

**“The Light within Me”:  
celebrating the self through Jewish holidays in Israeli state education**

Sari R. Alfi-Nissan, Shlomo Guzman-Carmeli, and Rachel Werczberger

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how popular psychology discourse is translated and embedded into Jewish holiday-related activities in Israeli primary schools. Since pre-state Hebrew (Jewish) education in Israel, Jewish holidays have been used to promote Zionist socialisation and integrated into the ethos of nation-building. We followed the celebration of Jewish holidays in an ethnographic study of an Israeli primary school and through the content analysis of Israeli primary schools’ websites and teachers’ blogs from various geographic and social sites. We found that social agents in Israeli state education today reconstruct Jewish holidays to celebrate the self, by using religious symbols as metaphors for the ‘inner self’ to encourage children’s self-reflection and self-belief. We argue that in contrast to the claim that discourses of psychologisation and individualisation diminish religious and collective practices, celebrating Jewish holidays through the discourse of popular psychology in Israeli state education strengthens both individualistic and collective communal ideals, while reconstructing religious narratives and symbols to become more accessible to secular young individuals. The study illustrates the paths of popular psychology, religion, and spirituality in late modernity by showing how rebranding Jewish holidays in Israeli culture today does not necessarily reflect linear processes of individualisation or secularisation, as the self is celebrated within the community and through ethno-national and religious meanings.

## KEY WORDS

Jewish holidays; education; popular psychology discourse; psychologisation; individualisation

CONTACT [sari.alfi-nissan@area.ox.ac.uk](mailto:sari.alfi-nissan@area.ox.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Our pupils in the first grade and their teacher conducted an exciting activity about the light within them. In the spirit of the celebration of lights, Hanukah [...], the children talked about the transformation of their appearance when observing their shadows. They talked about their aspirations and then each pupil spoke about the light within them.

This translated excerpt from a website of an Israeli state school describes an activity for first-grade pupils celebrating the Jewish holiday of Hanukah, known as *hag h'aorot*, 'the holiday of lights'. During this activity, the pupils were asked to discuss their ambitions and reflect on their appearance and emotions. Thus, the celebration of the holiday of lights was used as a vehicle to inspire self-reflection and the celebration of one's unique self. The title of the activity, "The Light within Me", reflects this goal.

Since the earliest days of Israel's education system, in the pre-state (Yishuv) era, the celebration of Jewish holidays has been a central component in the school curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Typically, holidays were celebrated in Israeli *mamlakhti* state schools from a Zionist perspective echoing ethno-nationalist sentiments (Shoham 2017).<sup>2</sup> The educational emphasis on the Jewish calendar has continued until today. In this study, we show how the global discourse of popular psychology, emphasising 'self-growth', 'positive thinking', and self-reliance, is now being embedded in holiday-related curricula in Israeli state primary schools. This process relies on using religious symbols as metaphors for the 'inner self' to rebrand the Jewish holidays by "joining unlike things together" (Fenwick 2000, 56).

Scholars of late modernity have noted the popularisation of psychology and its integration into everyday life in Western culture (Furedi 2003; Illouz 2008). 'Popular psychology discourse' is a general term for language and practices promoting a therapeutic as well as an entrepreneurial ethos (Brunila 2012). It includes discourses

of ‘self-help’ (Pessi and Salonen 2023), ‘self-fulfilment’, and ‘self-growth’, promoted by psychologists and coaching professionals (Pagis 2016) and through popular culture (Illouz 2008). Recently, the discourse of popular psychology has been integrated into Western school curricula (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown 2018). This discourse has also become part of the Israeli educational discourse and the everyday language of youth (Alfi-Nissan 2024; Alfi-Nissan, Gabay-Egozi, and Pagis 2021; Alfi-Nissan and Pagis 2023; Shoshana 2017, 2019). This discourse is often regarded as reflecting neoliberal values by promoting ideals of accountability and employability (Brunila and Siivonen 2016).

Drawing on sociological studies of the psychologisation of educational discourse (Ecclestone and Brunila 2015) and scholarly works recognising the ways in which neoliberalism affects contemporary forms of Judaism (Friedman and Kornfeld 2018; Werczberger 2023), we present the articulation of the discourse of popular psychology in Israeli state education as manifested in Jewish holidays activities led by primary school teachers. Judaism can be regarded as an ethnicity, nationality, and religion, while secular Jewish-Israeli identity is “distinctively dependent on the state for its self-understanding and vitality” (Yadgar 2011, 468). Mobilising religious symbols and holidays by the state education to promote a national identity is a global phenomenon (Ben-Amos, Bet-El, and Tlamim 1999). Thus, considering the centrality of the Zionist-collectivist ethos in Israeli school curricula (Al-Haj 2005), the psychologisation of Jewish holidays in Israeli state education is especially intriguing. There is a growing debate on the implementation of psychological discursive practices in education from a psychological perspective (e.g. Seligman et al. 2009) and a sociological critical perspective (e.g. Brunila, Vainio, and Toiviainen 2021; Ecclestone 2012). However, the articulation of this discourse in state education echoing religious and ethno-nationalist discourses and its intersection with ethno-national symbols and narratives has yet to receive its scholarly due.

We explore the case of the celebration of Jewish holidays in Israeli state primary schools through a qualitative inquiry which includes a preliminary ethnographic study of an Israeli primary school in the Tel-Aviv area, content analysis of the websites of Israeli primary schools in various geographic and social locations, teachers’ blogs, and school programmes offered by the Ministry of Education. The findings indicate that the global discourse of popular psychology is translated into a local religious ethno-national context and embedded in Jewish holidays activities that

celebrate the self. Utilising religious symbols, children are encouraged to believe in themselves and to engage in self-reflection.

We argue that the psychologisation of Jewish holidays adapts religious ethno-national symbols and narratives to an entrepreneurial and therapeutic ethos in a way that makes these symbols and narratives accessible to secular Israeli children. This process is a unique example of the way teachers adopt global neoliberal practices and discourses, without abandoning the main purpose of state (*mamlakhti*) education and its “Zionist republicanism” (Bareli and Kedar 2011, x). Moreover, we show that this process of hybridisation does not reflect secularisation but rather new paths of religiosity and spirituality. As scholarship on the Jewish-Israeli context indicates, religion and secularity in Israeli society are mutually imbricated rather than dichotomous (Yadgar 2011; Ben-Porat 2013). Concurrently, we demonstrate that the popular psychology discourse intersects with religious symbols and practices in a way that seemingly contradicts the spirit of neoliberalisation and individualisation. By doing so, we contribute to the debate on the popular psychology discourse in education as well as to the discussion of how this discourse interfaces with everyday religious practices.

### **Popular psychology discourse in late modernity**

Late modernity has been characterised as the age of psychology and the “preoccupation with the self” (Rimke 2000, 61). Scholarship links the popularisation of psychology with the dual processes of individualisation and globalisation. One of the central arguments of this scholarship is that the decline in the role of religious communal practice in modernity has fostered the popularisation of psychology and reflective self-making processes. Since modern identity is no longer defined by religious traditions, individuals have been driven towards self-fulfilment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Giddens 1991).

The contemporary ideal of self-fulfilment is closely associated with the theory of American humanistic psychology, which has been popularised through the cultural production of self-help books, media content, and agents of popular culture (Illouz 2008) as well as the prominence of positive psychology (Pagis 2021). Positive psychology has been portrayed as a “science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” that “promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless”

(Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 5). In contrast to classical Freudian psychology, positive psychology strives to promote self-fulfilment and make it accessible to the broader public (Pagis 2016).

According to Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2001), individualisation is connected to the globalisation of the self, encouraging individuals to create their own biographies. As the language of psychology permeated everyday discourse, the demand for reflexivity and authenticity grew (Illouz 2008), resulting in a field of reflexivity experts such as New Age gurus and personal life coaches. In personal life coaching, individuals are encouraged to follow their ‘dreams’ and ‘passions’ in the pursuit of happiness. This commercialised profession reflects and reproduces neoliberal cultural ideals, as the marketplace is seen as the main sphere for achieving self-fulfilment (Pagis 2021). For Glenn Adams et al., the language of psychology both reproduces and legitimises “the authority of neoliberalism and its colonization of everyday life” (2019, 190). From this perspective, neoliberalism advocates ‘self-growth’ promoted by popular psychology and encourages entrepreneurialism and personal accountability, while devaluing collective practices and values.

Focusing mainly on adults, the critical sociological study of the popular psychology discourse has addressed its manifestation in the workplace (Pagis 2016; 2021), in romantic relationships (Illouz 2012), and among disadvantaged communities (Helman 2019). The discourse of popular psychology has also become prominent in Western school education (Brunila, Vainio, and Toiviainen 2021). According to Martin Seligman et al. (2009, 293), positive psychology education involves educating ‘for happiness’. However, in recent years, the critical study of the psychologisation of school education, seen as reflecting neoliberal ideologies, has also expanded. Scholars have critically addressed pedagogies of resilience (Joseph 2013) and mindfulness (Reveley 2016) and ‘character education’ (Ecclestone 2012; Jerome and Kisby 2022), understood as promoting market-oriented and individualistic characteristics through discursive practices of popular psychology. Kristiina Brunila and Päivi Siivonen (2016) have shown that therapeutic and entrepreneurial discourses intertwine to promote neoliberal selfhood in school education. Moreover, research on the discourse of aspiration has linked young people’s ambitions with their future adult occupations (Suckert 2022).

Scholars regard these discursive practices as a form of neoliberal

governmentality, promoting young people's accountability for future employability (Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown 2018). The neoliberalisation of education as a global trend fosters free market ideologies through practices such as the self-management of schools and parental choice (Hill and Kumar 2012). These global trends are also reflected in Israeli state education (Berkovich 2014). Moreover, while "religion and religious education might not be the most obvious contributors to a neoliberal education system" (Fancourt 2022, 8), the neoliberalisation of education has been shown to reframe religious education (Fancourt 2021; 2022). These studies reveal that educational policy enactment is a dynamic process of both top-down and bottom-up trends which operate within socio-political contexts (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). In this article, we show that social agents in Israeli state education create bottom-up processes adapting neoliberal pedagogies to ethno-national religious educational content.

### **The 'inward turn' and the psychologisation of Judaism**

Studies have examined the effect of individualisation and the consequent 'inward turn' on religious modalities in late modernity (e.g. Taylor 2007). The quest for personal choice and spiritual 'self-growth' and the desire to imbue traditional practices with personal meaning are changing the relationship between the individual and institutionalised religion as well as religions themselves. There is a growing individualisation of religion characterised by the "reflexive turn" and the "sacralisation of subjectivities" in the Western world (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 174–176).

In line with this trend, the study of Jewish identity and religiosity has focused on the individualisation of Jewish life, identity, and religion (Kelman et al. 2017). In *The Jew Within*, Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen (2000) emphasise the 'subjective turn' whereby the principal authority has become the sovereign self. This turn focuses on an 'authentic' self and its expression and generates highly individualised forms of worship by revising Jewish tradition. These trends have brought about new forms of Jewish worship and practice, such as Jewish Spirituality and Jewish Renewal (Werczberger 2021), and has had an impact on textual study and communal endeavours (Illman 2019; Kelman et al. 2017). For instance, a study on the secular Yeshiva *Bina* revealed its secular students' attempts to imbue traditional Jewish texts with personal meanings (Guzmen-Carmeli 2020).<sup>3</sup>

Judaism has also been influenced by the discourse of popular psychology and the therapeutic ethos. Indeed, many Western religions now incorporate a therapeutic ideology (Yaden et al. 2020). This is especially evident in contemporary spiritualities, which tend to rely on psychologised language. By shifting the psychological focus to spiritual development and the realisation of the self, these new forms of spirituality fuse the religious with the therapeutic (Tucker 2002). In this regard, Jewish New Age communities in Israel have been shown to psychologise Jewish rituals, understanding them in therapeutic terms (Werczberger 2021). Importantly, these processes take place not only on the margins of Jewish life but also in mainstream communities (e.g. Fader 2013; Werczberger 2023).

Moreover, the entrepreneurial ethos embedded in the discourse of popular psychology has also been shown to influence Jewish identity formation. Joshua Friedman and Moshe Kornfeld (2018) examine the intersection of neoliberalism with Jewish identity and show how the “Jewish innovator” has become a new form of neoliberal-Jewish subjectivity promoted in Jewish American educational programmes. Following this scholarship, in this study, we examine how discursive practices of popular psychology intersect with Jewish narratives and symbols in the celebration of Jewish holidays in Israeli education.

### **Jewish holidays in Israeli culture and education**

Holidays are an important component of religious traditions, forming a coherent system of symbols and cultural identity (Etzioni 2004). Despite the multiplicity of Jewish ethnic groups and traditions, the central narratives and practices of Jews have remained similar. Wherever Jews have lived, *Hametz* (leavened bread) was forbidden during Passover, the *menorah* (eight-branched candelabra) was lit on Hanukah, and the rules of Jewish law were observed when Jews erected *sukkahs* (huts) on the holiday of Sukkot (Goldberg 2003).

With the emergence of the secular Zionist movement at the end of the nineteenth century, many of the Jewish holidays were conscripted to promote Zionist ideology and religious texts were reworked to incorporate Zionist symbols (Balin 2000). Old symbols and historical events were revived and given new meanings (Schwartz, Zerubavel, and Barnett 1986) and the holidays were integrated into the ethos of building the renewed nation (Shoham 2017). The close connection between cultural heritage, holidays, and nationality is not unique to the Israeli case. Cultural

and religious heritage is closely related to nationalisation (Millei 2021; Skey and Antonsich 2017) and holidays are constitutive elements in constructing cultural heritage as enactments of everyday nationalism (Reimers and Puskás 2022). The Zionist movement emphasised these connections, imagining and creating the renewed Jewish nation.

Seeking to re-establish the Jewish people's connection to the land, the Zionist movement favoured agriculturally oriented holidays. For example, in the early twentieth century, Tu b'Shvat became known as the holiday of planting trees to strengthen ownership of the land in the expanding Jewish territory in Ottoman-ruled Palestine (Long 2009). Shavuot (the Pentecost), which was mostly celebrated in the Diaspora as a spiritual holiday marking the Jews' reception of the Torah, regained the symbols of the fruits of the Land of Israel and agricultural motifs from biblical Judaism were re-adapted to the Zionist ideology (Shoham 2017).

Education has been one of the main sites for Zionist enculturation (Ben-Eliezer 1995) and the Jewish holidays were important tools for this task (Handelman 2020; Sitton 1996). Indeed, the Zionist movement had not only territorial and political but also educational dimensions: to create a new Jewish persona, categorically different from the Diaspora Jew (Ben-Amos, Bet-El and Tlamim 1999). In the pre-state Zionist movement and in the educational system which subsequently emerged, ethno-national elements were often emphasised over religious motifs (Handelman 2020; Sitton 1996). Some of the holidays embedded in school curricula, which had formerly been marginal and neglected, were revived and transformed (Shoham 2017; Kerret and Tal 2018). For instance, in the early twentieth century, the Zionist movement developed the myth of Lag b'Omer, linking the narrative of the Bar Kokhba revolt to the struggle for national freedom (Zerubavel 1995).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the narrative of Hanukah was highlighted according to the revived myth of the Maccabees who had won a war of the few against the many. The texts taught in schools drew a direct line from the Maccabees to the building of the new Jewish nation (Don-Yehiya 1995).

With the foundation of the state of Israel and the formation of the state education system, the ethno-nationalist-collectivist ethos was institutionalised in formal school curricula. *Mamlakhti* state schools continued the educational emphasis on the traditional holidays, while adding secular-civil celebrations such as Holocaust Remembrance Day (*Yom Hashoa*) and Memorial Day for fallen soldiers of the Israel

Defence Forces (IDF) (*Yom Hazikaron*) (Handelman 2020; Lomsky Feder 2004).

Yet, in parallel to these collectivist-ethno-national educational orientations, since the beginning of the millennium, following global educational trends and processes of the neoliberalisation of Israeli education (Berkovich 2014), the language of popular psychology has become dominant in the everyday life of both youth and educators (Alfi-Nissan and Pagis 2023; Shoshana 2017, 2019). In Israel, dubbed the “start-up nation” (Senor and Singer 2011), the entrepreneurial ethos has become dominant in school education and has been shown to be interwoven with local ethno-national ideologies promoting a Zionist entrepreneurship (Alfi-Nissan 2024; Alfi-Nissan, Gabay-Egozi, and Pagis 2021).

Given the infiltration of the popular psychology discourse into educational settings on the one hand and into Jewish religious practices on the other hand and given the unique setting of Israeli education and the discourses embedded within it, we ask: How are Jewish holidays celebrated in contemporary Israeli Jewish non-religious state school education? How does the popular psychology discourse intersect with holiday narratives and symbols in Israeli state schools today?

## **Methodology**

This article is part of a larger qualitative research project, conducted from January 2017 to January 2020, on the *mamlakhti* (Hebrew, non-religious Jewish) state school system, the main branch of schooling in Israel, attended by more than half of the pupil population (Feniger, Shavit, and Caller 2022, 129). The research focused on primary schools, the primary sphere for the articulation of social and cultural discourses in school education.

The data collection and analysis included three spiral stages. The first comprised preliminary ethnographic research in an Israeli state primary school in a large city in the Tel Aviv area, including six in-depth interviews with the school headteacher and five first- and second-grade teachers, observations of the school's physical surroundings, and content analysis of the school's educational programmes, the school's websites, and official publications (the school's papers, brochures, etc.). The data were coded and categorised using thematic analysis. The analysis revealed the hybridity of individualist and collectivist values in the school. The theme of Jewish holiday celebrations as the celebration of self was one of the main themes in the data.<sup>5</sup>

The second stage of the data collection included content analysis of 40 state primary school websites and Facebook pages and 10 blogs by primary school teachers. As the school in the preliminary ethnographic research was from the Tel-Aviv area and located in a neighbourhood with a higher socio-economic status, the selection criteria for the schools' websites were geographical region, socio-economic status, and size of the city. These criteria allowed us to examine the widespread implementation of the theme 'celebration of self' in Jewish holidays. Twenty percent of the schools were in northern Israel, 35% in the Tel Aviv area, and 45% in southern Israel and the Jerusalem area. Thirty-five percent of the schools were located in large cities, 37.5% in medium cities, and 27.5% in small cities/towns. The socio-economic status of the population in the various schools ranged from 1 to 10 (median = 5), on a 1–10 Israeli Ministry of Education scale (The Ministry of Education of Israel website accessed 1 August 2018). We applied content analysis to the data from websites and social media, as texts on physical and online sites serve a political-social purpose (Charmaz 2006, 37-39). The data were again subjected to thematic analysis, going back and forth from theorisation to analysis. Using analytical categorisation, we identified the main themes deriving from the data, with the dominance of Jewish holiday symbols and narratives becoming clear as a main theme, characterising Jewish–Israeli identity manifestation in state primary schools across Israel.

In the third stage of the data collection, we followed Jewish holiday-related content on the official websites and Facebook pages of 15 other Israeli state primary schools and five other teacher blogs, alongside data relating to Jewish holidays from all the official websites of Israel's Ministry of Education.

The data were collected by the first author. As she is a former pupil in the *mamlakhti* school system and a mother of pupils in this education system, Jewish holiday celebrations in school activities have been part of her daily life. In the first stages of the research, her daughter, then in third grade, came home from school a few days before Hanukah with the drawing of a menorah, with the title: "The Light within Me." The child's name was written in the candle at the centre and the child had been asked to write her 'strengths' in the other eight candles. This positionality—having been a pupil in the 1990s, familiar with the Zionist themes of the celebration of Jewish holidays, and being the mother of a pupil in the same system today, introduced for the first time to the theme of 'celebration of self' through Jewish holidays in daily life—is part of the reflective process of this qualitative inquiry.

The process of data collection and analysis included triangulation of methods and sources as well as theoretical and investigator triangulation (Flick 2004). Additionally, we conducted reflexive discussions with students in higher education who work as primary school teachers from various geographical Israeli sites, to validate our findings further. The research followed ethical guidelines for qualitative research and received approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Bar-Ilan University. The collected data and analysis were in Hebrew and excerpts from our various data sources were translated into English by the authors. All the names in this article are pseudonyms. As, according to the Israeli Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education website, Published July 2021, last accessed 4 October 2023), 89% of educators in Israeli state primary schools are women, all interlocutors introduced in the findings are female.

## **Findings**

Our findings indicate that social agents in Israeli non-religious state schools generate bottom-up processes that recreate religious symbols and narratives through the celebration of Jewish holidays. We found that school activities centred on Jewish holidays in Israeli state education integrate the popular psychology discourse of self-help and both a therapeutic and entrepreneurial ethos to rebrand religious symbols. These activities, which are built on traditional Jewish symbols, urge pupils to engage in self-reflection, self-belief, and self-celebration. In the following, we demonstrate, through the cases of Hanukah, Tu b'Shvat, and Lag b'Omer, how the celebration of Jewish holidays in Israeli primary state schools is used to induce reflective inquiry and encourage self-growth through the identification of personal 'strengths' and 'passions'.

### ***Hanukah: The Light within Me***

We found that many Israeli state schools celebrate Hanukah in an individualised manner, using the language of popular psychology. "The Light within Me" is the most common activity of this trend. In such activities, pupils are often given a piece of paper in the shape of a candle and asked to describe their 'strengths' as personal traits that 'shine within them'. The following excerpt, taken from Mali's blog of 13 December 2014, a primary school teacher, illustrates this:

A week ago, I gave each child a paper candle to take home. The assignment

was for the parents and child to sit together and think about the bright points [understood as elements or characteristics] of their son or daughter, write the bright points, decorate, and ornament the candle. The child and parents created the candle together. Each day I read a few of the [texts on the] candles and it seemed as though the children grew a few centimetres from pride. (Accessed 20 November 2020)

Similar to activities offered by personal life coaches (Pagis 2016), this activity asks pupils to enumerate their positive qualities and traits, described as their ‘bright points’. In similar activities, the ‘strengths’ are drawn on a menorah, with a different ‘strength’ written on each candle. These activities use the image of the candle or menorah as a metaphor for the unique inner light that defines each pupil.

Many of “The Light within Me” activities to mark Hanukah draw on a quote attributed to the late chief rabbi of Israel, Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), one of the founding fathers of the Religious Zionist movement:

Everyone must know and understand that deep inside them burns a candle, and no one’s candle is like another’s, and no one lacks their own candle. Everyone must know and understand that it is their task to work diligently to reveal the light of that candle to the public, and to ignite it until it becomes a great flame and to illuminate the entire world. (Translation taken from the Facebook page of the National Library of Israel, accessed 25 January 2023)<sup>6</sup>

In these activities, the words of Rabbi Kook are employed through the discourse of popular psychology to promote personal empowerment and accountability. This quote is used to promote an individualistic ethos, highlighting the power of each individual to ‘shine’, while stressing that it is the child’s personal responsibility to strive to do so.

Sometimes, parents are asked to transcribe their child’s inner lights on the candle or menorah. Such parental involvement resembles life coaching practices, in which family members and friends are “harnessed to the project” of individual “self-growth” (Pagis 2016, 1092). In some of “The Light within Me” activities for pupils from third to sixth grade, teachers ask pupils to write their friends’ positive qualities. Another school invited grandparents to join in the activity, adapting its title to “The Light within Me and within My Grandparents”. The grandparents were asked to write

the ‘bright points’ of their grandchildren and the children were asked to write the ‘strengths’ and ‘bright points’ of their grandparents.

The practice of celebrating Hanukah through the celebration of self has become commonplace, with teachers seeking additional methods to convey this aspect of the holiday. For instance, Orit, a participant of the ethnographic study in the school in central Israel, asked her second-grade pupils to write their names on the menorah, together with the names of eight other people in their lives who ‘help them shine’. The following year, instead of a candle-shaped piece of paper, she distributed a doughnut-shaped paper on which pupils could write their ‘inner lights’ and positive personal traits. (Personal interview, 15 February 2017) Thus, the image of a candle, which represented light and self, was replaced with the round shape of the *sufganiyah*, a traditional Hanukah pastry. Notably, while a *sufganiyah* traditionally has the shape of a ball, Orit chose to depict it as an American doughnut, a round flat shape with a hole in the middle, perhaps indicating an attempt not only to individualise the symbol but also to Americanise it.

Some teachers swap the Hanukah candles for a flashlight or a lightbulb. Reut, a first-grade teacher, celebrated ‘the light within’ by giving each child a piece of paper with a lightbulb on it and Rabbi Kook’s quote to write their personal ‘strengths’. She described this activity on her blog of 26 December 2016 as follows:

The class is dark, all the lights are off, and I sit with a flashlight in my hand in front of the little ones [children], stressing a very clear message: in each and every one of you there is a candle, and it is special and filled with light and strength, and it doesn’t resemble the candle of the other as it is unique, just like you. I asked the little ones to think of their inner light. [...] I kneeled down to face them and projected the bright light on them, just like their unique light, and I told them what is the great light that I see within them, in each and every one of them, and why it is so unique and why it is only theirs and no one else’s. (Accessed 3 February 2020)

In this activity, Reut paraphrases Rabbi Kook’s words, stressing that everyone has an inner light and personal uniqueness. Moreover, the teacher physically projects a light on her pupils to induce self-reflection and to promote personal empowerment.

Another concept in popular psychology that has emerged in school Hanukah activities is ‘resilience’. This concept has been embraced in Israeli state education

(Plotkin Amrami 2021) as it has in other Western educational systems. A primary school in a city near Tel-Aviv suggested a Hanukah celebration entitled “Hanukah Resilience”. The school’s Facebook page showed a picture of a menorah followed by the text “Eight days of practicing resilience tools”, with each of the eight candles in the drawing representing one “resilience tool”, such as sensory relaxation methods of relaxing your muscles and slow breathing alongside psychologised practices of naming your emotions and exercising self-compassion (accessed 21 April 2020).

Furthermore, in this school, “The Light within Me” activity was implemented using Howard Gardner’s (1983) questionnaire of multiple intelligences. The children were asked to measure their types of intelligences according to the questionnaire and highlight the highest score to show their strongest intelligence. This example illustrates the marketisation of resilience as part of the psychological turn in neoliberalism (Brunila, Vainio, and Toiviainen 2021). Both activities merge to promote popular psychology practices through holiday symbols.

In the activities of “The Light within Me”, the collective narrative portrayed in the words of a traditional Hanukah song—“Each of us is one small light. All together, we shine bright”—has redefined light as a celebration of great light within each individual. Additionally, popular psychological language can be found in the activities based on the story of the miracle of Hanukah. Traditionally, the miracle of Hanukah is seen as an example of divine might. According to tradition, during the Maccabean revolt, a small cruse of pure oil, enough to light the Temple menorah for one day, lasted eight days. Yet in state schools today, the symbol of the miracle is used to promote personal growth. For example, Shira, a primary school teacher, used her blog of 1 December 2015 to suggest an activity for other teachers: “You can let each child talk about a miracle s/he wishes for themselves as a Hanukah miracle and what each will do to make that miracle happen.” (Accessed 28 February 2018) Here, the traditional religious narrative of the miracle of Hanukah is reformulated as a personal goal and the children are urged to plan their actions in order to ‘make it happen’.

### ***‘Self-growth’ at Tu b’Shvat and ‘burning bad habits’ at Lag b’Omer***

The reconstruction of holiday symbols as metaphors—used to trigger self-reflection, recognition of strengths, and personal traits to provoke positive thinking and setting goals for self-growth—can also be found in school activities for other holidays. Our data show that, while the popular psychology discourse is sometimes embedded in

other holidays such as Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) through activities of ‘self-forgiveness’, this discourse was widely and prominently assimilated in the celebration of Hanukah, Lag b’Omer, and Tu b’Shvat. While Hanukah is also celebrated in secular Jewish homes, we found that specifically in the education system the symbols of this holiday are celebrated through popular psychology. However, Tu b’Shvat and Lag b’Omer are not usually celebrated in Israeli secular Jewish homes, but rather in schools. Lag b’Omer and Tu b’Shvat were both marginal religious festivals in non-Zionist Jewish cultures that were revived in the Zionist era in school education (Shoham 2017; Kerret and Tal 2018) and are now also rebranded through popular psychology discourse.

Lag b’Omer (in Hebrew: the thirty-third day of the ‘Omer’) concerns the biblical commandment to count the 49 days between Passover and the agricultural festival of Shavuot. The holiday, which is celebrated in Israel with bonfires, was associated by the early Zionists with Bar Kokhba, commander-in-chief of the second Jewish revolt against Rome in 132 CE (Kerret and Tal 2018). We found that current celebrations of Lag b’Omer focus on the symbol of fire. Like the candle at Hanukah, fire is transformed into a symbol for the celebration of the self. Similar to “The Light within Me” activity, teachers encourage their pupils to discover the fire within them as they are asked to write their ‘strengths’ on a piece of paper which has the drawing of a bonfire on it. Dana, a first- and second-grade teacher who participated in the ethnographic study, asked her pupils to address both their personal ‘strengths’ as well as their burning ‘passions’ and ‘desires’ on the drawing of a bonfire (personal interview, 10 April 2017). Thus, Dana integrated the discourse of popular psychology promoting the ideas of self-realisation and personal ‘passions’ (Pagis 2021) into the celebration of the holiday.

Moreover, the merging of psychological discursive practices into holiday celebrations in Israeli primary schools refers to positive psychology concepts such as ‘strengths’, ‘desires’, and ‘passions’, but also highlights the therapeutic ethos (e.g. Illouz 2008) by “using the language of disorder, addiction, vulnerability and dysfunction” (Brunila 2012, 453). This is illustrated by the following activity related to Lag b’Omer, found on Shani’s blog of 13 May 2019, where fire is psychologised into self-improvement and the pupils are asked symbolically to throw their ‘bad habits’ into the fire:

After reading a thought-provoking and moving poem, we go on to the

activity itself. It is held in groups of up to five [pupils]. The children begin the activity in a ready-to-share [feelings/emotions] mood, and with good energy, after reading the [emotion-provoking] poem. Each group has to create a [drawing of a] fire that is made of [paper-shaped] flames. On each flame the members of the group write their bad habits. I usually begin the activity with a personal example and share a (real!) habit that I wish to stop [...]. Sharing my bad habits shows the children that it is okay to admit bad things that one does. (Accessed 27 November 2020)

Here, the teacher employs the symbol of fire as a catalyst for group sharing. Like the setting of a group therapy session, children are encouraged to share their faults, weaknesses, and ‘bad’ habits. The collectivist ritual of the bonfire, traditionally attributed to the second-century sage Shimon Bar Yochai and later adapted in the Zionist narrative to the heroism of the Bar Kokhba rebellion against the Romans, is transformed to a “collective ritual of the self” (e.g. Werczberger 2017, 49).

According to some traditions, the holiday of Lag b’Omer is associated with the Talmudic figure of Rabbi Akiva and many teachers include this aspect of the day in their Lag b’Omer activities. Some teachers show an educational cartoon video, authorised by the Israeli Ministry of Education, that portrays a teenager and his robot conversing about Rabbi Akiva. The following, taken from Adi’s blog (no date of posting), describes an activity led by a teacher using this video:

Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd who, with willpower and perseverance, succeeded to learn the Torah in his old age and became a great rabbi [...]. Before watching the video, the pupils were asked a few questions: what was Rabbi Akiva’s profession? At what age did he begin to learn to read and write? What was his profession after he had learnt to read and write? After that, we discussed the personal traits which help us succeed [...]. The pupils raised examples of things that were once very difficult for them, but with the help of the personal traits that they’ve mentioned (willpower, determination, perseverance, and so on) they succeeded. To conclude the activity, I returned to the saying “as water wears away stones” and explained it to them (“where there is a will, there is a way”). (Accessed 12 September 2018)

In traditional Jewish tales, Rabbi Akiva is often depicted as a simple and modest man. In the above excerpt, however, Adi adapted the traditional story of Rabbi Akiva to the discourse of popular psychology and an entrepreneurial ethos by strengthening the logic that determination leads to success and by focusing on the individual pushing himself to achievement. Rabbi Akiva is portrayed as an entrepreneur, motivated to change his professional life course solely by the power of his will. The quote from the book of Job (“as water wears away stones”) is used to stress that individual inner strengths, persistence, and determination may conquer all obstacles. Our findings show that this type of activity has been replicated by other teachers in various schools. In adapting the classic narrative to the discourse of popular psychology, the religious storyline is not necessarily secularised but rather becomes more accessible to young secular pupils.

Tu b’Shvat is another Jewish holiday that was revived in the Zionist era to strengthen the collective identity of pupils as Jewish-Israeli and their affiliation to the land of Israel (Shoham 2017). Our findings indicate that the Tu b’Shvat celebrations in Israeli primary schools today reinvent the notion of the tree as a symbol for ‘self-growth’.

In a lower middle-class school in the south of Israel, Sarah, a third-grade teacher, attached the drawing of a large tree to a wall in preparation for the celebration of Tu b’Shvat. Above the tree she wrote: “Keep growing, and like the tree, aspire high to new challenges.” The school’s Facebook page posted the following description on 23 January 2018: “Our talented art teacher created the tree of goals for the class. Each pupil wrote his/her goal for the next semester (on the leaves) and the way [they plan] to reach these goals (on the roots).” (Accessed 4 September 2018) In this Tu b’Shvat activity, the tree became a symbol to induce future-oriented self-reflection, its branches representing a linear strategic process to self-fulfilment. Through the metaphor of the growing tree, the children were encouraged to focus on their ‘self-growth’ by articulating their aspirations and also by acknowledging their accountability to achieve these goals.

Our findings suggest that these innovative activities are the result of a bottom-up process in which teachers develop their own educational curricula. When we asked teachers about the sources of these activities, they referred us to other teachers, either colleagues or teachers they follow online. In contrast, the activities suggested on the webpages of the Ministry of Education (accessed 2021) are mostly centred on the

traditional holiday themes, although the celebration of the self is evident in some activities, such as “My Freedom” for Passover and “If I were a Tree” for Tu b’Shvat. The highly popular “The Light within Me” activity for Hanukah became an official programme of the Ministry of Education. However, its title was changed to “The Light within Me—The Light within Us”. Like the original, this programme encourages pupils to embark on a journey of self-realisation to discover their inner ‘strengths’. It goes further, however, empowering pupils to use their ‘inner light’ for the public good and encouraging teachers to work collectively with the class to identify its ‘group strengths’, in an effort to harness the self in the service of the collective and the nation (Ministry of Education website, accessed 27 January 2021).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This study shows how Jewish religious symbols are redesigned in current Israeli education to celebrate the self through popular psychology discourse, to foster self-reflection and find inner ‘strengths’ through activities celebrating Jewish religious holidays. This process, we argue, rebrands Jewish religious symbols to make them more accessible to the younger generation and promotes both neoliberal and ethno-national values. Notably, using religious symbols to magnify self-realisation does not necessarily reflect a linear individualisation process, nor a process of secularisation, since the self is also celebrated within the community and through ethno-national and religious meanings.

The popular psychology discourse, which is often associated with neoliberal ideology, is usually understood as a global phenomenon. However, this perspective disregards the importance of local cultural and religious particularities in (re)shaping global discourses. In this “context specific inquiry” of neoliberal discursive practices (Ong 2006, 17), we show that, in Israel, a society experiencing an ongoing transition from a collectivist culture with socialist characteristics to an individualised neoliberal culture, the educational discourse has also changed. It has been shown that Israeli education today promotes an entrepreneurial ideal self in a way that weaves neoliberal global discourses with local ethno-national ideologies (Alfi-Nissan 2024; Alfi-Nissan, Gabay-Egozi, and Pagis 2021). The celebration of self through Jewish holidays is a unique example of these processes.

We found that the popular psychology discourse intersects with, rather than opposes, religious symbols. Thus, our data describe not processes of secularisation but

rather new paths of religiosity and spirituality. It has been suggested that Jewish mysticism and the psychological discourse may be mutually enriching (Werczberger 2021). Concurrently, the data reveal that the concern with the realisation of individual ability, the detection of inner ‘strengths’, and the cultivation of pupils’ capacity to take initiative can be embedded in Jewish ethno-religious symbols.

In cases where figures from the Talmud or from the Jewish tradition, such as Rabbi Akiva or Rabbi Kook, or symbols such as the menorah, were introduced, the teachers employed psychological discourse to rebrand the Jewish holidays. For these teachers, psychological discourse may provide an opportunity to resolve the tension that characterises their engagement with religious and traditional content. Moreover, the global processes of neoliberalisation, privatisation, and the marketisation of education (Hill and Kumar 2012) that are also taking place in Israel (Berkovich 2014) influence teachers’ performativity (Ball 2016). Therefore, this study is also an example of the way teachers participate in processes of ‘policy enactment’ (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012), in this case of both ethno-national and neoliberal agendas.

Following Tara Fenwick’s notion of metaphor creation as relying on “joining unlike things together”, where “a primary phenomenon is apprehended with a conceptual scheme borrowed from a secondary field of phenomena” (Fenwick 2000, 56), our data show that religious symbols are used as metaphors for the ‘inner self’. We argue that celebrating Jewish holidays through the celebration of self serves to strengthen both individualistic and collectivist values. It seems that the fluid techniques of interpreting religious symbols can create a sense of belonging and collective affiliation. As the local religious and the global entrepreneurial merge in a rebranded hybridity, religious symbols and narratives become more accessible to Israel’s younger generation, who use the popular psychology discourse fluently in their everyday life (Alfi-Nissan and Pagis 2023; Shoshana 2019).

Our study demonstrates that social agents in the field of education generate bottom-up processes that recreate religious symbols and narratives. In the centralised state education system we studied, bottom-up processes produce discursive change as social agents adapt and reconstruct traditional religious symbols. These processes reflect the various voices and interests of social agents creatively redesigning the meanings of Jewish religious symbols in Israeli education within context-related dynamic translations.

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## ORCID

Sari R. Alfi-Nissan <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9947-8038>

Shlomo Guzman-Carmeli <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6410-929X>

Rachel Werczberger <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8060-9693>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the holidays mentioned in this article are considered festivals in the Jewish tradition. As social actors in Israeli education refer to both holidays and festivals as ‘holidays’, we use this term.

<sup>2</sup> Israeli education is predominately public. The education system is divided by language: Arabic and Hebrew. The Hebrew-speaking/Jewish schools are further divided into two streams: *mamlakhti-dati* (state Jewish religious) and *mamlakhti* (state Jewish non-religious) which is the branch of schooling for most Jewish pupils. The term *mamlakhti* derives from the word *Mamlakhtiyut* which is a form of “Zionist republicanism”, promoting a Jewish-Israeli affiliation through rituals and symbols (Bareli and Kedar 2011, x).

<sup>3</sup> The secular Yeshiva Bina, part of the Bina organisation founded after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination in 1995, reflects a movement among secular Israeli Jews to reclaim Jewish texts as cultural heritage. Established in 2006, it offers year-long programmes for young adults, combining *hevruta* (paired learning) with academic methods to foster Jewish textual literacy within a secular framework.

<sup>4</sup> The Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136 CE) was the third and final major Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in Judea, led by Simon bar Kokhba. The revolt resulted in massive casualties and the subsequent expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem. In Zionist historiography, Bar Kokhba was transformed from a figure associated with catastrophic defeat in traditional Jewish memory into a symbol of heroic resistance and national liberation, embodying the ‘new Jew’ who fights for independence rather than accepting subjugation (Zerubavel 1995).

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘celebration of self’ was created by the researchers in the process of analysis. It was articulated by social actors with notions such as ‘the light within’, ‘the fire within’, ‘my freedom’, and ‘self-forgiveness’. As the symbols of each holiday were coupled with terms such as ‘self’, ‘within’ or ‘my’, we address this theme in the comprehensive definition of ‘celebration of self’.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Kook was well known for his nationalistic-collectivist political theology. Interestingly, his writings have also been shown to reflect an individualistic drift (Fischer 2006), in which “national mysticism” is strongly tied to psychological conceptions (Garb 2005, 47).