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ABSTRACT
Secular-believers, who constitute about 25% of Israeli Jews, are self-identified secular people who believe in some kind of divinity. Based on in-depth interviews with secular-believer women, this study aims to reveal their theological assumptions and claims. It examines metaphors and images participants used to relate to the divine as well as the theological categories they emphasized. The study uncovers the pluralistic nature of secular-believers' beliefs and the common tendency to address faith-related content in a positive light.

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Theoretical Background

Israeli researchers tend to concentrate on the first two of the three B's of religion studies—Behavior and Belonging—while neglecting the third: Beliefs. This tendency is hardly surprising, as Judaism is primarily a religion of practice. Even the Hebrew word for 'religion' (*dat*) means 'law' rather than 'faith' or 'belief'. Religiosity is thus measured according to observance of obligatory religious laws and commandments (*mitzvot*, singular *mitzva*) far more than according to one's set of beliefs. Indeed, one may claim that, for Jews, self-identification as religious or secular is more connected with observance than with faith (Liebman, "Reconceptualizing" 184). This, does, of course, not mean that Judaism makes no claims about God, the world or people. Rather, Judaism extends beyond robotic adherence to law, but presents theology through the "reading, reflective, and experiential practices that constitutes Jewish religious life" (Cass 3).

About half of the Jews in Israel identify themselves as secular (Keissar-Sugarmen 26). This self-identification bears political and cultural significance, as it expresses resistance to the obligatory nature of the orthodox religious laws (Liebman, "Reconceptualizing" 177). Secular Jews in Israel tend to keep some religious practices (especially those connected to the circle of life, such as major holy days, ritual circumcision, weddings, and funerals), but these practices are interpreted as means to connect 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—national identity, such people aspire to preserve their Jewish identity while maintaining their freedom from the yoke of *Halakha* (Yadgar 87). Thus, unlike Diaspora Jews, for whom leaving the Jewish religious tradition generally entails assimilation (Levitt 107–08), Israeli Jews distance themselves from the Jewish religion through secularism.

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This secularism, however, is very Jewish, as Judaism is the normative identity in Israel and preserved by the state and the market. The State of Israel, 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 (*kosher* food) is mandatory in official public institutions (Liebman, *Religion* 2). 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 negative terms—secularism is not religion. In such discourse, 'secularism' does not bear a positive ideological meaning. Charles Liebman and Yaakov Yadgar use the term 'default seculars' to characterize people who describe their secularity in this negative manner (150).

Some prominent Israeli intellectuals, however, promote ideological secular discourse (see e.g. Itzhaki; Malkin; Yovel, Tzaban and Shaham; Zuker). Such discourse adopts an understanding of secularism as a vehicle for values of enlightenment, such as rationalism and humanism. These views explicitly or implicitly identify secularism with the absence of faith in God.

According to demographic data, however, about half the secular Jews in Israel (some 25% of the total Jewish population) declare that they believe in God or a higher power (Beit-Hallahmi 162; Keissar-Sugarmen 44). These are the people I call 'secular-believers'. Although this term may appear self-contradictory (especially within Christian discourse), I submit that it is entirely valid in the Israeli context.

Secular-believers may be characterized cautiously as combining secular self-identification with a belief in the existence of what William James (149) called "the more". As demonstrated below, this 'more' is not necessarily understood in the traditional monotheistic manner, that is, God as a normative agent who created the world and acts therein. Accordingly, I use the term 'god' with a lower case 'g' to imply conceptualizations of the divine that are not similar to the traditional monotheistic 'God'.

These semantic conventions echo the position adopted by Paul Heelas (46) who claims that 'New Age' spiritualities may be distinguished from theistic spiritualities of God, as the former are "experienced as emanating from the depths of life within the here-and-now", while "the spirituality of the Holy Spirit, of obeying the will of God … [is] understood as emanating from the transcendental realm to serve life in this world". It is perhaps even more relevant to the case of Israeli secular-believers to note that such language use also reflects the post-traditional and post-authoritarian theologies of prominent twentieth-century Jewish scholars, including Martin Buber and A. D. Gordon, who proposed a deep spiritual philosophy detached from traditional Jewish practices and theology (Lahav, "Postsecular" 200).

The hybrid perspective of secular-believers destabilizes the dichotomy of the religious and the secular offered by the secularization thesis (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 4). The postsecular perspective, which has gained momentum over the past few decades, rejects the dichotomist understanding of the thesis. This perspective emphasizes the hybrid relationships between the religious and the secular and the theological foundations underlying the 'secular' as well as the particularities of secularism in different religions and cultures (e.g. Asad 1–17;

Casanova 24; Connolly 19–46; Taylor 423). Accordingly, (Jewish Israeli) people who define themselves as secular but believe in god do not constitute an oxymoron but rather embody and manifest a particular hybrid combination of the religious and the secular within a given cultural context. They thus merit study and investigation and ought not be ignored or presented as an absurd paradox.

However, as traditional Israeli sociology largely adopts the perspective of the secularization thesis, only a few references to secular-believers appear in the study. Some scholars offer critical assessments of the (mis)understanding in the thesis of the religious–secular relationship in Israeli culture from both sociological (Goodman and Fisher; Fischer; Shenhav; Yadgar) and theological (Buzaglo; Binyamini; Dinur; Katz) points of view. They claim that, in the Israeli context, secularity is not (and indeed never has been) disconnected from the Jewish religion and that theological assumptions about God, the people of Israel, and the land of Israel stand at the core of the so-called secular Zionist ideology. These scholars do not, however, deal with secular-believers as such, concentrating instead on other social identities that manifest hybridity of the religious and the secular. Largely influenced by Talal Asad's works, most writers (Buzaglo; Binyamini; Shenhav; Yadgar) focus primarily on the post-colonial analysis of traditionalists (*Masorti*) who do not define themselves as secular.

The few scholars who do address secular-believers tend to portray them as an example of 'incomplete', 'weak' or 'soft' secularism (e.g. Brinker). Sometimes the views of secular-believers are even presented as ludicrous, as in the following citation from the Israeli daily newspaper *Maariv*, published in 2001:

> Most Israelis who call themselves 'secular' do not understand the meaning of secularism. They alienate themselves from external expressions of the religion [Judaism] 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. (Lando)

As a result of this intellectual dynamic, we lack demographic knowledge about the connection between the secular-believers' identity and other socio-economic identity components, such as class, gender, ethnicity, and education. Their religious experiences and feelings, spiritual narratives, and beliefs have not yet been studied either.

Gender plays a major role in the complicated relations between the religious and the secular (Casanova and Phillips; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 18). On the one hand, there is consensus regarding the high level of religiosity and spirituality among women in modern (or postmodern) societies. Although, to the best of my knowledge, no research concerning the connection between religiosity and gender has been carried out in Israel to date, 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 (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 139). Hilde Hein, 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 woman" (451). In her 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.

At the same time, women's position in traditional religion is problematic, to say the least. The manner in which Judaism combines law and practice renders it a patriarchal religion.

Judith Plaskow (*Standing),* for example shows how religious law portrayed women as a source of disorder and described their sexuality as impure. Tamar Ross discusses the ways in which women are excluded from the center of synagogue life, barred from Talmud study, and prohibited from testifying or adjudicating in religious courts. 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 where the Jewish religion is synonymous with orthodox Judaism (Tabori).[1] This situation exerts a problematic influence on both secular and religious women's positions and rights as, according to state law, the orthodox (or ultra-orthodox) stream maintains legal control over marriage and divorce as well as over most of the country's cemeteries (Halperin-Kaddari and Yadgar).

Law and practices, however, are not the only means by which women are excluded in orthodox Judaism, as the underlying theology provides ample justification for such exclusion (Plaskow, "Calling"). It is perhaps most significant of all to note that the Jewish monotheistic theology of God as 'Our Father in Heaven' engenders problems similar to those encountered by Christian feminist theologians: while God is officially defined as a spirit that exists beyond corporeal gender definition, the language used to speak about God—as He, king, Lord, warrior, judge or father—transmits the message that God is male (Radford Ruether). In the well-known words of Mary Daly (17), "if God is male, then male is God". The symbolism of the patriarch in heaven justifies and reinforces patriarchal structures of the family, society, and church. I do not assert that this is the only patriarchal character of traditional Jewish theologies, nor that Jewish theology has only patriarchal characteristics or that secularism is safe from patriarchal notions and understandings. This critique of patriarchal religion is crucial, however, for many secular-believer Israeli women (Lahav, "Beyond" 213).

Rachel Adler thus demands that theology be addressed along with practice and law (xvi). Plaskow ("Right" 223) suggests that for feminists who wish to transform the patriarchal nature of Judaism, "the right question is theological" as theology is the source of women's conceptualization as the inferior Other. At the same time, however, theology may also be a praxis of liberation for women (Hogan 64) and 'doing theology', in the sense of articulating theological insights, can contribute to their life experiences.

Following these understandings and the feminist emphasis on women's experiences while noting that different women experience very different things, this study inquires: what do Jewish Israeli secular-believer women believe in? What are their theologies? What do they mean by 'god' or by other terms used to talk about 'the more', 'the highest' or 'the deeper'? Which religious or spiritual terminologies are being used? Which theological categories are being emphasized?

To investigate these questions, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with Jewish secular-believer women in Israel. Participants were recruited through notices (in Hebrew) posted on social networks, inviting secular women who "believe in a higher or deeper power, whether they call it god or not" to contact me.[2] About 100 women responded and expressed a desire to be interviewed, of whom 31 were selected at random and interviewed for about 90 minutes each. All the interviews were conducted in the summer of 2013. They were recorded and translated by the author. The interviewees' names in this article are pseudonyms.[3]

As the research is qualitative, it cannot provide reliable data about other sociological parameters of Jewish secular women in Israel. About half the participants were Ashkenazi (Jews of Western origin), a quarter Mizrahi (Jews originating in North Africa and Asia),

and the remainder from mixed families. Their age varied 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 had been raised in secular families and the remainder had been brought up religious or traditional, having adopted secular life in adulthood. The former group largely comprised Ashkenazi women and the latter mostly Mizrahi women. The intersection between these identity components and the women's beliefs is beyond the scope of this article which focuses on their theology rather than on their social positions.

Religious Feelings

> It is difficult for me to speak about faith. My private affair with god is something very intimate. I can only say that as a result of thoughts about the topic and experiences in my life, I had an inner emotional experience of the existence of a dimension that is beyond me but of which I am a part nonetheless. It is a kind of presence that is felt within me that is different from and deeper than the everyday experience, one that can vanish as suddenly as it appeared. (Hannah, 60, psychoanalyst)

Hannah's remarks demonstrate a highly prominent element in numerous interviews: the emphasis on feelings of an intimate relationship with "the dimension we call God" (Hampson, "That Which" 171). The participants described this emotion as a continuous living sense of connection with something abstruse, higher or deeper, that exists beyond material dimensions. They talked about a sense of wonder and enthusiasm, a feeling of contact with the sacred or longings and yearnings for such experiences. Faith-related feelings were real in their lives, described as authentic and deep, as a spiritual attitude towards life and the world, manifestations of which may change over time. Such sensations, said participants, accorded them new energy and a sense of vitality.

> It is a sense of sanctity, of something lofty and eternal, as though the soul elevates and mingles with something much bigger and I realize that I am only a part of it. It is a marvelous and stirring feeling. (Naomi, 69, psychologist)

A sense of the sacred may evoke other positive or negative feelings. Rather than mentioning such negative sensations as fear, awe, shame, guilt, smallness, and futility, however, the participants linked their sense of sanctity only with positive feelings, such as happiness, joy of living, renewal, love, care, and a sense of closeness to others and to the world. Spiritual feelings were presented as a wellspring of personal growth, optimism, and hope. If an encounter with the sanctity did raise negative feelings, they were not mentioned by secular-believer Jewish women. Some participants explained this tendency in their position as secular-believers:

> I feel that I choose to believe and this choice is very good for me. On the one hand, I feel that things do not happen without purpose and that my life has meaning. On the other hand, there is no guilt. For me, religion is somehow connected with guilt, shame, a feeling of smallness. As secular-believer, I do not have [such feelings]. There is meaning, but not religious guilt. I am better able to accord meaning to my experiences, to explain them not only on the psychological level but also on the level that exists beyond my personal soul. (Sigal, 39, doctorate in social work)

The sense of meaning gained by choosing to believe appeared even when participants did not express a full conviction in god's ontological existence:

> I find the essence of the question of whether there is or is not a god in the world, in heaven, wherever, to be foolish and ludicrous. In my life, there is a god because I chose that there be a god in my life, because it is good for me. It makes me healthier. It does not interest me to argue

> about it. For my part, let them say that I invented a god for myself. It makes no difference to me. (Naama, 48, doctorate in social sciences)

Some may frame such women as something other than 'true believers', at least in the simplistic understanding of faith as a full sense of certainty in God's existence as an ontological being or entity. The participants, however, rejected such an understanding. They suggested that their choice to bring god into their lives renders their faith stronger. For them, doubts, complexity, and difficulties are meaningful for faith, as they force the believer into a continual process of strengthening her 'inner belief'.

What is God?

When asked what they mean by the term 'god', many participants said that they deliberately avoided thinking about it consciously. They hardly addressed this question and felt comfortable believing without explaining what exactly they believe in. They did not dedicate a great deal of time and effort to defining this notion and sensed no need to interpret it, as demonstrated in the following statement:

> I have difficulty defining for myself what god is. What's more, it does not concern me all that much. I'm comfortable with things as they are, very stripped down. I do not feel that I'm adding anything to myself by knowing or deciding what it is, because in any case, I cannot truly know. I do not feel that it will strengthen my faith in a higher power at all. (Nirit, 45, alternative therapist)

Most secular-believer women could not totally avoid the cognitive, conscious dimension of their faith, however. From time to time, even those who hardly addressed it wondered what it is that they believe in. What stands out in the interviews is the variety of responses regarding this issue: secular-believer Jewish women in Israel presented many different perspectives about god. Unhampered by traditional religious definitions, they expressed a pluralistic theological understanding.

Analysis of the images and metaphors attributed to the divine revealed two chief categories: anthropomorphism vs. amorphousness and masculine vs. feminine terminology. A minority of the participants adopted the traditional Jewish anthropomorphic masculine God, to whom they attribute positive characteristics. Although they identify themselves as secular, they preserve orthodox theology and images. For them, god is God, that is, a masculine normative being, the God of history that functions in this world. Furthermore, they adopted a very graphic image of God, although even some orthodox theologians (notably Maimonides) consider such descriptions to be idolatry.

> When I was eight, my mother bought me an illustrated book of Bible stories, in which God was depicted as a kind of white cloud, with a nice face and a white beard, on a sky blue background. This image is engraved in my mind and when I have to imagine God, he will always be that image for me, from the book. God for me is a cloud with a grandfatherly face who is located in heaven and who leads us. (Inbal, 52, housewife)

On the other hand, some women who maintain traditional images of this type attributed a negative sense to them, expressing frustration over this image and annoyance with the attendant theological perception:

> I have in my head an image of God, like a picture of a white cloud with a man's face and a booming, rolling voice, somewhat threatening. There is no question that He is a man. I cannot

> rid myself of this image, that is a serious obstacle as far as I'm concerned. (Noga, 36, doctorate in social sciences)

Other women offered anthropomorphic feminine images, suggesting that such metaphors make it easier to connect with the divine, perceive her as close, and argue with her without fear:

> Until a few years ago, I thought of God only as something male and inflexible. He becomes angry, He metes out punishment, He bestows gifts and He and He and He. And there is no choice: if you do such and such, you will receive such and such and if not, you will not. Only recently did I begin to think about faith as something softer, detached from religion, not requiring religion. Then, suddenly, the conception of god can change as well. For example, a woman may assume the place of God, because a woman can be far softer, more accepting, rounder, less angular and less rigid. (Rakefet, 39, social worker)

In the same vein, the possibility of detachment from the traditional perception of God as a masculine agent was also proposed by Sigal (39), a professor of social work, who said: "If so, it may as well be a woman. This distances me from the concept of the God of history, who performs magic, who punishes, who is distant from me." She added:

> It is also logical for god to be a woman, because if you think about god as something that encompasses and fills the entire universe, the simplest, most trivial and most immediate image is the womb. I understand that men, who were historically given the privilege of speaking with god, want to blur this image, but this is the desired image. And the womb, with all due respect, belongs to women, not men.

Surprisingly, even women who talked about god in feminine terms did not use the expression 'goddess' to address the divine. Only one woman mentioned the goddess, offering an amorphous perspective that associates it with 'the grand source of everything'.

The lack of reference to the goddess is unexpected, considering the concept's popularity in feminist spiritual movements and Western feminist theology (Christ and Plaskow 10–11). Theology of the goddess (thealogy) was conceived as crucial to women's empowerment, as it represents a symbolic recognition of women's powers and tradition (Christ 278). Furthermore, as Melissa Raphael ("Goddess", "Feminist") notes, combinations of Judaism and the Goddess religion were developed by Jewish feminists in the West. The comparison between Raphael's findings and my own will be expanded in the "Discussion" below.

There are three possible explanations of the participants' tendency to avoid the term 'goddess'. The first is the harsh resistance of traditional Judaism to goddess worship, which is interpreted as a manifestation of idolatry, suggesting that there are divinities other than YHVH. The 'war against the goddess' is linked with the struggle against other gods in the Land of Israel, as described in the Bible. Furthermore, Jewish writings also associate goddess worship with witchcraft and black magic (Kien 131). These conceptions are apparently so well rooted within Judaism that many women almost automatically adopt its historical resistance to paganism and spiritualism and consequently reject the notion of the goddess.

The goddess concept may also be rejected because of its connection with the New Age movement(s). Only three participants presented themselves as actors within this sphere and as believers in its (broad and pluralistic) principles. All the others tended to reject New Age phenomena and expressed contempt towards them, calling them 'charlatanry', 'mumbo jumbo', and 'cheap spirituality'.

A third reason for using the term 'god' rather than 'goddess' was offered by one woman who suggested that such a choice had political significance:

> I do not use this concept [of the Goddess] because it is a weak one. The concept of god has mighty cultural and historical power that I am unwilling to forgo. And when I say 'god', I am not referring to what the religious refer to and I speak about her in the feminine gender intentionally, for feministic reasons. I will not forgo the concept, however, as then I would be giving up the power that my words have when I speak about the topic. (Naama, 48, doctorate in social sciences)

Proceeding to amorphous images and metaphors, it is important to note that, in Hebrew, a highly gendered language, even amorphous statements are marked for gender. One cannot even refer to 'god' without attributing gender. In Hebrew, suffixes, pronouns, and verb conjugations designate god as masculine or feminine. Common, hegemonic usage refers to a masculine god and Naama, quoted above, was the only participant who described her amorphous beliefs using the feminine gender.

Amorphous metaphors about god included 'god is the good', 'the universe', 'the power of the world', 'the force of creation', 'the prime mover', 'the full half of the glass', 'the source', the spirit of the world', and 'the infinite'. The Christian notion of god as love was mentioned only by one participant. The most common statement was 'god is everything':

> God is everything; this cabinet and this plant and you and I. It [the Bible] says: "… there is none else beside Him" [Deuteronomy 4:35]. That means not only that there are no other gods but also that there is nothing other than god. (Reut-Miriam, 25, student)

> God is essentially everything and nothing. It cannot be said that it is present; it is everything. According to quantum mechanics, there is more space than material between atoms and particles. I now think that god is this space in which the materials move about, with him, composed of him. (Rotem, 59, Internet content manager)

The immanent pantheistic understanding that identifies god with nature was also mentioned by some participants. Rivka (33), a farmer, for example, said that she based her beliefs on the writings of A. D. Gordon (1856–1922), a postsecular Jewish theologian who, like contemporary Jewish secular-believers in Israel, imbued a life that does not include observance of religious law with a deep sense of religiosity (Lahav, "Postsecular" 200). For Gordon, the immanent god manifests itself in 'nature' or 'existence' (in Hebrew *havayah*, a word that connotes the name YHVH and thus implies a sacred existence). A person can attract and approach this sacred existence by working in nature. Through this work, one may advance, accumulate vitality, and experience contact with the divine (Schweid 165):

> I talk to the vines as I harvest grapes and I feel something there that is greater than I am. I know it is there. I see it in processes of healing myself and others. I experience it as the power of nature, the power that heals, that induces and ensures growth no matter what obstacles are encountered. I do not look upward when I speak with god. I simply look at a leaf. (Rivka, 33, farmer)

Life and God

The majority of participants believed that life is guided, that 'things do not happen accidentally'. They often used phrases such as 'whatever happens has to happen', 'everything is planned up to the second', 'everything is calculated in advance'. Most went farther, claiming—as many orthodox theologians do—that 'things always happen for the best'. Many considered this belief as manifesting the core of their religiosity, articulating it in statements such as 'I am a believer because I believe that everything is for the best'. They emphasized that it is impossible to know how particular events that appear to reflect evil and injustice actually contribute to the good, yet insisted that even such events embody a positive purpose. This

theodical discussion appeared even when interviewees were asked about the Holocaust and god's place therein.

The most common interpretation of 'everything is for the best' claims that events in life are designated for personal learning, change, and growth. Women talk about the 'precise script' that each of us has and through which we are directed towards the positive:

> I think that things are highly planned, as if someone is sitting and writing the plans. When the guiding supreme power took out my file, it wrote that I have to undergo a transformation in this life in certain respects and it also organized the events and things that happened to me and that I encountered in my life so that I would get through it. The purpose is to turn into a person who is as lucid and liberated as possible. The direction is positive because the objective of life here is a positive change. (Ruth, 65, teacher)

> My motto is 'Whatever happens has to happen'. You can try all kinds of maneuvers, but if you have to be at a certain point, you will get there, you will be there. At times it appears that god causes things to happen that do not appear to be for my benefit. It's annoying, but I know that if She (god) causes it to happen, there must be a reason and I have to learn something from it. There is something to learn from everything. (Sara, 37, engineer)

The claim that everything is for the best raises the question of personal providence, a central concept in Jewish traditional theology. As in the discussion of metaphors and images of god, the pluralistic dispersal of secular-believers is highly evident. Some women firmly rejected the idea of personal providence, calling it 'vanity'. One even said it was an 'inappropriate elevation of the human heart'. For these women, god does not interfere in their lives and has no particular plan for them. Others expressed ambivalence about this question, even contradicting themselves, as in the following example:

> Personal providence? I think so, even though every time I say 'yes', I think: 'Just a minute! It's absurd, isn't it?' So there's always some doubt. Sometimes I believe in it, when it's convenient for me and good for me, but sometimes I say: 'What does He, She, them, god care about what I am doing?' But sometimes I feel that there is some kind of guiding hand there. So perhaps I believe that everything is predetermined, yet we have free will, that there is something determined at the divine providence level. Nevertheless, the end of my personal story has not been recorded, but only, say, the potential thereof. I must admit that when I do bad things, I somehow believe that personal providence is absent, that it has been eliminated, as if to say 'What kind of god has time now to observe me, of all people?' (Sigal, 39, doctorate in social work)

At the same time, there is no doubt that many secular-believer women take personal providence for granted. When they talked about it, they emphasized the positive meaning of the term, as protection, care, help, and guidance to the right path. It is not that god oversees whether you do good things or bad things; it is that god is here for you, cares about you, and looks out for you. They said that everyone has a 'part of god' which is directed particularly towards her/him. Their personal providence is universal, not a reward for exceptional people. Moreover, it does not apply to human beings alone:

> I feel personal providence for myself and for my dog and I assume that when I have offspring, I will feel it for them as well. I feel it all the time. In the past, it occurred that my employer tried to attack me and I was saved at the last minute. Such a story may be seen from the victim's point of view, leading to questions such as 'Why did this happen to me, specifically?'. But it can also be seen as reflecting personal providence. (Rivka, 33, farmer)

Some women who talked about personal providence emphasized that it did not imply passivity. It is not that a person can do nothing and rely on the faith that 'god will provide'. Providence exists but requires humans—and not only god—to act. If a person is not

connected to her/his 'inner voice' and does not act accordingly, s/he will not benefit from personal providence:

> There is divine providence, but only up to a point. It is not enough to be passive. You have to be very enterprising. It is a guiding voice within each one of us. But if you are not attentive to it, it does not help. From my point of view, divine providence comprises the hints that we all receive, everyone on earth, regarding what is right and what is not right on our path. People have to simply listen so that it helps them. It only has meaning if we cooperate with it. (Lihi, 35, nurse)

The notion of 'god is watching' may also raise questions about divine punishment. This issue involves not only love and contact, but also fear and piety. Secular-believers were essentially of one mind in this respect: all participants but one rejected the idea of divine punishment, describing it as a 'terrible idea', 'a way to frighten people', and 'an unbearable notion'. Even women who talked about evil and suffering in life did not interpret it in terms of punishment. Most stated that they abhorred the idea, offering instead different perceptions to explain why evil and suffering are not to be interpreted as divine punishment.

The first explanation relies on conventional Jewish orthodox theodicy, according to which even what is perceived to be insufferable is indeed positive in mysterious ways and an unavoidable part of god's positive activity in the world (Dan 331):

> God does not punish us and will never do so. We also perceive punishment wrongly, as if we have done something bad and are beaten in return. We have to understand that what people call 'punishment' is essentially measures planned in advance that are intended to bring us to a place of self-love, love of those around us, peace with the creator, so that we understand that we have done something to be worthy of the light. (Reut-Miriam, 25, student)

Other explanations offered by secular-believers are based on a non-theistic separation between the world and 'divine activity', maintaining that god is not an active player in life. This explanation—that attributes the bad in the world to chaos, rules of natural law, and human activity, but not to god—appeared even in statements by women who believe in providence.

Yet another explanation that distinguishes between divine activity and suffering in this world is based on the notion of *karma*, according to which all of a person's past, present, and future activity affects the realities of her/his life:

> It is not a punishment. It is the results of the deeds we do. There is significance to the seeds I sow and to the observation that at times the reaction is delayed. I do not perceive this as reward and punishment. If I date a married man, I will cause pain to a woman in this world. I do not think that god will punish me for this, but I do think that I have sown a seed of something that caused someone pain. This seed will one day grow into a tree and this metaphorical tree will return to me somehow with a boomerang effect. I try to sow good seeds with all due positive intentions and not only to avoid sowing bad seeds, but I do not perceive god as a force that punishes, becomes angry and so on. (Rivka, 33, farmer)

The Soul

The soul was found to be a very prominent issue among participants. Most used this notion to address something significant in their lives. 'Soul' has more than one meaning in Judaism. Mostly, however, it is understood in orthodox Judaism as the higher component in the duality of body/soul, said to be characteristic of human beings. Thus, the soul is perceived as the divine component, the 'godly spark' within people.

Many participants, however, offered a far more 'secular' understanding of the term, perceiving the soul as the authentic, lofty part of the personality. [4] Here, the soul is part of the human being, the source of morality, not in the Freudian sense of external morality, but in the deep, primeval, inner, and authentic sense. It was presented as the core of personality or the lucid part thereof:

> The soul is perhaps the 'more' component within us, the ability to want to do better—not in the sense of talent or success, but better for human society, for the world around us. It is our innermost and authentic guide, a guide towards good, the core of our personality. This is the impulse to do good that exists within us. (Shirli, age unspecified, psychologist)

Within this perception, the soul is not understood as transcendent or as an opposite to the body or the embedded self, but as an immanent part of one's personality that exists in the here and now.

Other participants, however, offered a much more orthodox understanding of the soul. In their eyes, the dictum declaring that people are created in the image of god refers to the soul. The soul, in this case, is not a physical or mental human characteristic, but a separate, divine element transplanted into people, enabling them to accomplish their divine mission in life. Within this framework, god is defined as 'the total of the souls' or the 'mother of the souls'. One participant, a businesswoman, said that the soul is god's subsidiary. Others stated that god and the soul 'reside in the same neighborhood' and that the soul mediates between a person and god. One woman described the soul as a 'clean, golden drop' with which god had infused her:

> I believe that the soul came into the world to experience things. It is energy that comes from lofty realms. It determines which body it will inhabit on earth and that body is supposed to serve it in its script of life. It is impossible to arrive with one script and to undertake another, because that would be deviant. The soul experiences the many things in life that it is supposed to experience. It learns, draws conclusions and transmits them to the realms above. (Zippi, 49, businesswoman)

Women who attributed the second, divine meaning to the soul tended to talk about its perseverance and immortality. They mentioned reincarnation and the transfiguration of the soul, claiming that the soul returns to the world repeatedly, whether forever or until it achieves perfection. Influenced primarily by the Kabbalistic notion of *gilgul neshamot* (reincarnation), many participants said that they did not start here and end here, but that something within them continues beyond the circle of life and death. For them, the soul is not ephemeral, but permanent:

> The soul reincarnates and seeks to improve itself. It attends more and more lessons to become purer and to elevate itself. This is energy that has no beginning and no end, but continues to exist even after our death. (Smadar, 37, graduate student)

At the same time, other women rejected the idea of reincarnation. They said that they would like to believe in it because they understand the comfort offered by such belief, but they cannot. They were either 'not sure' or did not believe in the transmigration of souls:

> I fear that the idea of the perseverance of the soul originates in our attempting to explain death and to cope with fear of death. I do not think that it is possible to separate the body from the soul. I believe that there is no perseverance except in the memories of the people around us. I would be happy to believe that something of us indeed remains, but I do not. (Dalit, 48, doctorate in the arts)

Mitzva and Sin

Judaism is first and foremost a religion of *mitzvot*, the obligatory positive ('do') and negative ('don't') religious commandments that are understood as manifestations of the special relationship between God and Israel. According to Jewish tradition, there are 613 such laws that demand action more than belief, practice more than faith. It is thus not surprising that the *mitzvot* were prominent in most interviews. Participants offered two principal understandings of the term *mitzva*: the first duplicates the traditional meaning of the word, while the second perceives it as describing the inner moral obligations that each person has to consolidate on her/his own.

Participants adhering to the first interpretation tended to provide a list of the *mitzvot* that they do or do not observe. As this interpretation is primarily religious in nature, many expressed aversion to the concept, associating it with coercion, imposition of order, and unacceptable interference in one's individual life. They tended to say that many of the *mitzvot* suppress personal freedom, especially among women, labeling the concept of *mitzvot* as inherently dangerous.

The second interpretation accords *mitzvot* such meanings as 'moral obligations', 'existential duties', 'inner commandments', and 'ethical resolutions'. According to this perception, each person has to formulate her/his own *mitzvot* without using an existing list. Most women who viewed *mitzvot* this way said that the basic moral command is to do as much good as possible (positive 'do' commandments) and as little bad as possible (negative 'don't' commandments).

> To me, a *mitzva* means a mission of faith. In this spirit, I do whatever I can according to my understanding of its meaning. I am not perfect. I make mistakes all the time, like all people, but at times, at the end of the day, I say to myself: 'I performed *mitzvot* today.' I helped someone, I touched someone's life, I solved a problem for someone. I did not do it so that people would applaud me. Being a good person refers to one's attitude toward fellow human beings and also toward nature—to preserve and respect nature, not to harm anything. These are what I consider to be *mitzvot*. (Shalvat, 44, doctorate in social sciences)

Understanding of the notion of *mitzva* as doing a good deed while distinguishing the deed from the religious fixed list of 'dos' and 'don'ts' is very Jewish, even if not orthodox. Judaism emphasizes one's responsibility to *this* world, manifested in the demand for *Tikun Olam* (repair of the world). Following this philosophy, many participants emphasized the moral duty their faith requires:

> It starts with the most basic things. You do not step on ants. You keep a vegan diet. You are sensitive to minorities. You perceive the other person and reach out to her. You take political action to make the world a better place. You have to, because your faith in your god demands it, because your responsibility is to expand god's presence in the world. And god is manifested everywhere in the world, in everyone, in the whole. (Naama, 48, doctorate in social sciences)

Such perceptions preserve the centrality of the *mitzva* category within Jewish thought, while according it a 'secular' meaning linked with free choice and individual self-determination.[5] A person is perceived as having a duty to nature, the world, and god, but it is her/his responsibility to determine how, where, and when to fulfill this moral duty.

Within a Jewish context, sin is the opposite of *mitzva*. The participants, however, tended not to discuss this issue unless they were asked directly. As in the case of religious feelings and divine punishment, secular-believer Jewish women did not like to talk about faith in negative terms. Many, including those who spoke willingly about *mitzvot*, said that they

simply do not believe in sin. For them, this term is too harsh, too strict. Those who perceived sin according to its religious meaning—as a violation of a religious precept—were especially decisive in rejecting this notion. They maintained that the notion of sin was intended to arouse fear and guilt and to limit individual freedom.

Here, however, as in the case of *mitzva,* another, 'secular' understanding was also proposed, according to which sin is immoral, unethical, egoistic behavior that contradicts the moral obligation symbolized by the notion of *mitzva*:

> From my point of view, a sin means missing the mark, failing, deviating. First, there are sins toward others: I did something bad, I hurt someone, I expressed hatred toward someone, I became angry at someone, I did not think about the other person's feelings, I made someone feel bad, I behaved not nicely towards someone. And there are also sins against yourself, that are essentially sins against god. To sin toward yourself and god is to forgo your ideals before god, to betray yourself, your values, your soul, your spirit. (Reut-Miriam, 25, student)

Discussion

Adopting a sociological rather than theological approach, Hagar Lahav ("Complicated") shows that Israeli secular-believers tend to see themselves as Jews but interpret their Judaism in cultural, ethnic, and national rather than religious terms. They thus follow mainstream Zionist political theology, according to which Israel is defined as a Jewish (and democratic) state.

Secular-believers keep some religious laws and practices, but do so in a highly selective way and they interpret these as designed to maintain a sense of belonging to the Jewish people and to contribute to family unity. At the same time, they reject the (orthodox) Jewish religion as a hidebound, oppressive, and patriarchal tradition. They also reject non-orthodox Jewish denominations, such as traditional (*Masorti*) or liberal (such as Reform or Conservative) orientations. The former is interpreted as 'not essentially different from orthodoxy', while the latter is accused of being 'unauthentic'. On the other hand, as 'believers', secular-believers tend to reject 'conventional secularity' that they find lacking in spirituality and different from their own secularity. They have difficulty identifying secularism in positive terms and tend to perceive it negatively as 'not religion', although they credit it with values such as freedom of thought and belief, an unfettered way of life, skepticism, equal rights, pluralism, and tolerance. Hence Lahav (Complicated) concludes that the Jewish secular-believers' position is based on three principles: having faith, rejecting traditional religion, and practising secular (but not atheistic) Judaism. Even if not entirely stable, this position constitutes a valid and sophisticated outlook that ought to be taken seriously.

Concentrating on the content of secular-believers' faith, this study asserts that secular-believer women in Israel 'do' theology as they inquire about the relationship between human beings and god. Their theologies may be conceptualized as 'postsecular', as they are characterized by their non-traditional and non-orthodox theological nature. These theologies are certainly far less developed and articulated than those offered by professional theologians and they often include contradictions.

The participants' position as secular-believers, however, compels them to deal with questions concerning faith and belief. This is accomplished within a secular sphere that tends to ignore such questions, at least on the conscious level. As they perceive faith as a central dimension of their lives and self-identities but reject traditional theology, participants

have to exert special efforts to conceptualize their standpoints. Such discourse is lacking in Israel because of widespread disregard of the secular-believers' position. Hence, the secular-believers must accomplish this mission on their own.

When articulating their beliefs, secular-believer Jewish women in Israel primarily emphasize the emotional sphere of religious feelings. They 'sense' god much more than they 'think' about god. For them, it is a positive feeling of contact, wonder, vitality, and admiration. Feeling god does not fill them with fear or with a sense of smallness; on the contrary, it makes them happy.

The prominent theological categories used by secular-believer Jewish women in Israel are 'god', 'soul', and *mitzva*. Within this framework, they reject terms and understandings that they perceive as negative, such as fear of god, divine punishment, sin, and obligatory religious laws and commandments. They offer varied anthropomorphic and amorphous metaphors for god and address god in feminine or masculine language, demonstrating the pluralistic nature of secular belief.

They are united, however, in their emphasis on the positive, both 'good' and 'right'. Thus, everything is for the best: god is good, the soul is positive, and a *mitzva* can be understood as an inner, authentic moral responsibility for the good. These perceptions echo the Jewish tendency to emphasis 'the good' (as the positive and the right) as a central theological category, to emphasize retribution more than vengeance (Dan 68).

This 'good' does not remain solely at the level of individual happiness but also bears a certain social responsibility. Secular-believers' beliefs, as the interviews demonstrate, do not exclusively constitute a 'me' spirituality. In this sense, their faith is highly Jewish. It is not introverted, but exists within the community and demands *Tikun Olam*. It also echoes feminist ethics, even if gender is not (always) at the core of the moral obligation to improve the world.

This raises the question of how and where gender plays a role in the secular-believers' positions. As stated earlier, we do not have quantitative data about the gender division within this group. Furthermore, as only women participated in the study, we cannot compare their theologies to those of secular-believer men. It is interesting to note, however, that about half the participants perceived a connection between being a woman and having a secular-believer position, while the other half denied such a connection.

Those who linked their gender with their spiritual path also tended to define themselves as feminist. In a way, their position resembles what British Jewish theologian Raphael ("Goddess", "Feminist"), writing from an Anglo-American perspective, calls post-denominational or postmodern Jewish feminism. Like secular-believer women in Israel, postmodern Jewish feminists present "a more eclectic, self-defending mood" that is not bound by law and tradition ("Feminist" 53).

Raphael, however, perceives postmodern Jewish feminism as a combination of Judaism and Goddess feminist spirituality that "constitute[s] an authentic Jewish heritage of women's religion" ("Goddess" 198–9). Following the critique of monotheism by the primarily Christian and Western Second Wave feminist spiritual movement, Raphael encourages thealogy as a means of overcoming the separation of spirit/body and the transcendental and androcentric tendency of Judaism, also acknowledging its function as a feminist political tool.

As indicated, most secular-believers reject Raphael's Anglo-American perspective. They barely mentioned thealogical conceptions and rejected the Goddess notion outright. The

discussion of the soul demonstrates that many participants also preserve the traditional separation between body and spirit as well as the transcendent understanding of God, even when criticizing its androcentric nature. Indeed, a sizable number of secular-believer women preserved a distinctly orthodox theology within their self-defined secular-believer identity. Feminist spirituality, as it developed in the West, does not appear to affect them to any significant extent.

Within the historical context of postmodernity and the "return of spirituality" (Heelas), the postsecular paradigm suggests that the secular-believer phenomenon may well be widespread. At the same time, the particularities of this phenomenon clearly differ from culture to culture. Studying the theological understanding manifested by Jewish-Israeli secular-believers within their particular religious-secular landscape, with such unique features as the dominance of Judaism in a country that does not separate (orthodox) religion and state, draws our attention to the phenomenon itself as well as to its particularities.

Israel constitutes only one case study in possible broader research of the emergence of secular-believer women's grassroots theology. A cross-religion and cross-cultural study may be of particular interest and importance here. By comparing other social, cultural, and religious contexts, we may learn more about the similarities and differences of the secular-believer phenomenon as it is manifested across all kinds of borders.

Notes

1. Use of the term 'orthodox Judaism' does not imply that this religious stream is homorganic. Indeed, there is a wide spectrum of Jewish orthodoxy, extending from different types of ultra-orthodoxy to a much more liberal modern orthodoxy.
2. Reference to both 'higher' (which may imply a transcendent understanding of 'god') and 'deeper' (which may imply immanence) is dually motivated: firstly, I did not want to impose a particular perspective on the interviewees. Secondly, in post-traditional Jewish theologies (and also in some feminist theologies), the transcendent and the immanent are not understood as mutually contradictory but as symbolizing an axis of meanings that can be combined in different ways (Lahav, "Postsecular" 206). This issue will be discussed below.
3. The interviews also included less theological questions about the women's perceptions of Judaism, religion, secularism, and traditional practices and law. These questions are beyond the scope of this study and were discussed in detail elsewhere (Lahav, "Complicated"). They will be mentioned briefly in the findings section.
4. One may question the framing of this perception of the soul as 'secular', especially in the light of the (Christian) tendency of the secularization thesis to identify secularity with atheism. This understanding does not fit the Israeli religious-secular landscape, however, as noted above. Furthermore, as this landscape identifies 'religion' with 'orthodox religion', a similar understanding of the soul by theologians representing more liberal Jewish denominations (such as Reform and Conservative Judaism) does not render it 'religious' in Israeli terms.
5. Here, too, it is important to bear in mind the identification of 'religion' with 'orthodoxy' within the Jewish-Israeli discourse. This is not to say that free choice does not exist in Jewish traditional and modern religious philosophy. Within the Jewish-Israeli discourse, however, 'religion' is associated with nomism and secularism with antinomism.

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