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Next Year in Jerusalem: Constructions of Israeli Nationalism in High Holiday Rituals

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This article explores the intersection of nationalism and Jewish identity maintenance with High Holiday celebrations carried out in the Diaspora. Using directed interviews and participant observation, I took part in the rituals of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) to uncover the way that American Jews and Israelis living in the Jewish Diaspora create and sustain a dialogue with their “traditional” homeland, Israel. However, the connections between Jews and this homeland have shifted dramatically in recent times. Although Israel encourages all persons of Jewish descent to immigrate to the Holy Land, a complex web of multiple nationalities and identities is at play in the lives of Jews who live in the Diaspora. Through religious rituals, members of the Jewish faith – whether Orthodox, secular, or something in between – develop and preserve a philosophy of a world Jewish identity with surprising results. Although the rituals themselves may be used to encourage solidarity with the state of Israel, individual Jews now find themselves re-negotiating their sense of belonging. As toasts of “Next year in Jerusalem!” are made, the complexities of national loyalty, ethnicity, and religious practice merge to form a question on the lips of many Jewish people: What is a Jew, and who decides?

Seventy Faces

I set out to explore the complexities of Israeli nationalism and how it is constructed through High Holy Day (High Holiday) rituals, specifically those of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Unsurprisingly, these complexities are not separate from the larger issues of Jewish identity – a reality that both enriched my participation and observance in High Holiday rituals and frustrated my efforts to extract clear examples of nationalism from seemingly apolitical religious observances. To be more precise, I found it is almost impossible to

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disentangle Jewish rituals from struggles for Jewishness, traditions from ethnicity, and the rhetoric of Israeli nationalism from Bible-based liturgies.

That is to say, Israeli nationalism is seen in High Holiday rituals not overtly, but rather as part of a largely indistinguishable whole with Jewish practices in general. Unhelpfully, the observation of an onlooker, however much she may desire a complete apprehension of ritual practices, can be illusive and incomplete. In addition, it must be recognized that the emotive experiences invoked by religious ritual are as diverse for each practitioner as are his or her political beliefs. Therefore I do not intend to represent my observations as indicative of Jewish Diasporic understanding of Israeli nationalism as a whole, but only as characteristic of a single facet of Jewish experience: that which I was privileged to access by members of the Jewish community of Knoxville, Tennessee.

With these limitations in mind, I have drawn the following generalized conclusion based both on my participation in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services and from conversations with Jewish participants, namely: the symbols needed to sustain a connection between the state of Israel and Jews in the Diaspora are embedded in the minds of practitioners and subtly permeate the rituals themselves, even in the smallest detail. As David Kertzer explains, "Identification of the local with the national can take place only through the use of symbols that identify the one with the other" (Kertzer 1988: 21). In this exercise, "the local" must be seen as the pockets of Jewish communities, or even individual Jews themselves, in the Diaspora; similarly, "the national" refers to the modern state of Israel, to which all Jews are said to belong (Kimmerling 2001: 206). For example, the language of Hebrew is used not only in Hebrew *siddurim* (prayerbooks) for regular Shabbat services but also in the special liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the *machzor*. Because Hebrew was resurrected (or reinstated) as the national language of Israel, its use in holiday services serves as a bond that reaches in two directions: both to Jews of history and to those who live in the Israel of today. It is a chanted liturgical chain that stretches simultaneously into the past and across the Atlantic Ocean, to *Eretz Israel* (Land of Israel).

This does not imply an inherent similitude or explicit representation between the *Bene Israel* (sons of Israel) of the Bible and the modern state of Israel. Indeed, the dichotomy between the semantic meaning of the biblical Israel (which can refer to a single man, the patriarch Jacob of Genesis 32:28, or the "nation" of descendants of which he is the mytho-historical ancestor) and the significance of the word "Israel" when it refers to the modern state is compellingly overlooked in discourses on ethnic and national identity. As a collective, the biblical "Israel" therefore refers only to a people of Levantine extraction, whereas the modern state of Israel is composed of at least seven major ethnic identities (Kimmerling 2001: 11). In the modern interpretation of Jewish liturgy and literature, in which the *Bene Israel* are frequently mentioned, this contrast is dismissed via a politicized understanding of the unbroken continuation of Jewish ethnic identity. It is important, however, to keep two things in mind. First is that Jewish rituals and traditions have indeed maintained a degree of ethnic continuity throughout the Diaspora; although, given centuries of oppression and assimilation, it is impossible to measure the extent of this continuity. The second, and most important for the purposes of this paper, is that Judaism is perfectly comfortable with the sort of paradoxes and inconsistencies that send its Abrahamic religious cousins, Christianity and Islam, scrambling for rigid explanations that silence dissent. Critical examination to the point of disagreement is encouraged. As the saying goes, "There are seventy faces to the Torah: turn it and turn it, for everything is in it" (Bamidbar Rabba 13:15).

A Sweet New Year

The Rosh Hashanah service I attended took place not in the city's Conservative synagogue or Reform Temple, but in a hotel on the west side of town deemed large enough to accommodate the influx of Jews, American and Israeli alike, who would flock there for the holiday. The local Hasidic Orthodox rabbi who led the services had checked into the hotel with his family for the weekend to avoid driving during the holy celebration. In accordance with *halakhah* (Jewish law), some participants had booked rooms in the hotel to avoid driving on Shabbat as well. I arrived at the hotel that Friday evening with an Israeli named Talia, a friend and unabashed Zionist, and our children in tow.

The atmosphere was a far cry from the welcoming, more personal setting of what is commonly known as the "Chabad House," the suburban home of the rabbi and his wife, where Orthodox Shabbat services are normally performed and where I had frequently been honored to participate. The freezing lobby boasted no helpful sign, and the young hotel staff – no doubt bewildered by the entourage of black-coated Hasidic men milling around – had resolved to not make eye contact. A group of three dark, lean men stood talking quietly together in a hall just beyond the lobby, their *kippot* (traditional skull caps) a reassuring symbol of direction amidst the chaos of four children demanding to be led somewhere, anywhere. "Aha, Israelis!" Talia beamed with a mixture of excitement and relief. "That is always where you want to go," she announced, without a trace of irony.

We made our way to the back of the hotel, exchanging *shaloms* (Hello) and *shanh tovahs* (Happy New Year) as we went, where a group of Jews mingled just outside the makeshift sanctuary: a bleak conference room filled with rows of chairs, divided by a bamboo screen into separate sections for men and women, and headed at the front by a cabinet containing the Torah scroll. Directly in front of the women's section, a folding table had been provided on which dozens of white tea-light candles had been arranged. Talia and I had arrived just in time to take part in a Shabbat ritual that is purely under the purvey of women: the lighting of the candles.

We're about to light, come light, get the girls, come light the candles, are you coming to light? A dozen invitations were simultaneously extended as we drew near. Talia and I hefted our daughters onto our hips, clapped *kippot* onto the heads of our sons, and entered the sanctuary. Before the flickering table, I slowly and carefully recited the blessing, conscious of my imperfect Hebrew, while Talia tossed it off in the same confident mutter she uses to recite all Jewish rituals. Our daughters covered their eyes with their hands as they saw us do, at three and four years already conscious of the gender division of this practice – lighting the holiday candles is the right of women, hearkening back to the days when Sarah lit the candles in her tent with Abraham. We blessed the boys, imparting a wish that they mimic Ephraim and Menashe, the grandsons of the patriarch Jacob ("In time to come, the people of Israel will use you as a blessing. They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe,'" Genesis 48:20) and then the girls, that they become like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel – the matriarchs of Judaism.

Talia and I deposited the children upstairs with the rabbi's sister Tikva, where games and songs were being offered to distract youngsters while their parents prayed. Our kids joined the circle, the girls entranced by Tikva's song and its fingerplay: "HaShem offered Torah to all the other nations, but they said 'No way!' The Jews said, 'We'll take it, thank you Lord!' and they practiced it till this day!" The boys looked dubious.

Downstairs, the sanctuary was filled with the low rhythmic droning of *davening* (prayer) coming from the men's section. Unencumbered by the command to pray and

therefore at ease to enjoy themselves, the women all greeted each other amiably, complimented jewelry, and asked after relatives. I flipped through the pages of the *machzor*, turning over in my head the connection between the biblical creation of man and Rosh Hashanah, literally the “head of the year,” the day on which God created Adam. This formation is done in the context of the creation of the universe, wherein mankind is the final product at the end of a tiring six days of God’s hard work. And, lest we forget, this process of creation is based on words: God speaks, and things are. In Genesis 1, nothing undergoes a process of becoming. Light, dark, earth, water, stars, and sky all exist at the very instance of divine speech. This is not unconnected to a curious linguistic feature of biblical Hebrew: there is no term for “thing.” To express the concept of “thing,” or “objects” or “stuff,” one uses the term *dvarim* – literally, words. Words are active objects, powerful expressions of holy will translated into material, into actions. Kertzer’s observation that “through ritual, beliefs about the universe come to be acquired, reinforced, and eventually changed” seemed to have a double meaning in the context of the Hebrew words used to celebrate the creation of the universe during Rosh Hashanah (Kertzer 1988: 9).

After the service, we were directed to another hotel next door, where a larger room was better equipped to house the dinner. This exodus required a walk in the rain, either via the short way – up a muddy hill – or the long way, around to the front entrance. A number of us paused just underneath the awning debating which course to take, but Rabbi Yakov strode out in front: “We’ll go up the hill, just like Moses up the mountain. Come, children!” he directed cheerfully, grabbing the hand of a small girl next to him. The adults guided the little ones and elderly up the soggy incline – *careful mother, watch your step; hold my hand sweetie; shanah tovah, shanah tovah; hello, here you go, yes it’s very wet* – and into the dining hall. Tables had been placed around the room to seat more than eighty. They were already covered with food – various salads, dips, plates of gefilte fish, and *challah*, the ubiquitous braided bread – in an array that was reminiscent of the oft-repeated Jewish maxim: “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.”

The rabbi blessed the wine and the bread, and the meal began in earnest. First, apples dipped in honey to symbolize a sweet new year. The *challah*, normally eaten with salt, was also dipped in honey. Pomegranate seeds, symbolizing the good deeds that should be performed, were eaten as well. The salads were followed by hot dishes, potato-stuffed pastries, kugels, cobblers, and pies, the serving of which was interspersed with outbursts of joyous toasts: “*L’chayim, l’chayim!*” (To life, to life!). Rabbi Yakov made his way to each table, his wine glass constantly refilled: “Who will drink a *l’chayim* with me? Who will drink?! Happy new year, *l’chayim!*”

Although wholly enjoyable, it became apparent to me (albeit through a hazy perception induced by numerous *l’chayims*) that there was very little in the Rosh Hashanah evening celebration to which I could point as an example of overtly nationalist symbolism. However, as would continue to hold true for the remainder of the celebration and for the Yom Kippur observance, the very religiosity of the holiday is grounded in Israeliness, as Israel is seen as the symbolic home of all Jewish people. Its origins harken back to Leviticus 23:24-25, where the Jews are instructed to keep the day as one of “a memorial with a blast (as in, of a trumpet).” The sounding of the ram’s horn, or *shofar*, is a continuation of this biblical command. However, the modern practice of Rosh Hashanah is largely based on traditions that developed during the course of the Jewish Diaspora, since the first century CE. If ritual is “an important means of influencing people’s ideas about political events, political policies, political systems, and political leaders,” then surely there was

something in the ceremony that underscored the most politically-charged of all Jewish sentiments: Israeli nationalism (Kertzer 1988: 79). As I had been told by several Jews before, "Everything in Judaism is political."

There are, to be sure, cognitive messages in all rituals (Kertzer 1988: 99), whether they are religious or not. And although there are no glaringly political messages in Rosh Hashanah celebration, its rituals are centered on ethnoreligious practices. It is this component of ethnicity which must be kept in mind to uncover the basis for Israeli nationalism in the High Holidays. Calhoun links ethnicity and nationalism in just this way: "Above all ... what we need to see is the extent to which the discourse on nationalism itself presumes a discourse on ethnic origins" (Calhoun 1997: 56). However awkward, difficult, or complicated the process may have been, it remains that the ethnicity preserved and cherished over hundreds of years in the Diaspora is uniquely Jewish, no matter what the country of origin; but the international identity of Jewishness is distinctly Israeli. Israel's Declaration of Independence takes pains to illustrate this: "[T]he Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious, and national identity was formed. Here they ... created a culture of national and universal significance" (Kimmerling 2001: 199). Moreover, Israel has continually made efforts to sustain its argument that "the Israeli state belong[s] to anyone defined as a Jew, wherever he or she may be, even if he or she has never considered immigrating to Israel or requesting citizenship" (Ibid. 206).

I had witnessed the underpinnings of nationalism in Rosh Hashanah, if only in the nostalgic recollections of those who had previously lived in or celebrated holidays in Israel. However, key-informant interviews had indicated that more overt connections to the ideology of Israeli nationalism were to be found in the observance of Yom Kippur--whether in prayer, ritual, media coverage, or even the thoughts of individuals.

Everything Is Coming from the Bible

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, occurs nine days after Rosh Hashanah. The period in between is referred to as *Yomim Norim*, the Days of Awe wherein a Jewish individual may repent of the past year's sins in order to be purified for the upcoming year. In Israel, this period is marked with a flurry of apologies, cards, or phone calls directed to distant relatives, to friends, to acquaintances. An atmosphere of compassion and kindness is generated by religious and secular Jews alike, as people inwardly review the past year's good and bad deeds. This benevolent aura is lacking in the United States, forcing American Jews to try to internally create a week of awe and repentance without the external support of visible Jewish culture and under circumstances that are visibly no different than the rest of the year.

I returned to the hotel for a far more subdued service. For observant Jews, Yom Kippur is marked by fasting and abstention from an exhaustive list of prohibited actions and items, with the intention of turning one's thoughts solely to the transgressions committed in the past. The Rabbi and his attendants were dressed in layers of ceremonial clothing: first the *tzitzit*, a vest-like undergarment with protruding fringe, covered by modest long-sleeved white shirts and black pants. Then the *beketshe*, a long black frock coat, covered by a long white robe called a *kittel*. Normally used as a burial shroud, the *kittel*'s color symbolizes the purification of sin. The long white prayer shawls that covered their heads gave an almost biblical character to the scene, which was undermined somewhat by

the wearing of black canvas sneakers, leather being among the items forbidden on Yom Kippur. In the *machzor's* reading for the day, references to Israel were more frequent: the liturgy begins with the famous *Kol Nidre*, the releasing of Jews by God from all and any vows made during the past year, and continues "Pardon shall be granted to the whole congregation of Israel."

These words struck me as very important. While the rest of the reading continued, I focused on the idea of the congregation of Israel. The words of the *machzor* – indeed, of most *siddurim* – were composed at a time when an Israeli state existed only as a future hope, a far-off dream. The "congregation of Israel," then, referred to Jews all over the world. Now, in addition to encompassing the Jewish people practicing in the farthest corners of the earth, "the congregation of Israel" also refers to a very real political entity. This is the uniqueness of Zionism: it both strengthens primordial Jewish histories and provides a locus from which to orient normative Jewish practices. As Benedict Anderson writes, "The significance of Zionism and the birth of Israel is that the former marks the reimagining of an ancient religious community as a nation ... and the latter charts an alchemic change from wandering devotee to local patriot" (Anderson 2006: 149). This reimagining is key to understanding how the modern state of Israel has altered Judaism. Unlike proselytizing religions, which can expect to increase their numbers through conversions, Judaism's survival has remained reliant on the continuation of its rituals and traditions through generations of family. In many ways, this focus on family is not unique to Judaism but holds true in many different cultural contexts: "Some ... relationships, like family and ethnic bonds, seem so basic that people ... cannot imagine themselves without their attachment to these relationships" (Calhoun 1997: 30-31). For modern Jews, these attachments are not just ethnic bonds but national ones now, too.

The bonds of ethnicity are seen as occupying "something of an intermediary position between kinship and nationality" (Calhoun 1997:40). Ethnic identities, however, can divide as well as unify, as conflicts between members of Israel's multiethnic society have shown. Calhoun describes identities as being produced "in worlds of plural ethnic identities" (1997: 42). This means that the tensions produced by multiple ethnic identities constructed in a variety of contexts both create and sustain those identities.

In addition to ethnic conflicts, the modern state of Israel also struggles with a competing duality of the secular and the religious. The largely nonreligious secular majority is nonetheless subject to rulings made by Orthodox religious courts. To complicate matters, Israeli Supreme Court rulings offer varying interpretations as to the role religion plays in nationalism. Judge Shim Agranat declared, "In the history of the Jewish people, the racial-national [sic] principle was joined with religious uniqueness, and between these two principles a connection was formed that cannot be broken ... The principles of nationality and religion are bound up with one another and cannot be separated" (Kimmerling 2001: 200). Compare this to a completely different assertion by the Israeli Supreme Court: "Israel is not a theocratic state, because it is not the religion that orders the life of the citizen, but the law" (Kimmerling 2001: 201).

I asked another Israeli friend, Ori, how these seemingly disparate ideas can co-exist. The answer was immediate: "Maybe the law is in charge of the citizen, but where does the law come from? From the Bible. Everything is coming from the Bible."

Reality Is a Plane Ticket

There is at least one major difference between the Judaism before the birth of modern Israel and its practice afterwards. Israel, of all the places on earth, is now seen as “a focus ... of Jewish identification for all Diaspora Jews, [and] as a locus for Jewish identity and experience – whether physical or virtual – to be lived through” (Mittelberg 2007: 40). This attachment to the “Holy Land,” although mediated by a host of religious associations and symbols (Kimmerling 2001: 189), has nonetheless manifested in one of Benedict Anderson’s alchemic changes: this time, Jews see themselves as a global society, a political and national community working toward a common goal. I spoke with Lilly, a facilitator and educator in the Knoxville Jewish community, who lamented a disruption or weakening in the connection between Jews worldwide. “Israel used to be upheld as this high standard, a moral authority,” she explained. The concept of Israel, a land of hard-working, idealistic young kibbutz farmers transforming the desert into the Promised Land, was an amazing one during her childhood. “Now, it’s not so amazing anymore.”

The actuality of having one’s historical dream fulfilled is, for some Jews, a little less magical than their parents and grandparents might have hoped. During the exile, Lilly explained, there was a hope for return to Israel, a hope of being safe and free, that united Jewish communities around the world. “Now, the reality is a plane ticket,” she sighed. “Israel’s reputation is tarnished: it’s no longer a light on the hill.”

This speaks not only to questions of Arab-Israeli conflicts but also to the inner tensions existing between the Jews of Israel. The summer of 2009 saw large-scale riots over parking garages open on Shabbat in Jerusalem. The Orthodox community practices a sort of media censorship by encouraging their teenage boys to burn bus stops with immoral advertisements that show a little too much skin. These incidents, and many others like them, are a window into the religious frictions that seek to define, or re-define, which version of Judaism Israel represents. According to Lilly, the riots over driving on Shabbat beg the question, “Whose Jewish are we?” Both Lilly and Talia expressed the belief that internal strife, not Middle Eastern security issues, is the biggest challenge facing Israel today. If national identity is “rooted in terms, values, symbols, and collective memory” then the Israeli debate over which values hold sway – secular or religious – is a very real one (Kimmerling 2001: 174).

The Stones Are Screaming At You

The phrase “Next year in Jerusalem!” is recited at the end of the Yom Kippur service, a sort of lifeline in my quest to find the political in High Holiday celebrations. This phrase is also repeated at the conclusion of Pesach (Passover) and is so steeped with meaning for individual Jews that exploring its connotations yielded a rich outpouring of stories. Given that it is impossible for all Jews to spend next Yom Kippur in Jerusalem, the expression is heavily nuanced by personal interpretation. Maya, an Israeli homemaker, felt that this phrase was “the worst part of the ceremony, like a stab,” because it reminded her of how she had left her homeland – first for Italy and then for America. All her grandparents had dreamt about, she told me, was to be in Israel; so for Maya, Yom Kippur became a day of

guilt and negative feelings due to not living in Israel. Thinking back to being in Jerusalem on Yom Kippur, she added, "There is an undeniable connection. Jerusalem has something I cannot describe. When you are there, holiness is all around you."

Similar sentiments were echoed by Lilly, who described Jerusalem as "the heart-beat of the earth. If we have peace there, the whole world is healthy." But, she added, the construction of an internal connection with Jerusalem and Israel is difficult to constantly maintain. This cultivation of attachment is even more trying for Israelis now in America, who describe the experience of living or being in Jerusalem in terms heavily laden with spiritualism and esotericism. "Here, I don't know how to teach my kids how to be Jewish," Talia admitted. "In Jerusalem, the stones are screaming at you. You are walking in the City of David. You go out, and here it is! Here is the history, the home."

American Jews cannot, of course, experience the same connection to Israel that is felt by natives of the country. Adam, a university student just months from embarking on a three-year voluntary service stint with the Israeli Defense Force, remarked on the seeming insincerity of repeating "Next year in Jerusalem!" by those who have no intention of going. "Israel is not our home, but it's our sanctuary. People want to go but have no desire to go. If you really want to celebrate Yom Kippur in Jerusalem, you buy the plane ticket and just go over there." I asked him to explain further: how could someone want to go but have no desire to do so? "Everything has to make sense for you?" he rejoined. "Jews don't need to make sense of this in their hearts for it to be true."

Maya would agree. For all of the negativity personally associated with the phrase, she sees it as "a statement of saying no matter who we are, our hearts are always there. We swear it's a bond that cannot be forgotten. We will always be there, even if we have never been there."

Bitter Herbs, Apples in Honey

The practice of Judaism, much like the question of ethnicity in Israel, is full of contradictions. These seeming flaws, some Jews tell me, are exactly what give the religion its ability to adapt, to re-interpret and re-invent itself – the same ability that has sustained Judaism through years of exile from Israel. Others credit the Jewish people's survival to their adherence to traditions. These two apparently disparate notions of continuity are factually linked in Judaism's history, religion, and ritual: contradictions that coexist – the bitter herbs of Passover, the sweet apples of the New Year.

From an anthropological perspective, the practice of tying the periphery, the Diaspora, to the center, Israel (Kertzer 1988: 23), may be a more significant way to encounter Judaism's durability. Now, however, the center is no longer Jewishness, but Israel. Even non-Zionist Jews acknowledge that the existence of the modern state of Israel has dynamically changed Jewishness in general. Lilly remarked that the recitation of the words "Next year in Jerusalem!" by Jews all over the world drew them all in with the power of a shared connection to the state of Israel. Jackie's congregation alters the phrase in their services: "Next year in New Jerusalem!" This underscores the Messianic customs in her branch of the religion, a sect largely dismissed by other Jews, who do not accept Jesus of

Nazareth as their Messiah, as “not real Judaism.” But, as the conflicts in Israel between religious Orthodox Jews and secular Zionist Jews demonstrate, “Whose Jewish are we?” is not a question pointed at Messianic Jews alone.

This quest for Israeli identity has far-reaching implications. David Mittelberg calls for “a grappling among Israelis with the issue of *their own* Jewish identity and culture [that] must include *a continuous dialogue with Jewish peers from the Diaspora ... to understand and deal with the complexity of Jewish identity*” (Mittelberg 2007: 41, author’s emphasis). Maya attributed these struggles over what it means to be Jewish in Israel to the nation’s relative youth: sixty years is not long enough for a country to sort out such complex issues. Talia sees the problem as being far more immediately dangerous. “When the dream [of Israel] comes true, you are kind of going in a circle. Because if you don’t take the dream, it will be taken away from you.” From Talia’s perspective, if Israel (and the rest of the Jewish world) does not resolve its Jewish conflicts, the lack of a cohesive national identity will destroy the country from the inside out.

The boundaries between Israeli nationalism and religion may be blurred in many societal spaces (Kimmerling 2001: 173), but this doesn’t mean that the boundaries, even the blurry ones, don’t constitute a rich, complex whole. Rabbinic Judaism has always existed in an environment where navigating for survival was perceived as of utmost importance, where adjustments and modernization were accepted and interpreted according to Halakhic law in order to maintain Judaism’s vitality in face of exile and persecution. Therefore the Judaism that survives today is the inheritor of an expressive, diverse system of beliefs and rituals formed over 3,000 years by millions of Jews in hundreds of countries. The interdependence and cooperation of various communities “is a *sine qua non* for the continuity of the Jewish people” (Mittelberg 2007: 44).

The links between these communities were built on rituals and traditions, used not just to reflect connections that already existed but to constitute them as well (Kertzer 1988: 25). In Judaism, these religious rituals, such as the ones performed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, are used to strengthen Jewish ethnic ties, ties which have ultimately found their expression in Israel. Although the political undertones of Jewish religious ritual may not always be apparent, for many Jews they have always been there. According to Aviel Roshwald, the relationship between the Jewish religion, its rituals, and the modern state of Israel has to do with the “intertwined concepts of Chosen People, Covenant, and Promised Land. God has chosen to offer the Israelites the privilege of binding themselves in Covenant with Him ... in exchange for which they are to gain possession of the Promised Land. Their continued existence [there] is made conditional on their committed adherence to the Law, across the generations” (Roshwald 2006: 168-169). Talia echoes this reasoning. The rituals, she explains, “are about the family. The family is God’s command, and Israel is God’s reward that we have followed the rituals.” Kertzer has observed that ritual is capable of “serv[ing] political organizations by producing bonds of solidarity without requiring uniformity of belief” (Kertzer 1988: 67). In this case, High Holiday rituals can be understood as serving Israeli nationalism where there is at least a modicum of agreement as to the religious beliefs. However, in the absence of comprehensive accord as to what, specifically, is the “Jewish” nature of the state, Israel’s identity – and that of many Jews worldwide – hangs in the balance.

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About the Author

Amelia Caron is currently a graduate student at the University of Tennessee pursuing a Master's degree in Cultural Anthropology. As an undergraduate in the College Scholars Program, her program combined historical linguistics, textual criticism, and Classical and religious studies, with a focus on ancient languages and cultures of the Mediterranean. She completed a senior thesis, *Nephesh: an Ethnography of Israelite Purity Laws*, which combined a philological examination of the Hebrew word *nephesh* in Biblical texts with a comparative anthropological study of the relationship of blood to the ideas of sanctity and pollution. Her graduate studies have focused on Jewish identity, Israeli nationalism, and the transnational/immigrant nature of modern Israeli society and the Jewish Diaspora. Under her advisor, Dr. Tricia Redeker Hepner, Amelia is currently researching the *Beta Israel* (Ethiopian Jews), differential absorption experiences in Israeli society, and the effect of multiple immigrations on community-building and ethnic and religious self-identification.

About the Advisor

Dr. Tricia Redeker Hepner is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Tennessee. Her primary research agenda focuses on the political and legal dilemmas of refugees and asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa country of Eritrea. She has secondary research interests in the Great Lakes region of Africa and northern Uganda in particular. She is co-founder, with Dr. Rosalind I.J. Hackett (Department of Religious Studies) of the Gulu Study and Service Abroad Program (GSSAP) and is a core faculty member in the Disasters, Displacement, and Human Rights (DDHR) program in Anthropology. Her research on Eritrea and its diasporas has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and others. In addition to numerous journal articles, she has published two books: *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors and Exiles: Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), and *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the 21st Century*, co-edited with David O’Kane (Berghahn Books, 2009). A third book, *Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa’s Great Lakes Region*, co-edited with Kenneth Omeje, is in progress. Dr. Hepner is currently doing comparative research on Eritrean asylum seekers and human rights organizing in the United States, Europe, and Ethiopia and serves as Eritrea Country Coordinator for Amnesty International.