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# Jewish Secular-Believer Women in Israel
## • • • A Complex and Ambivalent Identity

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ABSTRACT: About a quarter of Israeli Jews are secular-believers. They
identify themselves as secular but also believe in some kind of divinity
(whether or not they use the term 'God'). As opposed to the 'secularization
thesis', which perceives such combination of secularism and faith as a con-
tradiction in terms, the current post-secular paradigm sees such hybridity
as a deep manifestation of the complex relations between the secular and
the religious in postmodern culture. This study offers, for the first time, a
deep sociological look at Jewish-Israeli secular-believer women, based on
31 in-depth interviews. It discusses the interviewees' perceptions of secu-
larity, religion, and Judaism, revealing the complexity and characteristic
ambivalence of their identity, while reflecting on similarities and differ-
ences between secular-believers and traditionalist (*masorti*) Israeli Jews.

KEYWORDS: faith, identity, Judaism, post-secularism, religion, secular-
believers, secularism, traditionalists

A Facebook friend posted a message informing me that you are looking for
secular-believer women for research purposes. I said to myself: "That's me,
exactly." Then I asked myself how my friend knew that I am a secular-believer.
After all, I never talk about it. I never even defined myself as such before that
moment. I became angry. On the one hand, it is so clear that I am a secular
woman who believes in God, yet on the other hand, I never thought of myself
as being one. I asked myself why I had never given a name to what I am. After
all, it is my essence, my way of life and my belief—the things that matter most.
How can it be that I did not give it a name? (Sigal, 39, professor of social work)

Social identities need a 'name', a voice. Without one, what remains is sim-
ply a collection of individuals who might share significant characteristics
but do not perceive themselves as connected to one another. This study
addresses several aspects of what may be a large but not yet recognized

social identity in Israel: Jewish secular-believers. People bearing this identity see themselves as secular (i.e., unattached to any particular religion) but also believe in a higher/deeper power dimension, whether or not they use the term 'God'.

At first glance, this identity may appear absurd, as it ostensibly embodies a contradiction in terms. Based on in-depth interviews, I seek to refute this contention, suggesting that 'secular-believer' is a valid and sophisticated identity, however complex and ambivalent it may be.

Gender plays a major role in the complicated relations between the religious and the secular. On the one hand, there is consensus regarding the high level of religiosity and spirituality among women in modern (or postmodern) societies. On the other hand, as I elaborate later, women's position in patriarchal Judaism is, at the very least, problematic. The question of how secular-believer Jewish women negotiate their secularism, faith, and Judaism in the face of Jewish patriarchy thus becomes a focal point of this study.

## Theoretical Background

The post-secular turn in the study of religion and society criticizes the conceptualization offered by the 'secularization thesis' (see, e.g., Asad 2003; Bellah 1991; Berger 1996; Bhargava 2005; Casanova 1994; Connolly 1999; Hammond 1985; Milbank 1990; Stark 1999; Swatos and Christiano 1999). This thesis, developed chiefly in the Protestant West during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, posits dichotomous differentiation between 'religion' and 'secularism' as primary analytical categories. It contributes to secular values such as freedom, modernity, enlightenment, and rationalization, while conceptualizing 'religion' as oppressive, premodern, and irrational (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008a).

Post-secularism points out the secularization thesis's misunderstanding of the role of religious belief and practice in the modern 'secular age' (Taylor 2007) and its misevaluation of the theological underpinnings of allegedly secular Western sociology. Such studies undermine the conventional understanding of religion and secularism as mutually exclusive dichotomies, that is, a person or a social group may be either religious or secular. Instead, critics call for a new sociology that would challenge such rigid distinctions and enable study of the hybridity of the secular and the religious (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008a).

Two connected claims of the secularization thesis, harshly criticized by post-secular scholars, are of particular importance to this study. The first is the attribution of 'universalism' to Protestant-oriented secularism.

This assertion fails to account for the complex relations that secularism maintained with religion throughout its development, whereby the qualities of the religion in reaction to which secularism develops determine the nature of that particular form of secularism. Thus, despite secularism's universal façade, each manifestation thereof is distinct: Protestant-oriented secularism, for example, differs from others that emerged in different, disparate religious contexts (Asad 2003; Casanova 1994; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008b). As Protestant Christianity is primarily a religion of faith and beliefs, a second claim is the identification of secularism with atheism (e.g., Cimino and Smith 2007). Taken together, these contentions maintain that universal secularism consists of distancing oneself from the concept of God or higher/deeper power(s), a process of 'disenchantment' of the world (Weber [1905] 2012) that replaces spirituality and faith with scientific and instrumental rationality.

Yet if a particular religion creates a particular kind of secularism, then the Protestant-oriented understanding of secularism cannot be simply imported for studying Jewish-oriented secularism. What, then, are the particularities of Jewish-oriented secularism in Israel? What do Jewish Israelis who identify themselves as secular—a group that constitutes about half of Israeli Jews (Pew Research Center 2016)—mean by their self-identification?

To begin investigating this question, one should first realize that, in contrast to Protestantism, Judaism is first and foremost a religion of practice (Dan 1997). Even the Hebrew word for 'religion' (*dat*) itself means 'law' rather than 'faith'. As such, religiosity is measured according to fulfillment of obligatory religious laws and commandments (Halakhah) far more than by assessing sets of beliefs. Indeed, one may claim that, for Jews, self-identification as religious or secular relates to observance rather than faith. This, of course, does not mean that Judaism makes no claims about God, the world, and people. Judaism extends beyond robotic adherence to law, but presents theology through the "reading, reflective, and experiential practices that constitute the Jewish religious life" (Fisher 2012: 2).

Considering the centrality of practice in Judaism, we can expect to find it in Jewish-oriented secularism as well. Indeed, demographic data about Jews in Israel reveal that although 47 percent identify themselves as secular, only 16 percent of them claim not to observe any Jewish religious practices at all. Even this small percentage is exaggerated, as 94 percent of Israeli Jews circumcise or would circumcise their sons, 92 percent observe at least some religious mourning practices, and 90 percent celebrate at least one Jewish holiday (Keissar-Sugarmen 2011).

The interpretation of these practices, however, is mostly cultural rather than religious (Pew Research Center 2016). That is, for secular Jews in Israel, keeping some religious practices is a means of connecting with Jewish

culture and history rather than with the Jewish religion. As Judaism is not only a religion but also an ethnic, cultural, and, in the Israeli case, a national identity, secular Jews aspire to preserve their Jewish identity while maintaining their freedom from the yoke of Halakhah (Yadgar 2012). Furthermore, secular self-identification also bears political significance, as it expresses resistance to the obligatory nature of Orthodox religious laws (Liebman 1997a). Thus, unlike Diaspora Jews, for whom leaving the Jewish religious tradition generally entails assimilation (Levitt 2008), Israeli Jews distance themselves from the Jewish religion through secularism.

This secularism, however, is very Jewish, as Judaism is the normative identity in Israel and is preserved by the state and the market. The State of Israel, which is officially defined as both Jewish and democratic, does not separate religion and state: Jewish law is incorporated within state law, the presence of the Jewish calendar is highly prominent (Saturday and Jewish holidays are official days of rest), Hebrew is the official language, school curricula are replete with Jewish content, and observance of Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*) is mandatory in official public institutions (Liebman 1997b). The markets fill the public sphere with Jewish symbols, just as Christmas trees or Easter bunnies symbolize Christianity in Christian-oriented states.

At the same time, secularism is the normative standard in Israeli public discourse and is essentially taken for granted. Hence, it is rarely described or analyzed scientifically. The common, unspoken definition of secularism in Israel is articulated in terms of what it is *not*: secularism is *not* religion. This discourse does not offer secularism any positive ideological meaning, and Liebman and Yadgar (2009) use the term 'default seculars' to characterize people who describe their secularity in this negative (non-determinative) manner. Certain prominent Israeli intellectuals, however, promote ideological secular discourse (see, e.g., Itzhaki 2011; Malkin 2000; Yovel et al. 2007; Zuker 1999). Such discourse adopts an understanding of secularism as a vehicle for values of enlightenment, such as rationalism and humanism, thus explicitly or implicitly identifying secularism with the absence of faith in God.

According to demographic data, however, about half of the secular Jews in Israel (some 25 percent of the total Jewish population) declare that they believe in God or a higher power (Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Keissar-Sugarmen 2011; Pew Research Center 2016). These are the secular-believers. Their position is often represented as ludicrous in humanistic secular discourse, as in the following citation from the Israeli daily newspaper *Ma'ariv* (Lando 2001): "Most Israelis who call themselves 'secular' do not understand the meaning of secularism. They alienate themselves from external expressions of the [Jewish] religion yet long for God's soothing hand in their beds at night. The common expression 'I am secular, but I believe in God' is a clear

manifestation of this paradox. In any other place in the world, it would be understood as a contradiction in terms."

Such criticism makes sense only if one adopts the basic assumptions of the secularism thesis, with its explicit or implicit denial of God. As indicated, these Protestant-oriented assumptions are not incompatible with Israeli Judaism, whereas opposition between religion and secularism denotes a relationship with practices and laws much more than with faith. Thus, in the Israeli/Jewish context, the secular-believer is not a walking oxymoron. Rather, from a post-secular perspective, secular-believers manifest a valid and sophisticated hybrid identity that signifies distance from obligatory religious laws and practices, accompanied by faith or religious feelings within a distinct Jewish society and culture. This perspective enables us to perceive secular-believer not as a paradoxical identity based on misunderstanding, but rather as a valid and widespread form of self-identification that merits study.

Such studies, however, have yet to be conducted. Sociological research does not conceptualize or address Israel's secular-believers as a distinct social identity. Subgroups among the secular-believers, such as Jewish New Agers (Ruah-Midbar and Klin Oron 2010; Tavori 2008) and secular worship communities (Azoulai and Wurzburger 2008; Sheleg 2010; Yair and Sagiv 2006), have been studied, but, as a distinct identity, secular-believers have been ignored. Even the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), which monitors the scale of religiosity, does not offer this category as a possible choice.

Another prominent social group that reflects hybrid relations between religiosity and secularism and does appear as a category in CBS surveys is the traditionalist (*masorti*) group. Although traditionalists and secular-believers manifest hybridity, they are not identical. Traditionalists, who have attracted extensive research over the last few years (see Buzaglo 2008; Shenhav 2007, 2008; Yadgar 2005, 2010), do not identify themselves as secular and thus cannot be perceived as secular-believers. A more intensive comparison between traditionalists and secular-believers that extends beyond this formal difference will be presented below.

This study focuses on the attitudes of secular-believer women toward their (Israeli) Judaism and their secularism. Women were selected as research participants for their dual relationship with religiosity: a tendency toward spirituality along with a problematic position in (Jewish) traditional religion. As demonstrated below, these opposing pressures suggest that the secular-believer position, which enables both spiritual feelings and freedom from the religion's patriarchy, may offer a particularly comfortable position for women.[1]

Numerous studies conducted in Western countries suggest that women score higher than men on scales that measure religiosity, in both spiritual

feelings and practice categories (Argyle 2000; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). To the best of my knowledge, no systematic research regarding the connection between religiosity and gender has been conducted in Israel, although 65 percent of Israelis who identify themselves as atheists are men (Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013). Hein (1996), however, suggests that the connection between women and religiosity may point more to the value of religiosity in contemporary Western culture than to any essentialist claim about the 'spiritual nature' of women. In Hein's estimation, spirituality is a virtue that was allocated historically to both men and women according to its cultural value. Cultures that value spirituality tend to associate it with men, while those that do not ascribe it to women.

In Israel, women's tendency toward spirituality often conflicts with their problematic position in Orthodox Jewish law and culture (Peskowitz and Levitt 1997). Religious law portrays women as a source of disorder and describes their sexuality as impure (Plaskow 1991). Women are excluded from the center of synagogue life, barred from Talmud study, and prohibited from testifying or adjudicating in religious courts (Ross 2004). Although far more liberal and egalitarian religious Jewish movements (such as Reform or Conservative Judaism) have been developed in the West, their presence is highly marginal in Israel (Tabory 2000), in which the Jewish religion is synonymous with Orthodox Judaism.

Laws and practices are not the only means of excluding women in Judaism. Theology may well be an even more powerful mechanism in this respect (Plaskow 2008).[2] For example, the Jewish monotheistic theology of God as 'our Father in Heaven' engenders the problem of God language. While God is officially defined as a spirit that exists beyond a corporeal-gender definition, the language used to speak about God—as a king, lord, warrior, judge, father, or He—transmits the message that God is male. In the well-known words of Mary Daly (1973: 19), "If God is male, then male is God." This symbolism of the patriarch in heaven justifies and reinforces patriarchal structures of the family, society, and church.

In recent publications about the theology of secular-believer women in Israel, I demonstrate that many women consider patriarchal Jewish theology and practices a principal reason for rejecting Orthodox Judaism (see Lahav 2016, 2017). While half of the research participants adopted traditional androcentric Jewish theology, the other half developed post-secular, non-traditional, and non-Orthodox root theologies that were much less patriarchal in nature than Orthodox ones. This does not mean that all secular-believer women would assume the yoke of Halakhah if Jewish Orthodoxy had gender equality, although it does suggest that their position as secular-believers is at least partly connected to Orthodoxy's problematic relationship with women.

## *Methodology*

To intensify assessment of the situation of secular-believer Jewish women in Israel for this study, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with secular-believer women. Participants were recruited through Hebrew-language notices posted on social networks, inviting secular women who "believe in a higher or deeper power or dimension, whether you call it God or not," to contact me. About 100 women responded and expressed a desire to be interviewed, of whom 31 were selected for the study with the use of randomizing software.

The interviews, each approximately 90 minutes in duration, began with demographical questions (age, ethnic origin, education, marital status, number of children, political orientation, etc.). As this is a qualitative sample, it cannot provide reliable data about these sociological parameters. It should be noted, however, that about half of the participants were Ashkenazi (Jews of Western origin), a quarter of them were Mizrahi (Jews originating in North Africa and Asia), and the remainder were from mixed families. Their ages ranged from 25 to 70. All described themselves as belonging to the middle or upper classes. Most had academic degrees or were studying for them. About two-thirds were raised in secular families, while the remainder had been brought up in religious or traditional households, having adopted secular life in adulthood. The former group was largely composed of Ashkenazi women, the latter mostly of Mizrahi women.

The interviews then proceeded to open conversations concerning such topics as perceptions of secularism and Judaism, religious experiences and feelings, sets of beliefs and conceptions of the divine, the benefits and costs of believing, spiritual and traditional practices, and comprehension of connections between faith and parameters such as gender, age, ethnicity, womanhood, motherhood, political identification, and so on. In the conversations, the participants introduced numerous stories and personal narratives, along with spiritual and ideological statements, all of which were analyzed qualitatively.

## Findings

### *Perceptions of Secularism*

> I ask myself what a secular life is and suddenly find that the only way I can define it is as the opposite of a religious life. This is somewhat ludicrous, as it ostensibly hints that secular life has no content of its own, that it is only negative. This is not what I think, but I do not know how to express the way in which my life is secular. Because I eat shrimp? That's foolish and

insufficient. Not knowing disturbs me, because I am highly familiar with discussions of enlightenment and secularization and can talk about rationalization and faith in humanity rather than God and so on ... I understand that this is supposed to be the content of secularism, but it is not the content of *my* secularism. (Nogah, 36, postgraduate student)

As Nogah's remarks demonstrate, the immediate responses of most interviewees to the question of what secularism is for them were articulated in negative terms, such as 'not religion'. Manifesting what Liebman and Yadgar (2009) call 'default secularism', the women tended to emphasize that they do not obey religious laws (*mitzvot*), such as the prohibition on eating shrimp that Nogah mentioned. As indicated below, however, they do not ignore all *mitzvot*.

Some positive features of humanistic secularism emerged in the interviews as well, although the participants did not present characteristics of secularism in any systematic or coherent manner, but rather referred to them by implication only. For example, some ascribed to secularist values that included freedom of thought and belief, an unfettered way of life, skepticism, equal rights, pluralism, and tolerance. Many perceived a strong link between secularism and women's improved position in society and culture.

Obviously, one may question this ideal understanding of secularism as a source of freedom, inquiring whether we are indeed less disciplined by secularism than by religion. Of greater significance to this study, however, is an analysis of what these positive definitions include and what they do not. I found no mention of separation of religion and state (probably because it is not applied in Israel), no scientific rationalism, no elimination of sanctity or enchantment, and no atheism or anti-theism. This corresponds with Engelberg's (2015) findings, according to which individuals located on the sociological borderline between Religious Zionist and secular societies in Israel also emphasize elements of liberal ethics—but not scientific rationality—when discussing their hybrid religious-secular position.

Secular-believer Israeli women differentiate their form of secularism from 'ordinary' secularism, which they identify with atheism. They are inclined to distinguish themselves from the ordinary secular world because of their faith and spiritual feelings, as in this example:

I grew up in a secular, liberal family. There was no place for God there. As a girl, I did have a God, but they taught me that one who believes in God is neither enlightened nor progressive but rather primitive and uneducated ... For many years, I made my way through the world without God. They taught me that He had no place with me, that He does not fit in. (Hadar, 40, kindergarten teacher)

The feeling of being different from 'conventional' atheistic secularism engenders a sense of solitude. Most participants claim that in their secular surroundings, their faith marks them as primitive, delusional, naive, weak, and irrational. They deal with this situation primarily by keeping silent and concealing their spiritual beliefs. "I do not deny my faith," said one of them. "If someone asks me directly, I admit that I believe in God. But most people don't ask, and I prefer it that way. I favor the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

To be sure, not all participants refuse to talk about their faith. A small minority said that they get over their embarrassment and discuss their spiritual feelings and beliefs whenever they can. Others talk about it only in intimate encounters with like-minded people. The majority, however, tend not to discuss it at all, at times not even with their husbands.

### Perceptions of Religion

This ambivalent attitude toward secularism is not reflected in the participants' feelings about religion, which most of them perceive as an oppressive institutional mechanism. Although for some, religion may also bear positive connotations, such as a sense of community, mutual responsibility, and tradition, the overall tendency reflected in the interviews was distancing and alienation from religion, as in the following example, demonstrating again the centrality of practices in the Jewish religious-secular discourse:

> [The Jewish] religion has so many things that appear ludicrous to me. Why is eating shrimp prohibited and eating cows permitted? Shrimp is tasty. Why does God care if someone eats shrimp? Or asking rabbis questions. Why do you need a rabbi to tell you what to do? Think for yourself and make decisions as a moral human being. It's not that I have no sense of sanctity, but I don't sanctify the rabbis. I sanctify the positive aspects of life because they are the manifestation of God on earth. (Sarah, 37, engineer)

The most common criticism of religion was expressed from a feminist perspective, addressing the patriarchal nature of (Jewish) religion and demonstrating its connection with their rejection of Orthodox praxis. As practice is central in Judaism, it is not surprising that the women talked a great deal about discrimination in customs and ceremonies, as in the following remark:

> If I want to attend holiday services, why do I have to climb to the second floor [women's gallery] of the synagogue and sit behind a screen? And attire—the Torah does not tell me to wear a skirt that's 10 centimeters above the knee. That's surely the idiosyncrasy of some deviant rabbi who was

unable to bear the sight of women's legs. I don't think God will judge me for that. (Reut-Miriam, 25, unemployed)

Some of the women criticized not only Jewish religious practices but also its patriarchal theology and hermeneutics:

> I would like to have made waves—a tsunami ... a hurricane—informing lay people that God did not really intend to have a male patriarchy ruling womankind. Once people understand this, it might become legitimate to rely on faith in God, to derive something from this concept and develop it. (Hagit, 58, personal coach)

> I hate this whole idea of the image of God like a drawing of a white cloud with a man's face and a booming, reverberating voice, somewhat threatening and frightening. He becomes angry, He metes out punishment, He bestows gifts and He and He and He. (Rakefet, 39, social worker)

Thus, despite their faith, the interviewees do not see themselves as religious. What is more, in addition to their 'spiritual but not religious' identity, they also see themselves as secular.

### Jewish Identity

As noted above, secularism is not universalistic. Thus, it is not surprising that the position adopted by Israeli secular-believers is often deeply involved with Judaism and Jewish culture. When asked about their Jewish identity, secular-believer women offer two types of answers. A very small minority see themselves as disconnected from Judaism altogether. They describe themselves as 'citizens of the world' and consider their belonging to the Jewish people as coincidental, with no sense of connection or identification:

> I have no dialogue with my Jewish or Israeli identity. I was born into a Jewish family by chance. I am a Jew only because my identity card says so. When people take pride in their Jewish identity, they imply that there is something special in Judaism. I detest that. (Dani, 58, journalist)

Most participants, however, consider themselves to be Jews, although many understand their Judaism as a secondary identity compared to their national identity as Israelis. This finding conforms with statistical data revealing that Jewish identity is very important to an absolute majority of Israeli Jews (Pew Research Center 2016). Those who emphasize their Jewish identity as primary say that they cannot and will not abandon it:

> I consider myself a Jew above all. I have no way out of Judaism. It's not something that I wear. I originate in Judaism and I like where I am; I'm even proud of it. The idea that everyone is entitled is a Jewish concept. The aspiration to make the world a better place is Jewish. That is the special quality of Judaism. (Nicole, 48, journalist)

Nicole also links her Judaism and her faith. "From the ancient Jewish texts, I realize that any story is better when God is involved, including the story of my life," she says. A similar approach—understanding Judaism as a source of faith and spiritual feelings—was also expressed in the following example:

> Judaism is highly focused on the cyclicality and regularity of nature, because the great things—all that we took from the Jewish religion for our culture—are concerned with time: the calendar, the days of the week and holidays, as well as rituals related to the cycle of life. This is what links me with faith; the ideas of time and nature are my personal connection to the Jewish faith. (Shirli, 62, psychologist)

On the other hand, many of the women did not see a connection between their Jewish identity and their faith, or between Judaism and their own sources of spiritual ideas such as Buddhism, New Age, or the Christian-oriented Twelve-Steps program. Judaism is not the foundation—or at least not the only foundation—of their faith:

> There are marvelous things about Judaism. Nevertheless, I did not find my beliefs there, but in other places. For example, I believe that God is pure love. My belief is universal and it has no connection with Judaism. (Yokhi, 49, women's workshop facilitator)

Secular-believer women are attached to their Judaism first and foremost through traditional practices, which they see as signifying not the Jewish religion per se, but the culture of the Jewish people. This finding is not surprising, considering the data presented earlier demonstrating the popularity of Jewish tradition among the secular in Israel.

Secular-believers observe Jewish tradition very selectively, choosing individually what to keep and what to reject. The most prominent traditional practices held by the interviewees are Shabbat, Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. Shabbat is characterized by family dinner on Friday night, sometimes accompanied by candle lighting. Some women restrict their activities, avoiding work or cooking, unnecessary travel, shopping, or Internet surfing. Other Halakhic prohibitions, however, such as driving a car or using electricity, are largely ignored. Like the Sabbath, Rosh Hashanah is also celebrated with a family dinner, while on Passover secular-believers generally attend a traditional, bread-free Seder and read the Haggadah. Still, some families change the traditional text, adding or

removing passages at their discretion. Most secular-believers attend syna-gogue only on Yom Kippur—and even then only for the first (Kol Nidrei) and final (Neilah) services marking the occasion. During the rest of the day, when people tend not to drive, they may ride their bicycles and even eat, although it is strictly forbidden according to Halakhah.

As with holidays, women secular-believers clearly feel connected to cer-tain Jewish customs and rites of passage (e.g., circumcisions, bar mitzvah, weddings, and mourning customs) and tend to observe them. Yet once again, observance of Halakhah is selective and by no means comprehen-sive, as many precepts are simply ignored. The same is true for dietary restrictions. Whereas some interviewees keep kosher, others avoid only pork. Some will not eat meat and dairy dishes together under any circum-stances, while others are less stringent outside their homes. In brief, atti-tudes toward Jewish dietary laws are pluralistic and thus do not constitute an overt identifying characteristic of the participants in this study.

Most participants emphasize two principal reasons for keeping Jewish traditions: first, a feeling of connection with the Jewish people, culture, and history and, second, family unity. As their motivations are not reli-gious but cultural, they feel free to preserve what they like and leave the rest behind, as demonstrated in the following comments:

> I do not work on the Sabbath because I understand the need for one day of rest and the beauty of preparing for the Sabbath, so that one does not become confused and turn the sacred into the everyday. The Sabbath tra-dition is important to me because of the family atmosphere, family unity. That's what keeps us together, that's what makes it feel different from any other day. These differences are important to me in terms of sanctification of the family. From my point of view, tradition is equivalent to family unity. (Miri, 38, businessperson)

> I differentiate between tradition and religion. I really like the tradition in which I was raised. I want a festive meal on Rosh Hashanah, even if shrimp is served. I will always have a Sabbath meal. It may consist only of cutlets, but there will be a family meal and we'll sit together. On Friday [night] I feel that there is a kind of aura enveloping our home, that we can actually see the light shining from the house, because there is God here, because something astounding is happening here now. I do not display the traditional symbols. We did not recite the blessings, the Kiddush, but that's not the issue. The issue is that there is still a different ethos, one of Jewish tradition and of faith. (Nogah, 36, postgraduate student)

Jewish secular-believer women's identification with Judaism is also connected with the Holocaust. "I feel Jewish because some of my family members were burned because of their Judaism. In such a situation, you

are Jewish in any case," said one participant. This expresses a sentiment present in most interviews: if you were born to a people that faced total extinction, you cannot abandon it. The participants' sense of belonging to Judaism is thus mediated by collective memory and a sense of collective existential danger (intensified by the ongoing state of war between Israel and its neighbors), as well as by the understanding of Judaism as a national and cultural identity.

### Jewish Texts and Teaching

Judaism is a religion and culture of text. The prayer book (*siddur*) in the synagogue and Torah study in the religious study hall (*beit midrash*) have been central in Jewish history since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE). Israel's secular educational system teaches the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) extensively, addressing it as a historical narrative that establishes the connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. The Talmud is studied as well, although it is accorded only marginal attention. Later writings, such as rabbinic literature, Kabbalah, Hasidism, and Jewish philosophy, are ignored. This approach differs considerably from that of the Orthodox religious focus on the Talmud and rabbinic writings (Ben-Refael and Ben-Chaim 2006).

The bond with Jewish sacred texts features prominently in interviews with secular-believers. Only a minority of them said that they feel no connection to the texts. Others said they had studied them or would like to do so. Some perceive a link between these texts and their faith, understanding them as theological and spiritual sources, while others see them as cultural works, a part of the creative output of the Jewish people over thousands of years.

Secular-believer women selectively choose the relevance of different traditional texts to their lives. Generally speaking, they follow the secular education system in adopting the Bible as their chief Jewish source of reference. The Bible is not monolithic, however, but a collection of different texts, written and edited over a thousand-year period by different people with different opinions. It includes stories and legends; prose and poetry; moral, social, and political analysis; proverbs, prayers, and philosophical essays, as well as laws and commandments.

In this comprehensive collection, secular-believers focus on the Torah, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Job—the more philosophical and faith-oriented books of the Hebrew Bible. As shown in the following examples, reaction to these texts is deeply emotional and involves perception of faith:

> I have a Bible at my bedside, and I take it with me when I travel abroad. These stories are human models from which inspiration should be drawn.

There is much wisdom there. Today more than ever, these texts represent Divine wisdom to me. These are texts of ultimate wisdom, of universal, existential human wisdom, of ultimate life wisdom. (Shalvat, 44, educational project entrepreneur)

The personalities in the Bible fascinate me. I can really find myself, for example, in [stories of] the Patriarchs. The issue of the sacrifice of Isaac is still a mystery to me. I relate to it as a case of an overtly illegal order. I think God wanted Abraham to refuse to carry it out. I am angry at Abraham for obeying. It is very alive for me. I actually become emotionally involved in such things. I try to remind myself that the Patriarchs are human beings, with human flaws, and that in itself is a spiritual statement. (Rivka, 33, postgraduate student)

Another reference mentioned by Jewish secular-believers is the Kabbalah in its contemporary interpretation, which has been gaining popularity in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles, due in no small part to the engagement of celebrities like Madonna, Demi Moore, and Ashton Kutcher. Many Kabbalah researchers harshly criticize the contemporary approach, calling it a generalized, New Age, commercial idea that has little if anything to do with the Kabbalah as it developed in Spain and southern France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE and in Safed in the sixteenth century. Some researchers attribute the success of contemporary Kabbalah to the postmodern emphasis on values such as an individualistic quest for satisfaction and fulfillment and the rejection of modern rationalism in favor of mystical spirituality (Hoss 2007). 'New Age Kabbalah' has been rejected and even banned by most Orthodox rabbis.

Secular-believers attracted to Kabbalah understand it primarily as an ancient teaching that grasps materialistic reality as a symbolic system reflecting revelation of God in the world. This approach distinguishes between the transcendent, hidden, incomprehensible aspect of God called *Einsof* (unending) and God's immanency. The immanent aspects, called *Sefirot* (sing., *Sefira*), manifest the 10 emanations and attributes of God by means of which the universe's existence is continuously sustained.

It is crucial to note that the *Sefirot* are gendered. The uppermost *Sefira*, the *Keter* (crown), is identified as masculine, while the lowest, the *Shekhinah* (divine presence) or *Malkhut* (kingship), is considered feminine. The other *Sefirot* are attributed gender characteristics according to their orientation in the Divine order: those on the right are associated with grace and connote masculinity, while the ones on the left are assigned to law and connote femininity. The center, compassion, is the line of harmony between the male and the female and links the masculine *Keter* and the feminine *Shekhinah* (Idel 1990).

This comprehensive understanding of God's world, which includes symbols of femininity along with the masculine symbolism of dominant monotheism, is highly appealing to some secular-believers, as shown in the following examples:

> The God of the Bible is zealous and vengeful. I am more amenable to the definitions of the Kabbalah, the 10 *Sefirot* describing an entity that encompasses all, both law and grace. There are also feminine spheres, Wisdom and Kingship. That speaks to me. (Hannah, 60, psychoanalyst)

> Kabbalistic concepts have left a powerful imprint on me. I look at my life and wonder what interpretation the Kabbalah would give me, or what it would suggest that I examine. I am very influenced by the Kabbalah's determination that there is nothing external to us, that material life is folly, and that everything essentially exists within us. It gives legitimacy to each person to be whoever s/he may be. I believe that this is a thought that leverages us. We should attempt to examine our view of faith and religion from this standpoint. (Shalvat, 44, educational project entrepreneur)

Finally, a few women also mentioned the Yemima method as a Jewish spiritual source of reference. This psycho-Kabbalistic method, developed in the twentieth century by an Orthodox Israeli psychologist, Yemima Avital, is gaining increasing popularity in Israel. It opposes emotional burdens and psychological proximity, favoring a state of 'accuracy' or 'precision', the latter term connoting an approach to the 'true nature' of life—positivity, goodness, and happiness. Kauffman (2012) perceives this method as a contemporary feminine Hasidic movement, as it was developed by a woman and women constitute the majority of its adherents.

Atara (40, teacher), who practices the Yemima method, explained that thanks to her studies, she learned that everything that happens in the world is for the best. For her, difficulties are "effort tests" that are meant to show her how strong she is. This is why she believes that "things don't just happen" and that everything has a purpose. By practicing the method, she learned that she has the freedom to choose "the good" and to be present in the world in the "right way." In this manner, she claims, studying the Yemima method reinforces her religious sentiments.

Thus, secular-believer women in Israel draw heavily on Jewish texts and teachings, using them as spiritual, theological, and emotional sources for their worldviews, although the interpretations on which they focus differ from those of Orthodox Judaism. While Orthodox teachings focus on Talmudic, rabbinic, and Hasidic literature, secular-believers go back to theological, ethical, or philosophical parts of the Bible or are attracted to contemporary spiritual approaches. They explain their reluctance to deal

with rabbinic literature by maintaining that religious Orthodoxy "gained control" over these texts, in which Halakhah and patriarchy predominate:

> I have great difficulty with this attraction to the 'Jewish bookshelf', especially the Talmudic literature therein. I think that continuing study of these patriarchal texts, even critical readings, means perpetuating it and preserving its significance at the center of our culture. I believe that this is bad. The Talmud really does not head my list of Jewish literature worthy of preservation. (Na'ama, 48, social science professor)

### Discussion

The meta-narrative of the secularization thesis tends to construct a web of dichotomous distinctions, contrasting modern, progressive, and rational secularism with traditional, backward, irrational, and parochial religiosity (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008a). In the Israeli context, this binary distinction primarily differentiates between Orthodox observance of Jewish practice and belief and secularism's non-belief and indifference to religious practice (Liebman and Yadgar 2009).

The post-secular perspective destabilizes this meta-narrative, pointing to the substantial hybrid phenomena that exist in social realms. As such, the post-secular shift is closely connected to the postmodern approach (Engelberg 2015). They not only share a 'post' prefix, implying criticism of the combined Western paradigms of modernity and secularism, but also challenge ostensibly universal and homogeneous meta-narratives while emphasizing particularities, dialectics, and counterforces within dominant social trends. Both the post-secular and postmodern approaches are interested in hybrid phenomena that undermine the closed nature and uniformity of common understandings. Both criticize the perception of scientific rationalism and reason as the only valid source of knowledge, and both highlight beliefs and subjective feelings (see, e.g., Blond 1998; McClure 1995).

Ambivalence—the co-existence of opposing attitudes or feelings toward a person, object, or idea—apparently features prominently within the postmodern condition, where disparate and contradictory strands of knowledge and passion indeed yield ambivalence and uncertainty (Cornell 1988). Bauman (1992: 193) maintains that the postmodern habitat is "a territory subjected to rival and contradictory meaning-bestowing claims and hence perpetually *ambivalent*," while Beck (1994: 33) argues that as high modernity abolishes its own ordering categories, "irreducible ambivalences, the new disorder of risk civilization, openly appear."

Such ambivalence, intensified by the undermining of conventional categories, seems to characterize Israeli-Jewish secular-believers, who are

ambivalent toward their secular habitat as well as their Judaism, expressing both negative and positive opinions about them. They see themselves as Jews but reject the prevalent conflation of Judaism and the Jewish religion. They define themselves as secular but feel distanced from 'conventional' atheistic secularism. Their very existence undermines dichotomous distinctions between religious and secular, presenting a hybrid position that combines Jewish identity with faith and secular, humanistic values.

This complex identity evokes negative reactions from both sides. Secular atheists accuse secular-believers of misunderstanding secularism and of not being truly secular. Their belief in God often labels them as primitive, naive, and irrational. On the other hand, religious people accuse them of taking the easy path, as they ignore religious law and do not view it as obligatory. Thus, they are certainly not accepted as "true believers."

The secular-believers' path, however, is far from easy. Consciously choosing a non-conformist social identity exposes one to social sanctions. In the secular-believers' case, it often entails mockery and contempt. Hence, they choose to keep silent. According to the 'spiral of silence' theory, this silence exacts a social price as well as a personal one. When people do not present their non-conformist position, it becomes even less accepted; and if it is less accepted, fewer people talk about it (Noelle-Neumann 1974). Thus, secular-believer Israeli Jews, who constitute about 25 percent of the country's Jewish population, remain unrepresented in its social discourse.

As indicated, secular-believer women in Israel draw heavily on their Jewish heritage. They obtain their sense of identity from Judaism, along with theological conceptions, spiritual feelings, and sacred terminology (Lahav 2016, 2017). This closeness to Judaism, which appears even when an individual draws her spiritual ideas from spaces outside Judaism, is inconsonant with findings derived from studies of New Age and Buddhist groups in Israel that describe different ways in which Judaism is being incorporated within ex-Jewish spiritual practices and beliefs (Loss 2010; Ruah-Midbar and Klin Oron 2010). This suggests that for secular-believer Jews in Israel, faith is related to Judaism and may draw individuals closer to Judaism, even in cases in which it originates outside Judaism.

As the secular-believer position includes a deep sense of Judaism and faith alongside a highly selective attitude toward Orthodox teachings and practices, an obvious resemblance appears between secular-believer and traditionalist (*masorti*) Israeli Jews. Both groups adopt a hybrid approach whose very existence calls into question the dichotomous distinction between the religious and secular camps (Yadgar 2010). What are the differences between them? Why do so many Israelis who see themselves as Jews, believe in God, and keep some (but not all) traditional Jewish practices choose to identify themselves as secular and not as traditionalist?

A comparison of findings about secular-believers with the literature concerning traditionalists yields several differences between the two groups with regard to practice, relation to religion, and ethnicity. Relying on Yadgar's (2010) extensive qualitative study on traditionalists (or 'traditionists', as he calls them), it appears that practice and observance (i.e., how many and which religious laws are being observed) are more central to traditionalists than to secular-believers. Although selectivity in observance characterizes both groups, traditionalists apparently observe more than secular-believers. Considering the vast range of Jewish practices noted in the current study and in Yadgar's research, however, no clear quantitative line can be drawn between traditionalists and secular-believers according to level of observance.

There is, however, a clear difference between the groups regarding motivation for observance of Jewish practices. While secular-believers conceptualize traditional practices mostly as cultural (rather than religious), emphasizing the family and the connection with Jewish culture as their principal reasons for keeping traditional practices, traditionalists interpret these practices as cultural but also discern a religious component therein (Yadgar 2010).

Buzaglo (2008) suggests that the religious attitude of traditionalists is less connected to faith than to faithfulness. By this he means that the primary motivation of traditionalists is devotion to their ancestors' worldview and way of life, which they perceive to be based on faith in God and the observance of His commandments. By contrast, secular-believers are not characterized by faithfulness. On the contrary, departure appears to be a repeated theme for them: from one direction they are 'leaving' atheist secularism, while from another direction they are 'leaving' religion (or a traditionalist position).

There are also clear differences between the groups concerning their attitude toward religion itself. While traditionalists tend to ascribe positive value to religion, perceiving it as a more complete way of life and often expressing hope to intensify their religiosity (Yadgar 2010), secular-believers harshly criticize and reject religion as an oppressive institutional mechanism. At the same time, traditionalists tend to ascribe negative value to secularism, identifying it with atheism and describing it as a tempting but empty and alienated way of life. Secular-believers, on the other hand, consciously differentiate between atheism and secularism and ascribe positive value to secularism's liberal ethos.

I suspect, however, that yet another difference, which extends beyond practice and ideology, concerns ethnicity in Jewish-Israeli society and culture, in which traditionalists tend to be Mizrahi (Keissar-Sugarmen 2011; Shenhav 2008). Although this is a speculative suggestion, as we do

not have quantitative data to support it, the small percentage of Mizrahi Jews in the sample of secular-believer women (about a quarter of the participants) may suggest that the secular-believer position is an Ashkenazi manifestation of Mizrahi traditionalism. In other words, people who cannot identify themselves as traditionalist because their Ashkenazi origin opposes the traditionalist connotation with Mizrahim may find refuge in the secular-believer position.

Does gender play a role in the secular-believer position as well? The present research structure precludes examination of such differences, as it focuses exclusively on women. The findings do suggest, however, that the patriarchal nature of the Jewish religion plays a central role in the participants' decision to identify themselves as secular. Even though secular-believer women in Israel are drawn to Judaism as a source of both cultural identity and spiritual feelings, women's exclusion from the center of Jewish practice and theology alienates them from the Jewish religion. While many of these women perceive Judaism as an oppressive and patriarchal set of practices, rituals, ideas, and theology, they consider it important to themselves nonetheless.

Previous studies (e.g., Lahav 2016, 2017) that concentrate on theology have asked questions such as, what are the beliefs of Jewish secular-believer women? What is 'God' to them? What are their religious experiences and feelings? What do they gain from their faith? Like Engelberg (2015), who studied individuals who decided to leave (or remain within) contemporary Israeli Religious Zionism, in my previous research I found a post-secular (and postmodern) theological discourse based on individualization, self-expression, therapeutic orientation, and the liberal ethic. By contrast, the present study seeks to present secular-believer women's socio-cultural (rather than theological) discourse by examining their attitudes toward secularism, religion and Jewish identity, and philosophy.

I maintain that the findings assessed so far display this hybrid position as a valid and sophisticated identity that merits academic and public acknowledgment. We still lack crucial quantitative data about secular-believers and their gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and the like, but the complexity of the secular-believer's position and identity is certain and inherently ambivalent. In conventional terms, it is neither secular nor religious, yet in reality it is both.

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## NOTES

1. This does not mean that it is of lesser importance to investigate how men construct links between their secularity and faith. This issue lies beyond the scope of this article and is intended for future study.
2. For an overview of feminist critiques on Jewish theology from a post-secular Israeli perspective, see Lahav (2016, 2017).

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