious awakening and a return to religious observance constantly peppered their talks with current slang, sometimes mild, sometimes aggressive; their speeches would be full of moral lessons, castigation, stories, and a great deal of humor and allusion. They explained to their audiences the importance of strict adherence to Jewish tradition, and would show how ceremonies and canonical texts were the key to a properly organized life. They maintained that, if life didn't dictate a reinforcement of tradition, then eschatology did: the Jewish People's collective redemption was at hand, and the Messianic Age would be one in which sinners would be held to account. Some would listen attentively and join; others would listen but keep a measured distance; still others would turn away. One way or another, the courting gave rise to a religious and ethnic renaissance, both bottom-up and top-down: regular Torah classes were organized in neighborhood synagogues, while large gatherings on issues of faith and morality were convened in local function halls or sports venues which, for a single night, would turn into a mass *beit midrash*; community trips were organized to burial sites of venerated figures; many works of prayer, *halacha*, and Jewish thought were composed and printed; religious ceremonies were renewed (or ostensibly renewed), or invented (Sharabi 2012; Bilu 2005). From time to time, rabbis such as Chaim Rabi, discussed at length above, drew their audiences to mass nationwide *hitorerut* or "religious awakening" rallies whose organizers sought to capture the spirit of the change underway. Haredism became a dominant religious model, present within the religious landscape of the non-Haredi Mizrahim.

The late 1990s marked a peak period when the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement's local efforts would establish itself. Visitors to neighborhoods and areas where there was a critical mass of Mizrahim could see the depth of the process and its everyday, communal manifestations. They could observe young men and women filling halls to hear the *teshuva* movement's sermonizers and promoters. They could see yeshivot, *kollelim*, *batei midrash* and synagogues springing up overnight, bearing signs denoting them "spiritual centers". They could witness the opening of Haredi-style preschools and Talmud Torah schools. They could observe the restoration of old synagogues and the construction of more luxurious new ones. Those who entered the synagogues could form an impression of the change underway from the bookshelves that were now not only fuller, but laden with many new titles. To this could be added the publication of new editions of the prayerbook by Mizrahi-Haredi institutes and yeshivot and the creation of psalm-reading groups (as a form of prayer) for children. A guest would certainly have been impressed by the bulletin boards notifying the general public of classes, sermons, and ceremonies to be held, and by the enthusiastic announcements of visits by *tzadikim*—prominent rabbis.

Classes in *halacha* figured prominently in the interaction between Mizrahi-Haredi rabbis and the non-Haredi Mizrahi public. Unlike Talmud classes, *halacha* classes did

not revolve around complex or complicated thought processes. Rather, they offered clear instruction on the religious practices required of the faithful in their daily lives. These classes would start by clarifying a specific instruction or set of instructions, and frequently continue by examining issues pertaining to the listeners' everyday existence, thereby touching on issues of practical concern to the audience in their quotidian reality. As with the *daf yomi* (daily Talmud study) classes intended for working people, the *halacha* classes provided attendees with a social framework (Heilman 1983), a friendly meetings where participants could share their world. The lessons also supplied an interpretive framework—an alternative narrative for their lives. From a lesson on the written word, the *halacha* class became an empowering community dialogue, and as such was regarded as no less an anchor of identity than a source of knowledge.

Local devotees of the *teshuva* movement activity were mostly young men and women of Mizrahi descent, ranging in age from teens to early twenties. The *teshuva* rabbis were particularly interested in courting young adults, regarding them as the future. For their part, the young people found direction in the sermons and in the classes on *halacha*, *midrash* (rabbinical interpretations), and *aggadah* (rabbinical narratives)—guidance toward a proper path and potential answers to the existential and social issues that filled their everyday lives, such as driving tests they might have failed, or confrontations between recently-married spouses. The rabbis often caught these young men and women at crossroads of intensely personal meaning: life transitions such as the progression from high school to military service, or from military service to civilian life; the death of family members; the decision about whom to marry; issues of loyalty to friends; job searches; and more. Sermons were tailored to this reality. They dealt with questions regarding the purpose of man and Creation, the meaning of Jewish identity, the place of God in one's life, family life, and more. All of the discussions were replete with empathy, humor, and an understanding of the problems that preoccupy young adults and their social milieu.

This was a public which, individually and collectively, often had personal stories to tell of expulsion from regular study frameworks in the Israeli education system, or of vocational tracking that often had an exclusionary effect and set pupils on a path toward working-class life and poverty (Motzafi-Haller 2012). The proactively-arranged encounter with the *teshuva* movement rabbis became, for this public, a way to become reacquainted with the world of theoretical study. We may say, to some degree, that the *teshuva* movement in its local manifestations was a kind of "Torah education movement". The call to acquire religious learning, in the form of regular invitations to enter the world of the *beit midrash*, to attend *halacha* or *aggadah* classes, did not necessarily present itself as a restorative demand, i.e., a call to withdraw into a distinct tradition, but rather as an opportunity to rebuild religious and ethnic capital—a framework for social empowerment and advancement. At one such regular class that I observed at length, these new participants—almost always a mix of devout pensioners and young people "strengthening" in religious observance—thirstily absorbed the words of the instructor, a young rabbi from Kisei Rachamim Yeshiva. On one occasion, I asked one of the participants about the class, and he was full of enthusiasm. "You saw for yourself. Today there's *halacha*—we've progressed!"

6. The Age of *Teshuva*: From Broken Ethnicity to Soft Haredism

Existing research on the development of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement and its political ramifications in the form of Shas prominently highlights the macro-historical conditions that allowed the movement to flourish in the 1990s: the barriers to class mobility faced by young Mizrahim (Cohen and Leon 2008), the privatization of the Israeli welfare state (Krampf 2018), and the channeling of ethnic rage into what Tal Shamur calls "melancholic citizenship" (Shamur 2017). These were, indeed, conditions that led young Mizrahim to see religion as a solution. However, in everyday life, entry was often gained to local congregations via a generational crisis that assailed the world of the local ethnic synagogue.

The crisis arose from the Israeli education system's impact on the children of immigrants from Islamic countries. On the one hand, the non-religious state education system encouraged secularization. On the other hand, the religious education system promoted Orthodoxy. One way or another, this situation caused young people to reject active and consistent participation in the ethnic order of the synagogue community, whether due to an abandonment of the religious way of life, or because of inconsistency between the religious education they had received and the synagogue's ethnic traditions, which struck them as antiquated. This led to instability in the Mizrahi synagogue congregations. The crisis manifested in a progressive loss of the skills needed to maintain the ethnic traditions, as the synagogue leaders who had learned these skills in their countries of origin died without having passed on these skills to the younger generation ([Leon 2009](#)). The *teshuva* rabbis who made their way from the Haredi world to these Mizrahi congregations saw opportunity in this crisis. Their improved knowledge of *halacha*, custom, cantorial singing, and traditional Torah reading gave them a significant advantage.

Make no mistake, the bond between the Haredi rabbis and the Mizrahi public, young and old, in the synagogue congregations of the 1980s and 1990s was not self-evident. We cannot ignore the deep religious and ideological gap between them. In part, this gap was cultivated by the Haredi study institutions, whether as part of the effort to distance their students from what was felt to be different, threatening, and tempting, or through the students' absorption of what might be termed "religious elitism" ([Feldman 2022](#)). Something of this nature may be found in the approach taken by a religious leader who disagreed with the activist approach of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Rabbi Ben Zion Abba Shaul, a major figure in the Mizrahi-Haredi sector, felt that the most stringent separation should be maintained between Haredi yeshiva students and the divergent surrounding environment ([Leon 2013](#)).

The *teshuva* rabbis' work with synagogue congregations was often marked by confrontation with a resolute and opinionated public. The latter objected to what they saw as a takeover by religious extremism. The encounter between the *teshuva* rabbis and the non-Haredi public led to changes in the national liturgy, and aroused the wrath of worshippers who viewed this as a form of secularization. The encounter produced not only symbiosis, but also tension between different lifestyles and modes of thought; between rabbis/"haredizers" representing a critical approach to Zionism (sometimes expressed in their sermons), and nationalist traditionalists who insisted on the inclusion of the Zionist liturgical additions in synagogue services—prayers for the wellbeing of Israeli Defense Forces servicemen, and the celebration of national holidays such as Israel Independence Day. Between those who aspired to devoutness, religious stringency, and reliance on *halachic* texts and those wished to maintain a moderate, lenient religious style with reliance on intergenerational ethnic custom and tradition; between those educated in the Haredi yeshiva world referred to by sociologist Menachem Friedman as the "society of learners," who forsake the work world in favor of long-term Torah study ([Friedman 1991](#)), and those who participate in the difficult, Sisyphean world of everyday labor so they can earn a living and survive; between Haredism synonymous with a Judaism that is insular from the outset, and a *masortiyut* (traditionalism) synonymous with the relaxed and pragmatic religious style associated with Mizrahi Jews ([Yadgar 2010](#)).

At times this tension led to a social rift between those who followed the *teshuva* rabbis and those who strove to distance themselves from them. At other times the crisis gave rise to a subtle and complex interaction between these two forces. This interaction is encapsulated in the term "soft Haredism". "Softness" does not necessarily mean religious pragmatism, but rather the ability to manage in a social reality of fluid religious boundaries. It is an approach that rests on the ability of *teshuva* rabbis to imagine, via the concept of *teshuva* and the possibility of a "turning of the heart," a continuum between the "Haredi Jew" (embodiment of a standard of religious perfection) and the tradition-observing Mizrahi Jew who is not Haredi. Naturally, this kind of situation clearly foments great tension and is rife with paradox and contradiction. It produces voices of fervent, externalized, purist, and

radical religiosity, but also frequently gives rise to complex thinking, a defusing of tensions, and even pragmatism.

7. “Doing” Faith: Women Motivational Speakers in the Provinces of “Soft” Haredism

A salient feature of “soft” Haredism is constant movement along an imaginary continuum between religious radicalism and religious pragmatism informed by the world of symbols and rituals associated with the *teshuva* movement. The anthropologist Tamar El-Or, who observed one of spaces of soft Haredism during the early 2000s, called them “provinces of *teshuva*” (El-Or 2006), or places marked both by eruptions of religious devotion and by the breaching of religious boundaries. This type of fluid reality invites what, in everyday language, is referred to as constant “motivational” work, i.e., the effort to continually increase religious feeling. One change undergone by the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement over the years is the shift from a discourse of bringing people back to religious observance (religious recruitment) to a discourse of religious strengthening (community preservation). A prominent feature of this development is the appearance of a new model of gendered religious authority: “women motivational speakers” (Leon and Lavie 2013).

The women motivational speaker model is not unique to the Mizrahi-Haredi world. In the last decade or two, a counterpart model has appeared in Israel’s Religious Zionist communities. However, the two models differ significantly. The Religious Zionist model is part of a trend toward reviving religious authority in that sector, where liberal and conservative forces are split on the gender issue (El-Or 2002). In the case of the Mizrahi-Haredi community, authority is very limited and is complementary to the mission of the *teshuva* movement activists—that of strengthening religious observance. Moreover, while the Religious Zionist model takes a scholarly approach based on knowledge acquired in Torah institutions, the Mizrahi-Haredi model features a popular approach that springs from within the community, everyday life, and the call to strengthen religious observance in the face of an image of weakening faith (El-Or 2006).

One example of such a motivational speaker is Ahuva Arad, whose official webpage describes her as “a young mother of four living in Petah Tikva”. She sums up her life story as a “spiritual journey” that began 20 years ago. She tells how her return to religious observance led, over time, to familiarity with the Breslov branch of Hasidic Judaism; in addition to Torah classes meant to spark religious awakening, she developed an entire set of rituals associated with the religious world experienced by women. While rabbis such as Chaim Rabi focus on maintaining the everyday *halachic* life in the communities they have established, women like Ahuva Arad, known in the provinces of *teshuva* as “*rabbaniyot*”, work on strengthening or invigorating religious life by means of what may be termed “doing faith”.

The designation “*rabbani*” is not self-evident. In Jewish tradition, especially in its Haredi form, the term is used exclusively for women married to rabbis. However, “*rabbani*” is also now being used for women like Ahuva Arad based on their intensive “doing faith” *teshuva* activity. A review and observation of classes taught by prominent *rabbaniyot* such as Ahuva Arad, Yemima Mizrachi, Vered Siani, Ruth Shemesh, Ronit Barash, Lisa Dadon, and Shimrit Ohana, most of them of Mizrahi background or married to Mizrahim, points to four main elements of “doing faith”:

The first element of “doing faith” is to broaden women’s practical religious knowledge. Each *rabbani* has her own cycle of classes and her own audience of local women. The material covered in the classes includes Bible stories or *midrashim* (textual interpretations) from the Oral Torah. The content of these classes offers a window on, and an opportunity for, reflective interpretation of everyday life, with an emphasis on home life. Major themes include parent-child relations, relations between spouses, the functioning of the home, fertility, and childrearing.

The second element is that of promoting ritual activity performed by women. The aim here is to give prominence to rituals associated with the feminine and familial lifecycle—rituals said to constitute *segulot*—practices of magical influence. Some of these practices are

ethnic, such as the henna ceremony for brides in Yemenite communities; others are *halachic*, as in the taking of challah (the burning of a small portion of a large, specifically-defined quantity of dough; for an interpretive analysis of this ritual, see [Neriya-Ben Shahar 2015](#)). Still other rituals are based in the Jewish calendar, such as gatherings on Rosh Chodesh (the first day of the Hebrew month).

The third element is a focus on the home. The concept of “home” has a dual meaning here: a physical space associated with the family unit, and a spiritual space meant to reflect religious partnership. The “home” is represented by motivational *rabbaniyot* as a wellspring of spiritual and sacred enterprise of the kind for which women take responsibility. Per this approach, home is not merely a religious-activity space to which women have been relegated by *halacha* ([Sered 1992](#)). Rather, it is the heart of everyday religious life. The woman is responsible for the sanctity of the home; she is expected to undertake its spiritual management. The home is the front line in the battle to repair the world; it is not a place of rest, but rather a source of constant movement and feminine activism. The home can also be a venue for women’s prayer gatherings, classes, and rituals/ceremonies.

A fourth element of “doing faith” has to do with *segulot* and miracles. Doing faith is a kind of gateway to a mysterious and liminal space where male authority is not absolute—the world of *segulot* and miracles. Classes and rituals (these things are often combined) are accompanied by narratives of a genre that may be termed “miracle stories”: routine actions in which the miracle is the result of deep faith that changes reality. Motivational *rabbaniyot* commonly share with their female audience stories of miraculous events that took place thanks to their guidance. Their aim is to teach faith. Many of the stories are linked to simple devotion and the intention to give that faith practical form.

The impression one gets from all of these activities is of a desire to inculcate a conservative, religious, gendered worldview aligned with a “natural” separation between women and men, and marked by ritual creation that is both dynamic and closely supervised. If men are meant to specialize in Torah learning and to serve as agents of religious knowledge in the home and community space, women are meant to become experts in ritual and agents of faith. However, the fact that this system perpetuates the traditionally gendered structure of the home and its maintenance does not translate into acceptance of the idea of a spiritual hierarchy between the genders; rather, it translates into a call for holistic spiritual partnership that is less a reflection of male demands than an opportunity for the range of female activity to be fully realized. The motivational *rabbaniyot* serve as agents of change advocating women’s religious activism within the context of a vibrant *teshuva* movement. At the same time, they also serve as guardians of the boundary of that vibrancy. This may be viewed as part of the dynamic of soft Haredism, as it does not constitute a trend toward breaching boundaries, but rather, and primarily, of fully realizing the potential of what is permitted to women within community bounds.

8. Conclusions

In this article, I offered an extended case study of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement in Israel. I have tried to divert attention from the movement’s political influence to that of its religious impact. The Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement, with its well-established and institutionalized communities and its rabbis serving as key local figures, has indeed played a highly significant role in the political empowerment process ([Lehmann and Siebzehner 2006](#)). Evidence of this can be found in the Shas party electorate’s growth over the past two decades by 150,000 votes—a relatively large number in Israeli terms—through the party politicians’ reconnection to the “field,” i.e., to *teshuva* movement activity.

In addition to the movement’s clear political gains as embodied in the success of the ethnic political party Shas, its social effects and influence on religious infrastructures merit attention. I have illustrated this impact in terms of the change sparked in Mizrahi congregations due to Haredization processes. Mizrahi synagogue worshipers did not become Haredi, but the social infrastructures on which their religious life rests, with the community of worshippers at its center, definitely changed. At the core of the new

religious community are *hozrim biteshuva* and *mitchazkim* (people “strengthening” their religious observance) who see Haredi society as a model and a source of inspiration; the oral tradition is “Orthodoxized” as it gives way to written *halacha* and custom; the congregational leadership is taken over by rabbinical figures hailing, for the most part, from the Haredi yeshiva world; the synagogue space becomes a hub of symbiotic but tense interaction between easygoing and stringent religiosity; splits and rifts arise less from the choice of an ethnic style than from the manifestation of a religious style; women are expected to adhere to strict gender separation but also to engage in religious activism. Some congregations, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas, become fully Haredi communities. This reality appears to be creating a new communal environment whose core is Haredi and whose periphery consists of [non-Haredi] tradition-observers, whose interaction is based on what I have termed “soft Haredism”.

An intriguing question is that of whether, and how, the new model will persist into the future. Experience teaches that Haredization processes produce both soft Haredism and reactions featuring alternative approaches, including secular ones, especially under conditions of middle-class mobility. One flourishing development along these lines, which might be termed the “Masortiyut Project,” sees Mizrahi intellectuals and activists trying to promote a moderate, liberal, easygoing version of Mizrahi religiosity. Another impact is the presence of religious life along a social continuum between Haredism and secularism. This reality creates not only pockets of religious devoutness or secularism, but also sites characterized by an intermediate position whose roots lie outside of Haredi society but which is replete with symbolic expressions originating in the theology and practice of the Haredi *teshuva* movement and the dynamic of religious strengthening. A spirited expression of this can be seen in a pop music genre that reflects the religious-communal world from which its performers emerged—a world shaped by the dynamic of the *teshuva* movement. These artists are creating a new and of-the-moment style of music that, in word and sound, integrates expressions of faith rooted in the discourse of religious strengthening with the desire for freedom and liberation that mark the culture of young Westerners. This is also part of the communal impact of the Mizrahi-Haredi *teshuva* movement.

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