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Vernacular Dialectics: Spiritual Practices of *Tsaddik* Veneration by Secular Israelis

In Israel, in order to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.
—David Ben-Gurion (the first prime minister of Israel)

*Vernacular dialectic reasoning reconciles contradictions in people's lives. It involves an amalgam of emotion, belief, and intuition, as well as structures and intentions similar to formal dialectics and scientific thinking. In contemporary Israel, many self-proclaimed secular Jews use vernacular dialectics to avoid confronting stark contradictions between their pilgrimages to the graves of Jewish saints (*tsaddikim*), their virtual practices of* tsaddik *veneration, and prevailing rational assumptions in their secular daily lives.*

Keywords

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BRAHOT IS A 50-YEAR-OLD WOMAN FROM TEL AVIV who has performed many pilgrimages to sacred graves in Israel and Morocco.[1] During one such nightly pilgrimage in 2001, she complained about the responses by those around her to her participation in faith-related travel:

> My husband thought that I was acting silly. He doesn't believe in any of this spirituality. My neighbors said that it was just my 40s crisis. My co-workers were sure I was becoming religious and warned me about "the slippery slope." But I knew. I felt it was right and that I was not doing it for anyone, just for myself. So I did it, and here I am. People can think that the good things that happen when you visit [sacred graves] are just a coincidence, but I know that travelling here helps because of the special powers of the place. I can't explain it and I don't want to become more religious. I just want to do what I like without people criticizing me all the time. (Brahot 1999)[2]

A proclaimed secular person, Brahot feels deep cleavages between the rationalistic-scientific agendas that she shares with her secular acquaintances and her emotional

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attraction to pilgrimages. She is not interested in converting to Orthodox Judaism, but several friends think that her spiritual quest inevitably leads to increased religious observance. Brahot separates pilgrimage from other Jewish practices. She interprets these unique travels as opportunities to experience condensed spirituality, which is detached in location, time, and worldview from her daily life.

Tsaddik is the Hebrew title of a man whose dedication to God and acts of human kindness (*mitsvot*) are regarded as extraordinary. When a tsaddik dies, it is believed that his spirit will seek ways to help people.[3] People often vow to repair, maintain, or adorn a tsaddik's gravesite if their prayers to God are answered. This paper suggests using the concept of *vernacular dialectics* to describe the practice of internal and social dialogues that reduce contradictions between a choice to venerate supernatural powers and the venerators' otherwise perceived secular worldviews. I begin by outlining the phenomenon of tsaddik veneration in contemporary Israel and its controversial nature among the Jewish Israeli population. I then explain why, although tsaddikim are mentioned extensively in Jewish scriptures, the pilgrimage to tsaddik gravesites is a vernacular activity. I follow this trend of thought and practice through three types of veneration sites: locational, symbolic, and virtual. Locational veneration includes travelling to remote gravesites. Symbolic locations are sites that might not be graves of actual saints, but even venerators who know of this uncertainty prefer to relate to the symbolic sacredness of the grave rather than dwell on the question of who is actually buried in this place. Virtual veneration of Jewish saints is a noteworthy new phenomenon in which vernacular dialectics is often articulated by online venerators who are not Orthodox Jews.

In the ultra-Orthodox and traditionalist Jewish groups in Israel, spiritual activity and thought are major aspects of life. In contrast, many in the secular Jewish population view pilgrimages to Jewish saint graves as unsuitable for people who otherwise exhibit non-Orthodox identities and lifestyles. Mainstream media, which is mostly secular, also portrays spiritual and rational perspectives as incongruous. Still, the soaring popularity of tsaddik veneration in Israel points to the vitality of this tradition and its appeal to both religious and secular Israelis (Collins-Kreiner 2003, 2006; Epstein 1995).

The largest Israeli mainstream news portal, *Ynet*, published a joint survey with the Smith Institution showing that one in three Israelis and one in 10 self-proclaimed secular Jews had visited the graves of tsaddikim in the previous two years (Sela 2006).[4] This trend of "spiritual hobby," which also includes East Asian meditation and eco-spirituality, has become increasingly prevalent in secular Israeli groups. However, such popularity has not altered the controversial status of spirituality in secular circles. Therefore, Brahot and other secular Israeli pilgrims choose to compartmentalize their peers into those with whom they interact daily and those who accompany them on pilgrimages. They accept that their families, colleagues, and friends might not be supportive of such spiritual activity. Moreover, they construct a new kind of logic in order to feel at ease with choosing to participate in spiritual travel. As I have witnessed both during my interviews and in broader contexts, pilgrims tend to rationalize their attraction to this activity using arguments seemingly based on supportive empirical evidence. For example, they often state that pilgrimage is known to positively affect psychological and

physical health. However, they tend to ignore that the source of this evidence might be legends or rumors about the tsaddik's powers. Explaining the process of belief in magic as a reasonable activity resembles the manner in which Max Gluckman analyzed the reasoning of the Azande tribe in the early twentieth century (1944). However, while Gluckman's work aimed to explore and apply concepts such as *logic* to people who seemed, to him, to not adhere to scientific reasoning, tsaddik gravesite pilgrims struggle to demonstrate for themselves why their spiritual practice is rational.

At the time of my marriage in 1998, several of my informants suggested that I hold a thanksgiving feast at the gravesite of the tsaddik Yonatan Ben-Uziel, where much of my research was conducted, due to his special reputation for matchmaking. These informants suggested that despite the non-spiritual purpose of my visits to his tomb for research purposes, the powerful tsaddik had in fact found me the ideal partner. They did not perceive research (as opposed to going specifically to pray) as an obstacle to the site's efficacy.

A young male pilgrim of Polish ancestry told me, "It is just like antibiotics. It kills the germs even when the patient does not believe that it works." In using this analogy and viewing my marriage as empirical proof of the tsaddik's powers, he chose to ignore the possibility of a non-causal relationship between the pilgrimage and my marriage. His view was not based on a deeply rooted belief system instilled through education because his parents and family did not practice this tradition. Rather, it reflected a process of vernacular dialectics, which aligns the thesis that one must undertake a pilgrimage to receive a blessing with the fact that I had not visited the grave in order to be blessed. He resolved this tension mainly intuitively by concluding that the supernatural powers of the place work universally on all visitors, regardless of their intentions. This conclusion might not withstand structured logic, but it supplied him with the needed rhetoric in this dialogue.

The idea that the tsaddik's powers are effective even for nonbelievers is also expressed in a short story posted in Tsaddik Ben-Uziel's description online. The narrative tells how a construction worker who was repairing the gravesite met his soulmate through supernatural intervention. In this story, the manual worker was not aware of the spiritual powers of the place. While working, he found a note with a phone number on the ground. He called that number and met the love of his life (Zfat 2008). The reiteration of this and similar stories during pilgrimages and in virtual veneration sites enables pilgrims who have some doubts related to this spiritual practice to feel welcomed in tsaddik gravesite rituals.

Logical ways of thinking in the daily life of pilgrims are thus often mixed with emotionally driven conclusions. While scientific logic often tries to avoid subjective intuitions, most tsaddik venerators whom I met in this research would not detach their feelings from event interpretations and decision-making. In fact, most people do not. Vernacular dialectics is such a common process of discourse in contemporary Israel and elsewhere that it has often been considered one and the same as a logical scientific attitude. In this article, I attempt to tackle the delicate task of deciphering when and why vernacular dialectics is used, examining mainly the discourse that unfolds during and around tsaddik veneration by self-proclaimed secular Jews in Israel.

While studying vernacular dialectics, my fieldwork led me to many encounters with secular pilgrims on visits to sacred gravesites in Israel. This social category consists of people who adhere to some selected Jewish religious forms but state that they lead secular lives. In general, even when attempting to encounter the supernatural, they did not express a firm belief in a divinity, supernatural intervention, or other Jewish concepts. Only a small minority of secular Israeli Jews may be classed as anti-religious, and I have not met any of these during pilgrimages (Arian and Keissar-Sugarmen 2012:30–5). During my research fieldwork, 1994–2016, I conducted participant observation during various pilgrimages. I began as a graduate student writing a master's thesis on the topic. Later, it became my secondary fieldwork while I was visiting my home country between studies in the United States and research in South Korea. As I settled back in Israel in 2008, I resumed my engagement with tsaddik venerators. Most of my data gathering began as informal conversations with pilgrims during gravesite visits, which led to recorded interviews in more conventional locations in the city. In 1999, I distributed 42 open questionnaires during two organized pilgrimages. The lengthy responses from people whom I had not known before confirmed my other research experiences where pilgrims seemed happy to talk about their spiritual voyages and to share their feelings and thoughts about tsaddik veneration and their struggles with a secular-oriented social world. About 75 percent of the respondents were women, which is consistent with the ratio of women to men found on organized pilgrimages. The names used here for the main informants are pseudonyms that they chose for themselves during our conversations.

Overall, I participated in more than 30 organized and private tours to gravesites in both the green hills of Galilee and the arid plateaus of the Negev Desert. I was especially interested in the *tikkun hatsot* rituals organized by the self-proclaimed rabbi Yaacov Ifargan (described below), since these pilgrimages mainly attract secular Jews and are well attended. I also documented and analyzed the public discourse regarding tsaddik veneration in the printed press, television, and on the internet after 2001. The much-studied annual *hillula* events, which are held to mark the anniversary of a tsaddik's death, attract mostly a religious crowd and therefore did not serve as my main research focus (Deshen 1977; Weingrod 1990, 1998).

Leonard Primiano introduced the term "vernacular religion" to refer to practices based on individual interpretations of religious traditions (1995). In his view, "the omnipresent action of personal religious interpretations involves various negotiations of belief and practice" (43). Thus, research of lived religious experience must take into account the vernacular aspect that is more private, changing, and adaptive, as well as the accumulated effect of individual actions on the broader religious environment. Official institutional ideologies have less flexibility and adaptability than vernacular ones, as they are bound by regulations and set prospects (Howard 2005b, 2006). When we use the term "vernacular" to modify broader terms, such as "religion" or "rhetoric," it often necessitates narrowing the scope of analysis to just those practices that are created locally and have strong links to specific contexts. The historical development of the term *vernacular* shows that it was mainly used to describe simple, small-scale, local community-based practices (Howard 2005a:174–7). However, the term *vernacular*

dialectics as discussed here means a sophisticated rationalization process that can be observed in various contexts and practices. By describing how pilgrims, pilgrimage guides, tsaddik veneration websites, and the media use this rhetoric, I demonstrate its prevalence. Vernacular actions form a norm or social fact when repeated regularly with similar intentions and structures by many individuals. The repetition of this type of discourse in various venues has created a normative expressive terminology, which follows the form of a logical argument. This discourse was echoed in the comparison mentioned earlier between the effects of pilgrimage and medications.

Vernacular dialectics is a common discursive norm that developed from and alongside the more notorious logical dialectics that has been discussed for thousands of years by various philosophers. Socrates and Plato established the philosophical practice of dialectics, and later it was applied by Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx regarding contradictions among people's thought, experience, and material surroundings. A simplistic definition of dialectics is that it is a means of distinguishing true from false. By establishing a thesis and antithesis and then striving to achieve a logical synthesis, tensions between opposing assumptions can be resolved. According to Hegel, the aim of such dialectic discourse is to develop knowledge and understanding of the world by extracting the truth from new ideas and experiences. The self is thus constructed through contact with others (1977:111–5). Kant also saw dialectics as a means of exposing illusions caused by aspects of life that are beyond possible experience (Caygill 1995).

In the case of tsaddik veneration, many pilgrims' acquaintances and, to some extent, the pilgrims themselves, consider this activity illusive and irrational. Stories offered by tour guides and fellow pilgrims often attempt to appear to be grounded in empirical evidence. As the opening quotation from Israel's first prime minister implies, miracles can be perceived as realistic. In contemporary Israel, the dialectic process is an accepted indicator of logical-scientific thinking and the popular measure of the secular mind-set, which contrasts with Jewish religious thinking. Orthodox Judaism confronts other philosophies, thinkers, and theories, including Hegel's perspective on dialectics (Abramowitz 2010), concluding that the existence of supernatural powers is unquestionable, whereas a basic tenet in the discourse of the secular Israeli population, about 70 percent of the Jewish majority, is that even the divinity may be doubted. Scientific perspectives within modern mainstream Israeli discourses have led to varying degrees of discrediting of religious establishments such as the Chief Rabbinate, the most significant contemporary Jewish authority in Israel. Within the scope of discredited religious activities, tsaddik veneration has been notoriously stigmatized as unnecessary, superstitious ancient folklore and an activity that is harnessed for monetary gain by dishonest rabbis (Yitah 2012). This view has been promoted by mainstream media, which has increased the public discourse on the topic and accordingly added more tension to the identity conflict of pilgrims who regard themselves as non-Orthodox.

Several television programs tried to prove that this negative stigma regarding tsaddik veneration is in fact a reality, and that Rabbi Ifargan, who leads rituals of pilgrims at tsaddik graves, is a charlatan. One example is a documentary titled *An Industry of Millions: The Story of the Ifargan Family* (Levy 2010), which reflects the exceptionally

negative image of tsaddik veneration in mainstream Israeli media. Initially broadcast in the Spring of 2010, the hour-long documentary was part of a popular series by prominent journalist Amnon Levy. The program traces the evolution of the Ifargan family from an ordinary non-Orthodox family to a group of religious spiritual healers who mediate between people and the spirits of tsaddikim. The goal of the documentary was to prove that members of the Ifargan family offer spiritual consultation to manipulate the blind faith of believers and earn millions. That view was not shared by the majority of my informants, who felt that they made donations to Ifargan voluntarily, without manipulation. They argued that they did not donate money out of fear or ignorance, as the documentary implied.

Other TV documentaries, such as *X-Ray Eyes* by director Sharon Kidon (2010), sought to present Ifargan as an indisputable spiritual healer and fortune-teller by interviewing his believers, mostly proclaimed secular Israeli Jews, who call him "The Roentgen" ("X-ray"). The source of this stage name is the belief that his mystical abilities give him "X-ray vision" to see people's illnesses and tumors, and even the address of his personal website uses the word *rentgen*, the Hebrew pronunciation of "roentgen" (Ifargan 2015; fig. 1).

Kidon's film included interviews with leading media celebrities who reported that The Roentgen had healed them and helped them solve various personal problems. While there can be no clear-cut resolution to the debates between believers and nonbelievers, their dichotomous perspectives necessitate individualized solutions to enable otherwise secular people to engage in tsaddik veneration practices.[5]

In his analysis of late modern societies, Anthony Giddens argues that people's confidence in medical, science, and engineering experts is similar to the confidence

Figure 1. Yaacov Ifargan's website, with his photograph featured on the homepage.

placed by previous generations in leaders of traditional religious belief systems (1991). Respect and a reliance on assumed expertise underline these two kinds of trust. William Nicholls (1987), Georg Simmel (1997), Bryan Wilson (1979), and John Wilson (1987) regard combinations of scientific perspectives and spiritual practices as integral to modernity. Indeed, tsaddik veneration in contemporary Israel can be discussed within these theoretical frameworks. It is based on trust that is rooted in spiritual worldviews, and it is expressed using concepts anchored in ancient traditions. At the same time, venerators engage in innovative contemporary adaptations of the traditional pilgrimage acts and practice rational-scientific ways of thinking. Their trust is divided between scientific experts and tsaddik veneration leaders.

I first met Oren, a man then in his late thirties, on an organized pilgrimage 10 years ago. He worked for the most advanced cellular telephone company in Israel. He had no formal academic education but used many scientific terms and examples in his speech. Every few months, he attended a ritual near a tsaddik gravesite. He said that it "elevated the spirit and cleansed the soul." He also reported that he engaged in many other spiritual practices, including yoga, Reiki healing, and reading such mystical Jewish texts as the *Sefer Hazoar*. Oren praised science as an important tool for understanding the world but said that even in physics, there is a mystical aspect. As he understood it, "the Quantum Theory shows that the person conducting an experiment can influence the ways that particles move. This is the key to understanding the limits of science." For Oren, "rational-scientific thought was effective as long as it could explain things." Whenever events exceeded the explanatory power of science and reason, he turned to mystic powers and often told me of "medical miracles" that he observed where, as the story goes, people were healed during or after their visits to tsaddik graves.

A number of people whom I observed at tsaddik grave pilgrimages had serious health issues, such as paralysis or cancer. While seeking medical help, they noticed that doctors tended to avoid promises in the absence of conclusive indicators for positive treatment outcomes. My informants nevertheless often sought hope in order to relieve their stress. In many stories told at tsaddik gravesites by rabbis and pilgrimage leaders, the miraculously healed protagonists had been treated in various hospitals before turning to tsaddik veneration. Despair after the failure of conventional medicine seemed to make tsaddik venerators more receptive to optimistic projections such as the idea that people can be healed miraculously by participating in pilgrimages. In January 1998, the father of a child in a wheelchair spoke to the large audience of a ritual that I attended near a gravesite. He said, "Once we understood that the tsaddik was our only hope [after long hospitalization periods], we began visiting the grave regularly. That boy's health has been improving constantly since then. Now we are hoping that my son can walk again." The audience applauded enthusiastically.

Religious faith and lifestyle can provide a constant source of hope for religious people, but as most of my informants saw themselves as secular, they tended to reject Jewish Orthodoxy, saying it is unrealistic and overly demanding. Still, when faced with life-threatening situations, some individuals adopted a vernacular dialectic rationalization of their spiritual activities, which offered a glimmer of hope despite perceived logical improbability.

Locational Veneration of Tsaddikim and Religious Identity

When I first met Brahot, with whom I began this article, at a gravesite ritual almost 20 years ago, she was 35 years old. At that time, she told me how pilgrimage became part of her family's heritage:

> My grandmother had four dead babies in Morocco. This bad luck changed after she traveled to the grave of a Jewish tsaddik in a remote region of Morocco and her fifth baby was born alive. (Brahot 1999)

Brahot used the personal story of her grandmother, which was a part of her oral family history, to explain her own new interest in visiting the graves of tsaddikim. She also believed that it was evidence of the spiritual powers encapsulated in such spaces. Some years ago, she was excited to learn that an organized tour to Morocco included Tsaddik Amram Ben-Diwan's grave, the site mentioned in her grandmother's miracle narrative. Before she visited that sacred place, she did not know much about the tsaddik, who was born in Jerusalem in the eighteenth century. Later, she learned that he died in Morocco during his travels to teach the scriptures and collect donations. Her choice to visit Morocco was not triggered by sightseeing aspirations but by curiosity about her grandmother's story. At that time, a friend of Brahot's husband was unable to have children despite many years of fertility treatments, and Brahot decided to seek help for her at the tsaddik's grave. She recalled her experience:

> I was so inspired at the gravesite. I felt that the skies were opening. . . . I took home some pomegranates that were growing at the graveyard and gave the fruit to the barren couple. They ate the fruit and the next fertility treatment they received was successful. (Brahot 1999)

Brahot's pilgrimage experience in Morocco had parallels to her grandmother's experience: both were related to fertility, and both reportedly proved successful. It should be noted that unlike the grandmother's story, where success was based solely on the miraculous encounter with the tsaddik's gravesite, in the more contemporary event, the spiritual help of the fruit enabled the success of the fertility treatments. Medicine and spirituality appear to have worked together in Brahot's own healing mediation story. Moreover, the purpose of her grandmother's visit to the tsaddik was to solve her own problem, while Brahot was interested in conveying the tsaddik's blessing to others. By detaching her personal problems from the miraculous outcome of the pilgrimage, Brahot could portray her act of veneration as generous mediation rather than as a quest for individual benefit. Brahot conveyed that she used contemporary problem-solving practices frequently and viewed pilgrimage as being outside her routine. She saw a psychologist, met with a support group regularly, and depicted herself as a hip, young big-city professional for whom tsaddik grave rituals formed just a tiny part of a busy schedule. She described herself as a "rational person" numerous times and used vernacular dialectics to affirm her secular identity despite her spiritual experiences during tsaddik grave pilgrimages. For example, she said that the fact that scientific medicine could not explain the sudden success of her friend's last fertility

treatment (besides calling it a coincidence) increased her belief that a miracle had occurred thanks to her visit to Amram Ben-Diwan's gravesite.

For some pilgrims, like Brahot, travel to another country is deemed important, while others choose to manifest their tsaddik veneration in Israel. Various rituals are held near tsaddik gravesites in Israel, and organized gatherings often attract more participants than random pilgrimages. One such event is *tikkun hatsot*.

Until recently, almost each Monday, a tikkun hatsot ritual took place at midnight in a dark forested valley in the Galilee in Israel popularly known as Amuka.[6] This site is the perceived gravesite of Tsaddik Yonatan Ben-Uziel. The literal meaning of *tikkun hatsot* is "midnight rectification," but it is often translated as "midnight vigil." It is a rite that includes various mystical ideas and acts, including a direct appeal to the supernatural (Tishbi 1991). Rabbi Yaacov Ifargan leads this tikkun hatsot ritual, which attracts several hundred people each time, despite its remoteness. The ritual begins with prayers and religious folk songs. The climax is reached after about two hours when Ifargan symbolically opens the heavens for prayers by reading a long list of gate names, including the Gate of Healing and the Gate of Matchmaking. He then calls on various tsaddikim for assistance by throwing small boxes of Sabbath candles into the fire and reading out a tsaddik's name each time a box is burnt. During these rhythmic and entrancing practices, the audience repeatedly shouts "Amen."

Hundreds of people crowd onto the sloping muddy hillside when the self-styled rabbi enters the paved courtyard in front of the tsaddik's tomb. Ifargan has no formal rabbinic ordination, and he has been surrounded by controversy over allegations of sexual harassment and financial corruption (Ifargan 2002; Etinger 2008). Ignoring all this, most tikkun hatsot participants consider him an authority in spiritual mediation and often call him Tsaddik Ifargan. Ifargan is well versed in vernacular dialectics, which reassures his followers that contradictory paradigms are acceptable. In his youth, he led a secular lifestyle and is acquainted with the ways of thinking of secular Israelis. Hence, instead of scolding and preaching through fear, as many Orthodox rabbis do, Ifargan tries to convince his audience that there is no harm in practicing tsaddik veneration alongside a non-religious lifestyle. In his speeches throughout tikkun hatsot events, he explains that all Jews practice Judaism, even if they are not self-proclaimed religious people. For example, giving alms is an important virtue in Judaism, and Ifargan often tells tikkun hatsot audiences that they all perform this duty through their mandatory national insurance payments. He uses the rhetoric of empiricism by recounting miracles that he is purported to have mediated physically to prove that tsaddikim really can help people. As he walks among the participants, he touches some and blesses others. I have seen several people in wheelchairs suddenly stand up when he approached them, although I do not know which, if any, of them were in a wheelchair because of difficulty walking or due to actual paralysis. As mentioned above, in the media, these miracles have been discussed as fake. However, ritual participants mostly view them as real. They talk about them with much enthusiasm and hold their breath when the Rabbi asks a healed person to approach the microphone and tell his or her stories. I have not heard pilgrims express disbelief in such assumed miracles.

People's willingness to accept legends as proof that miracles can happen is essential in Ifargan's argumentation process. "In their oral context, legends are richly evocative of society's fears, hopes, anxieties, and prejudices, and folklorists decode these narratives to reveal and analyze the cultural attitudes expressed within" (Blank 2009:9). Tsaddik gravesite pilgrims may listen attentively to legends about Ifargan because they reflect their own personal concerns and offer hope in situations that produce fears and anxieties, such as illness or lack of a life partner. Legends in contemporary urban societies share several common features: they state practical information, such as the profession of the protagonist and where he or she lives; they are written or told in vernacular language; and they usually begin with describing a routine activity that suddenly shifts to some unusual event. These features are typical in most urban legends (Brunvand 1981:3–4).

Furthermore, the people who produce legends know that they might encounter audience resistance, and therefore "the legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief" (Dégh 2001:97). The anticipation of disbelief is evident especially when pilgrim guides tell narratives beginning with phrases such as "You might think that this is nonsense, but there are so many cases where the tsaddik's blessing worked. For example . . ."[7] The manner in which the legends combine regular secular activities with extraordinary spiritual traditions allows this genre of folklore to prevail in tsaddik pilgrimages of secular Israelis. This plasticity of narrative, as discussed by Howard (2006), is the very foundation that enables tsaddik veneration to remain a vibrant and dynamic tradition that appeals to broad audiences.[8] Moreover, secular pilgrims who tell personal experience narratives about miracles, such as the story of Brahot discussed above, tend to express skepticism toward miracles as their initial standpoint. This narrative trait may appeal to secular Israelis who identify with this kind of feeling, and may make these legends more believable to them. As Lawton Winslade states in relation to various other beliefs in spiritual concepts, "the occultist consumer interprets perception and information according to self determinal laws creating a system of coherence where one previously did not exist" (2000:86).

My informants sometimes suggest that they were not certain how these miracles were achieved, but they point out that there are many things beyond human comprehension. The popular (and logical) Hebrew aphorism "Im lo yoil lo yaziq" [It may not help but at least it doesn't harm] is used by self-proclaimed secular Israelis to explain spiritual practices such as tikkun rituals as entertaining events with a specific purpose and no negative effects. Other types of spiritual practice such as synagogue attendance require greater social negotiation with self-proclaimed religious Jews who could be critical of the secular lifestyle of occasional visitors. Ifargan, however, stresses that tikkun hatsot participants should not feel guilty about not being more religious.

Ifargan's clothing, prayer motions, and speech all denote him as an ultra-Orthodox Jew. In contrast, most tikkun audience members do not conform to Orthodox norms of dress and behavior. In summertime, women often wear sleeveless shirts and shorts, which is against the code of modesty for observant Jews. In the Orthodox community, there are strict rules regarding gender separation, especially during prayers. However, at tikkun events, I observed that when the announcer asked the men and

women to stand separately, many did not obey. Ifargan never criticized this as "lack of respect" or scolded participants for how they dressed. Ifargan's liberal approach was far removed from my experiences on pilgrimages with Orthodox religious groups. Despite my best efforts to conform to religious norms by wearing a skirt and long sleeves, I was frequently rebuked by Orthodox pilgrims and tour guides for wearing a wedding ring but not covering my hair (Orthodox married women do not show their hair), or for wearing a light-colored skirt, which they considered immodest (it draws more attention than a dark skirt). Such strict demands were new to me, even though I grew up in Israel and had several Orthodox acquaintances. It seems that in recent years, more exacting norms have been on the rise within Orthodox Jewish religious circles (Raphael 1993).

Several studies have noted the worldwide process of polarization within Jewish religious observance and practice (Satlow 2006; Sharot 1991). In Israel, the boundaries between the *lo maamin* (atheist), *hiloni* (secular), *reformi* (reformed), *masorati* (traditionalist or "mildly religious"), *dati* (religious), and *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) Jews are becoming more rigid. Each classification has a unique set of norms relating to dress, conduct, social grouping, and even employment opportunities (cf. Goldschmidt 2009; Meyer 1988; Satlow 2006). Before the 1990s, though, within pilgrimage events, these clear-cut distinctions were rare. Most pilgrims to the graves of tsaddikim in Israel were elderly Moroccan women from the traditionalist masorati population who visited the graves during the day in family or neighborhood groups (Deshen 1977; Shokeid 1977). For these pilgrims, who were mostly immigrants who came to Israel in the 1960s and 1970s, tsaddik gravesite pilgrimage was a part of their heritage. They performed it in their native countries and continued to perform it in their new location.

Saint veneration was a common practice among the Muslim (Bhardwaj 1998; Eickelman 1976), Berber (Rabinow 1977), and Jewish societies of North Africa (Ben-Ami 1998). Most researchers of tsaddik veneration in Israel agree that group pilgrimages to the graves of tsaddikim helped first- and second-generation North African Jewish immigrants to establish a unique ethnic identity in Israel.[9] The tradition of such pilgrimages has been described as a folk custom that migrated to Israel with North African Jews (Ben-Ari and Bilu 1990, 1997; Bilu 1987, 1990; Deshen 1977; Shokeid 1977, 1998; Weingrod 1990, 1998). Since the 1960s, most Israeli anthropologists have perceived tsaddik veneration as a domestic vernacular practice used by low social status venerators for self-empowerment (Sered 1988). Tsaddik veneration was considered a folklore tradition in contrast to hegemonic Judaism that controlled institutionalized worship spaces such as the Western Wall (*Kotel*) (Bilu 1987; Sered 1988; Shokeid 1974). My own findings show that contemporary tsaddik veneration is practiced by Israelis of diverse ethnic backgrounds and is a hybrid of vernacularity and institutionality.

Primiano argues that vernacular religion is not lived exactly as dogma would have it (1995). Often a relaxed attitude toward institutionalized norms and texts can be observed in tsaddik veneration, where canonized biblical texts are often read in unique manners. This is especially evident in Ifargan's services, perhaps as a result of his self-designated status of rabbi. Primiano's observation of vernacularity as being

"religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, and interpret it" (44) fits Ifargan's liberty in ritual construction. The uniqueness of hiloni pilgrims' practice of vernacular religion is that in their daily lives, they do not observe religious codes, but in their pilgrimages, they express sincere belief in supernatural powers. Such venerators interpret their experiences in tikkun hatsot through flexible alignment of thesis and antithesis within the contradicting conceptual frameworks of rational-scientific versus religious-mystical. The pilgrims often describe their spiritual activity as "engagement with Jewish folklore," thus asserting the practice's vernacularism, as opposed to exacting institutional establishments that might demand full dedication (Howard 2005a). Those who have not experienced tsaddik gravesite pilgrimages as a family tradition and were not socialized with such beliefs and activities (mainly Israelis of European descent) relate to that practice as an individual choice of spirituality. Others, like Brahot, who grew up hearing about tsaddik miracles, reflect on their pilgrimages as a "root searching" activity (*hipus shorashim*) that is a common identity-construction process for Israelis of foreign ancestry.

Within the mixed ethnic origins of tsaddik gravesite pilgrims, some distinctions can be made. Religious people visit the grave mainly in daytime while secular pilgrims come at night, primarily when the tikkun hatsot ritual is being held there. Daytime and nighttime pilgrims are clearly two distinct groups: daytime pilgrims are traditionalist-masorati individuals, and nighttime pilgrims are secular-hiloni types. For many hiloni nighttime pilgrims, who learn about these events through advertisements or internet promotion sites, nighttime tsaddik veneration offers a context and site removed from their family, friends, and workmates. If they fear that such activities could negatively affect their self-presentation, they can compartmentalize their spiritual practices and hide them. As discussed by Erving Goffman, my informants often thought about their self-presentation and how others would perceive them (1959:7). Nighttime frames some pilgrimages and tikkun hatsot rituals as isolated events, far removed in time and locus from the individual's secular life by day, which allows veneration participants to hide their spiritual experiences from members of their social circle (Zerubabel 1981).

When I first met Gila, she was 25, living at home with her parents, and working as a computer supervisor for the municipality of a Tel Aviv satellite town. She wanted to relocate to downtown Tel Aviv "because that was where the fun people lived." Her father was from Tunisia, and her mother came from an Eastern European immigrant family. Gila and her parents were hiloni, and her father did not practice Jewish Tunisian pilgrimage traditions. Gila had participated in 10 pilgrimages to tsaddik graves, hoping that this would lead to finding a spouse. She hid these trips from her parents, fearing their disapproval. Before boarding the bus to tikkun hatsot events, she always switched off her cell phone.

> If my phone rang while I was on the bus and everyone was singing religious songs, it would be extremely embarrassing. My friends have known me as "the party girl" because I love dancing and [going to] clubs. It might ruin their trust if they found I was visiting graves. My image would be destroyed. I'd rather tell them that my battery went dead than try to explain where I was. Even my parents would be shocked to hear that I do it. (Gila 2000)

Gila defined her non-religious identity in terms of her entertainment preferences, which include dancing in clubs. This is something practiced by young hiloni Jews and is not common or acceptable among religious young people. Tsaddik veneration was a deviation from Gila's normal lifestyle, and she was reluctant to share her spiritual interest with her relatives and friends. Like Gila, many venerators have adopted the practice of turning off their cell phones and shying away from photographers, lest their faces appear in the news or on the internet in relation to tsaddik veneration.

The story of Shoshana, a 43-year-old woman who made pilgrimages to tsaddik graves on numerous occasions in the past 2 years, shows how individuals utilize vernacular dialectics in their spiritual practices. Although she is the daughter of American Jews, her pilgrimage was not linked to family heritage. Like many people I met at tikkun hatsot rituals, Shoshana was looking for a life partner. There is tremendous emphasis in Israeli culture on marriage and having children, and Shoshana, who had not established a normative family by age 40, suffered regularly from social comments and pressure to marry. She said:

> I sought an explanation for this and decided my situation [being unmarried at 40] resulted from being too demanding of my partners. I thought about times when I felt that men had left me because I was too lax [letting them behave as they liked]. All this thinking got me nowhere. I still didn't have a clue what I was doing wrong. (Shoshana 2002)

Many hiloni pilgrims suffer from the absence of a life partner and visit the sacred gravesite in Amuka as an attempt to gain peace of mind and an end to this painful situation by adopting a transcendent belief in an external force. If they were religious Jews, this approach would be socially acceptable. But, as noted, the contemporary mind-set that elevates logic and discourages superstition often makes it difficult for such hiloni Israelis to think about life's problems in anything like religious terms. Thus, many agencies wanting to proselytize supernatural beliefs construct their proselytizing narrative in quasi-dialectic terms in the hope of convincing people that tsaddik veneration is a rational choice. The type of rational secular discourse used by veneration proponents helps to reduce the skepticism of hiloni visitors toward veneration proselytizing. As Shoshana recalled about her first visit to Amuka,

> the first time I took a tour to a tsaddik's grave, it was weird. A friend invited me to go, and I thought it was bullshit, but I went anyway. Surprisingly, I felt better after the visit. Some of the burden was lifted off my shoulders. As if now someone else was taking care of me and I could rest. (Shoshana 2002)

The Amuka gravesite that Shoshana visited is the most common pilgrimage locale for people hoping to find love and get married. It is attributed to Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Uziel and is not far from the town of Safed.[10] The veneration of Ben-Uziel's grave is especially appealing to hiloni Jews since this tsaddik's reputation belongs to a much-needed area of expertise. It is said that on his deathbed, he told his followers that people longing to get married should pray at his tomb and their prayers would be answered within a year. In Israel, hiloni Jews believe in marrying for love, and they

search for a soulmate. Israel's early twenty-first-century urban lifestyle has resulted in more lonely 30- and 40-year-old career people desperate to start a family. At Tsaddik Ben-Uziel's gravesite, Yaakov Ifargan promises that people who regularly attend tikkun hatsot rituals will find a partner chosen by the tsaddik's spirit. Internet and media publications have also fueled the growing popularity of the Amuka gravesite and the fame of Yaacov Ifargan (Mynet 2008; Halali 2013; Harpaz 2008). Moreover, pilgrimage organizers, who rent buses and guides to lead people to Amuka and other tsaddik gravesites, work hard to extend their clientele through printed advertisements and the internet (fig. 2).

The advertisements for daytime traditionalist pilgrimages use Old Testament-style Hebrew fonts, biblical phrases, and lists of the names of rabbis accompanying the pilgrimage. As in other documents produced by Orthodox Jews, the acronym ב״ה or ד״סב (meaning "God willing"/"with God's help") appears in the right-hand corner of the advertisement. In contrast, advertisements for nighttime pilgrimages are printed in plain fonts and marketed as adventure, spiritual, or experiential tours, without clear Jewish indexicality. Such differential usage of religious markers also appears in online publications. Pilgrimage organizers have harnessed the symbols that will entice each kind of pilgrim to the relevant event. Many hiloni pilgrims engage in online forum postings about these events, share the information in their internet social networks, and express their thankfulness for the availability of online postings that led them to come to tsaddik gravesites and tikkun hatsot rituals.

Figure 2. A newspaper advertisement for a tikkun ritual by Yaacov Ifargan, laden with religious symbols. Author's image.

Most informants talked about experiencing a special feeling during tikkun hatsot. They reported excitement about being among so many like-minded people. Some felt that others at the event shared their emotions and life stresses. Their words echo Victor Turner's notion of supportive *communitas*, when a sense of unity arises through a ritual's emotional appeal. A tikkun hatsot ritual is constructed "'in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure" (Turner 1970:98) in similar and different ways to the cases explored by Turner when developing the concept of communitas. The tikkun hatsot event is far removed in distance and meaning from the ordinary lives of many hiloni participants. It is also special for Ifargan and his assistants, who drive for hours to Amuka and stay awake all night. But, unlike the shared values of Turner's informants, many tikkun participants have contested religious affiliations and beliefs. This contradiction is an anti-structure that reinforces secular pilgrims' communitas through their participation in activities that others in their home environment might consider weird or beneath them.

Edith Turner extended the effect of communitas to include various non-religious activities, arguing that they also express the importance of group-created joy (2011). It seems that, likewise, for my informants, at least in their first pilgrimages, the religious aspects of the tikkun hatsot event were secondary to the pleasure they gained from their near-ecstatic joyful group experience. Their image as a trendy New-Age activity following media coverage of celebrity visits, including one by Madonna (Grinberg 2008; Test Ynet 2008; Weiss and Shiloni 2004), also attracted my informants to tsaddik pilgrimages. Many rabbis in the Orthodox community object to visits by non-Jewish celebrities and see their visits as photo opportunities devoid of all religious sincerity. However, these visits continue to attract secular hiloni media coverage, thus boosting the visibility and social legitimacy of spiritual pilgrimages for non-Orthodox people.

Symbolic Sites of Veneration

Brahot's story of her visit to the tsaddik's grave in Morocco is but one example of the fact that many pilgrims are not concerned about the authenticity of tsaddik gravesites. She never paused to confirm that the grave really belonged to Ben-Diwan or to ask why and how he came to be buried there. She assumed that it was his burial site because that was the traditional narrative. Many people travel far to be close to a saint's spirit because sacred gravesites are considered *axis mundi*, where there can be direct communication between our human world and the cosmological realms.[11] The idea of linking two worlds, the tangible grave and the imagined dwelling place of the tsaddik's soul in the afterlife, is beyond logical explanation. Many pilgrims whom I interviewed explained how the geographic distance that they travelled on their pilgrimages created a unique spiritual experience that seemed convincingly ancient and rooted in long and proven success stories—as if somehow they had travelled in time to an era when more people believed in magic.

Traditions of magic and spiritual healing often involve human and object mediation of supernatural powers. In Israeli tsaddik veneration, blessed water, pictures of the saints or their graves, and amulets sold on site have become important objects in veneration practices. From her trip to Morocco, Brahot brought back the fruit of a tree that grew at the grave compound. She said that the tsaddik's power had travelled

all the way to Israel encapsulated in the fruit and had helped her friend become pregnant. Other pilgrim practices of object/human-mediated worship include taking notes, pieces of cloth, or oral requests from friends and relatives to the gravesite and "delivering" them to the tsaddik, who is somehow present there. Pilgrims often hang amulets and photographs bought at the gravesite in their homes and cars. Others keep in their wallets miniature books of psalms that they received from the pilgrimage organizers or purchased themselves while visiting the sacred place. The belief that a spirit resides in and near its grave makes objects bought at the site more powerful than the same objects sold in regular stores.

A common representation of where the tsaddik spirit resides is "standing before the Seat of Glory" (*omed mul keesay hakavod*). While the seat of glory represents the place of God, which is imagined to be somewhere in the spiritual realm, outside the material world of humans, the tsaddik's spirit is also believed to reside in his grave, accessible and tangible to those pilgrims who make the effort to visit it. Tsaddik graves are often marked by stone buildings topped with white or blue domes, like graves of Muslim saints in the Galilee and elsewhere. There is little scientific evidence that the domed rooms where tsaddikim are venerated are Jewish tombs because most records have been destroyed in the turbulent past of that land. Furthermore, as described by Yoram Bilu, in contemporary Israel, tsaddik veneration sites have often been set up in the houses of people who claim to mediate the tsaddik's words, although the actual grave is in another country, mainly Morocco (2010). This new phenomenon, which arose after the massive immigration from North Africa to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, further demonstrates the representational dimension of venerating a tsaddik's spirit at a certain place.

Historians and archaeologists have questioned the authenticity of long-established tombs in Israel, including the tomb of the matriarch Rachel; the cave burial site of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and Joseph's tomb. Internet forums of various ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups respond to such concerns, trying to assure readers that the graves are authentic (Bhol 2008). Orthodox tradition identifies these burial sites based on vague descriptions from the Old Testament and assertions by important historical rabbinical figures regarding the sites (Ilan 1997). In Judaism, the material body of a deceased person is instrumental in his or her afterlife. If a person's remains are buried in the right way according to tradition, his or her spirit can join its body when the Valley of Dry Bones prophecy is fulfilled. This prophecy in the Book of Ezekiel reassures the Jewish people that when the Messiah comes, Jews will rise from their graves and live once more (Ezek. 37:1–14). Jewish traditions also demand strict purification procedures before a corpse can be buried, in order to enable the future resurrection (Heilman 2001:31–71). The strong belief in the power of buried bones is manifested when construction work unearths unidentified graves. When this happens, heated arguments arise between Orthodox and hiloni Jews over whether human remains can be moved. Sometimes the controversy includes demands to stop all construction at any cost (Weingrod 1995).[12]

Given the importance of bones and graves in Jewish culture, it is surprising that so many people undertake pilgrimages to the sites of tsaddik graves that may not even contain the physical remains of the venerated figure. When there are questions about

whose bones are actually buried in a tsaddik's veneration site, Orthodox institutions often indicate that they view the site as a *tsiun kadosh* (a holy marker) as opposed to a grave (*kever*). Discussions about the sacredness of such veneration sites have also occurred in pre-modern Jewish thought (Vigoda 2003). By changing the terminology used to describe tsaddik graves from *grave* to *marker*, worshippers can circumvent the question of the buried person's identity. This is because the holiness of the site then derives from the symbolic and spiritual evidence linked to the site rather than from material evidence. Many venerated locations are believed to have been revealed to important mystical leaders. The most famous such rabbi is Isaac Luria Ben-Shlomo (known as Ha'Ari Ha'Kadosh). Rabbi Luria was a leading sixteenth-century rabbi and mystic from the Galilee town of Safed. According to legend, Rabbi Luria received a revelation regarding the location of graves whose spirits needed to be worshipped, and he showed his disciples where the spirit of each tsaddik lived. Such interpretive meanings of pilgrimage destinations often triumph over historic and archaeological evidence, making the veneration of these spaces a practice of symbolic or invented sacredness. Here, vernacular dialectics is used when legends are perceived as reliable evidence. The long (or sometimes perceived to be long) tradition of grave pilgrimage and stories of miracles serve to assure the pilgrims that the legends are proof of the graves' authenticity. I have never heard pilgrims question the visited grave's location and identification.

As a rule, the pilgrims state that a symbolic gravesite—the *tsiun kadosh*—must be visited in order to receive a completely effective blessing. However, some cannot travel far, and the tsaddik's blessings have to be mediated. In many tikkun hatsot rituals, an innovative technological mediation is practiced when pilgrims hold their cell phones high in the air, above the crowd's heads, in order to transmit images and sounds of prayer to friends and relatives at home. Others hold photographs of sick people in front of the metal fireplace because they believe that the photographs deliver some kind of encoded information that the deceased tsaddik can decipher. Such practices demonstrate that contact with the holy person's grave is important even when the supernatural blessing is mediated and not experienced directly by the person in need. The two options exist simultaneously, although pilgrims go to great efforts to visit the gravesite, assuming that remote broadcasting of the event is much less powerful. Another recent development in tsaddik veneration is the incorporation of internet venues. This new practice is based on beliefs and practices related to the mediation of tsaddik powers by human and object carriers and extending them to mediation via digital devices.

Virtual Veneration and Mediated Spiritual Power

In the past 20 years, tsaddik veneration has also become a virtual practice, which includes real-time webcam views of gravesites (Po-ip 2006), virtual tours of gravesites (Maalot-tzadik 2013), announcements of mass pilgrimages and organized tours (Zadi-kimtours 2010), virtual forms in which one can file requests for a tsaddik's help (Zfat 2003; Zadikim 2008), and recording the venerator's prayers to be played at a chosen gravesite (Po-ip 2007). Most tsaddik veneration websites allow users to make

virtual appeals to the tsaddik through human messengers who will pray, play recorded requests, or light sacred candles at the grave for a user they have never met. These internet platforms thus allow the virtual pilgrim to stay home but do not eliminate the required direct, tangible experience of the gravesite. While the pilgrim practices virtual veneration, other people must go to the actual gravesite in order to mediate the spiritual powers of the tsaddik. Tsaddik veneration websites are a kind of *armchair pilgrimage* based on actual sacred places, real people, and spiritual powers that are expected to also exist offline and not merely as imagined virtual entities in a digital world.[13] This emerging phenomenon deserves thorough research, which is now in progress. In the meantime, I outline here some initial findings and reflections.

The widespread use of the internet in Israel has been harnessed by both Jewish religious proselytizers and groups opposed to religious proselytizing, in order to present their views. My informants did not appear confused by the sheer diversity and amount of information that is available on the internet. In fact, their descriptions of data searches and processing show that they are skillful in picking and sorting through this data when constructing their own creative and often self-contradictory religious identity. Tsaddik veneration websites often promote increased religious involvement by couching their religious ideas in semi-logical terms. Through dialectical narratives in contemporary hiloni speech style, the websites' texts often employ emotional channels to convince site users that the projections for future happiness through tsaddik veneration are empirically based. They cannot prove this in a substantial or canonized manner since, in itself, tsaddik veneration is a vernacular practice. Rather, they tend to use terminology and a narrative structure that offer their audience a familiar and convincing form of argumentation. They perform vernacular dialectic discourses (fig. 3).

Figure 3. A website promising prompt marriage to venerators of Tsaddik Yonatan Ben-Uziel.

In my conversations with virtual pilgrims, I often heard that the emotional comfort they feel while entering tsaddik veneration websites is crucial to determining the amount of time and level of attention they allot to such websites. A balanced virtual text will entice hiloni readers to read further but will not make them feel ashamed of their non-religious activities or feel that their chosen life path is being threatened. It should seem serious and elaborate, but not too Orthodox. Sites that include the discussion of spiritual skepticism help virtual pilgrims identify with them. In a manner reminiscent of the night pilgrimages, the internet allows people to explore new religious options without conforming to a religious lifestyle. The internet allows zigzagging back and forth between levels of religiosity without clothing or behavior modifications. The privacy of the internet makes it possible for people to live two contradictory lifestyles: one online and spiritual, the other offline and secular.

The internet activity of small institutions dedicated to enticing young hiloni Israeli Jews to lead a religious lifestyle is a hybrid of vernacular and semi-institutional cultural activity. Howard noted similar hybridization in internet-mediated American Christian groups in which religious activities often combined institutional and personal interests and produced new meanings and personal engagement levels (2008). Users of internet venues often lack the means to check and verify the information offered in a convincing manner by various agencies. To some degree, the participation of website visitors in forums, talkbacks, and other virtual expressive forms allows counter information and intentions to be expressed as well. Within the tsaddik veneration context, this freedom has produced beliefs and activities that are based on what Howard calls *vernacular authority*. As he explains:

> Through digital conduits, repeated individual actions etch channels of shared imagining. Over time, these channels mark an aggregate volition, and this volition is the source of vernacular authority. Even if it is less dramatic than personal contact with the Madonna or space aliens, this authority still moves through these everyday believers to fill their daily lives with the divine. (2011:19)

Most ultra-Orthodox Jews see the internet as a threat to the religious value system and a means to circumvent the various control systems within ultra-religious communities (Sherlick 2008). Virtual tsaddik veneration has therefore been practiced mainly by hiloni and masorati Jews. It is a new practice that diverges from the locational and symbolic North African immigrants' tradition of the 1970s and 1980s. In their religious choices and self-definition, many Israelis are attracted to this religious/secular, individual/institutionalized hybridization inherent in the internet expressiveness of tsaddik websites. The fluid nature of self-tailored internet surfing practices can easily accommodate such contradictory modes, as it has no official script to follow. The internet situation is unique because there are no face-to-face interactions with cultural experts such as tour guides, rabbis, or experienced pilgrims. The novice virtual venerator cannot easily consult knowledgeable "elders" through dialogue. Therefore, virtual credibility is often based on personal impressions of texts and images achieved through shared symbolic language. Websites that manage to effectively mobilize their audiences espouse a kind of "virtual charisma."

Such webpages use the aforementioned religious indexicalities, including unique magical initials and fonts. They also feature photographs of Orthodox Jews and close-ups of tsaddik gravesites complete with headstone inscriptions and people in prayer. Websites with a religious orientation are prepared and maintained by interest groups such as associations for promoting Jewish culture and religion (OU 2008; Thirdtemple 2009; Judaicaplus 2008). The stated goal of many of these websites is to create closer links between all Jews and Jewish faith and practice (OU 2008). Israeli users of these websites are mainly people who feel comfortable with their interest and participation in Jewish spirituality. Tsaddik veneration internet venues with a religious orientation publish mystical stories with little, if any, use of vernacular dialectics because they visibly promote belief in God and the supernatural. They do not need to appeal to their audience with logical, scientific rhetoric.

In contrast, the hiloni tsaddik veneration websites publish topics of general interest, such as travel and matchmaking, into which relevant tsaddik veneration ideas are interwoven (Ynet 2008). These sites are designed as tourism sites or blogs, and the acronyms ה״ב or ד״סב do not appear. Tsaddik websites targeting the hiloni population are often sponsored by travel agencies and government ministries linked to the preservation of holy sites (MCJC 2009; Holidayinisrael 2009).[14] On the hiloni websites, one finds no pictures of bibles, holy men, or Torah-style fonts, but rather pictures of rough terrain vehicles, backpackers, and gravesites nestled in picturesque settings. These non-religious images are accompanied by text in the vernacular language with simple, appealing explanations of the tsaddik tradition. Organizations that accept all levels of religiosity offer virtual tourism with no need for travelers to alter or adapt their perceptions of life. Tsaddik veneration websites with a religious orientation are often hyperlinked on non-religious websites so that visitors who are interested may visit such sites.

On some websites, however, the distinction between religious and secular is less obvious, perhaps in order to hide the goal of proselytization. One example is the Zfat website, which carries the name of the town of Zfat (Safed), a renowned center of Jewish mysticism and spiritual tourism as well as ecotourism. The website has been widely criticized in chats and on virtual discussion forums for posing as a website for the actual town of Safed, as its name and layout imply. In online forums related to religious belief and practice, people interpreted the Zfat website as a trap for unsuspecting hiloni Jews interested in the tourist activities promoted by the website, not realizing the promoters' real intention is to attract Jews to an Orthodox lifestyle. After all the criticism, the website was recently completely erased (Zfat 2003). Such gaps between website content, images, and underlying intentions indicate that many tsaddik veneration website owners have a clear understanding of which styles and genres will attract hiloni Web surfers, and they use that knowledge to manipulate their target audience through vernacular dialectics. All these considerations demonstrate that there are close links between virtual and locational dimensions of tsaddik veneration.

In the case of tsaddik veneration in Israel, rather than creating "a crisis of boundaries between the real and the virtual, between time zones and between spaces, near and distant" (Shields 1996:7), the internet facilitates dialogue and contact between real spaces and people that otherwise might not have been possible. Both gravesite

pilgrimages and virtual veneration services, such as "send a prayer to a tsaddik via this website," reflect the hybrid religiosity that makes use of vernacular dialectics (Yeshuostzadikim 2008). Since both locational and virtual tsaddik veneration options share the same hiloni target audience, they need to be aware of each other's work. Just as designers of veneration websites need to know what happens at gravesites, the organizers of locational rituals must be familiar with the information that their audiences consume online. In fact, ritual organizers such as Yaacov Ifargan tailor their activities to match tsaddik website content so that the pilgrims will perceive the tikkun hatsot and other rituals as coherent and authentic practices of this vernacular tradition. They also sponsor their own websites (see Ifargan 2015). Certainly, the internet has broadened the cultural spectrum of spirituality in contemporary Israel and has extended the diversity of mediated efficacy, requiring vernacular dialectic explanations for hiloni audiences.

Conclusion

When my Jewish hiloni informants explained why tsaddik veneration was part of their lives, they often repeated the same arguments put forward by Yaacov Ifargan, pilgrimage tour guides, and related websites. These promoters of tsaddik veneration often talked about the abundant evidence of the power of righteous men and told stories about miraculous healing and other successful outcomes of visiting a tsaddik's grave. Their stories resemble urban legends because they narrate something that happened to someone else but describe that protagonist in a manner that creates a sense of credibility. In most cases, in their discourse, the pilgrims seemed to accept these stories as objective evidence. In line with Giddens (1991), this study demonstrates that there is structural similarity between tsaddik veneration and trust in medicine and science. Most people do not verify professionals' diplomas but pursue interactions based on trust. Likewise, many tsaddik venerators believe what they hear from rabbis and other pilgrimage guides and promoters without having investigated these claims thoroughly.

The variety of customized veneration opportunities in locational and virtual spaces highlights the agency and creativity of pilgrims and virtual venerators, whose nondemanding approach to these practices lets them assume religious and other identities that suit their needs. Practitioners of vernacular religion are not necessarily naïve consumers of legends and hope-creating mechanisms. Rather, they actively choose from a variety of available ideas and practices. Vernacular dialectics allows them to produce feasible explanations for their engagement in spiritualism because neither tsaddik veneration websites nor pilgrimages challenge their usual secular lifestyle. The organization, meanings, and functions of locational and internet-mediated tsaddik veneration reveal mutual influences between religious and secular cultural spheres. Many secular Israelis seek some form of spirituality, which tsaddik veneration offers free of charge or for a small fee, while demanding little additional personal effort compared to the more Orthodox paths of spiritual practice.

For their part, tsaddik gravesite venerators justify their visits to gravesites using a circular type of argumentation that often relies on legends. They argue that gravesite

pilgrimages cannot do any harm, and since there are many legendary cases of success after visiting tsaddik graves, there must be some truth in them. This helps to feed people's hopes, suspend their disbelief, and rationalize grave visits, while convincing the pilgrims that their efforts are not spurious. However, the discourse is rarely based on self-experienced success and firsthand encounters with the powers of tsaddikim. Even in Brahot's case, where she believed that pomegranates from a distant tsaddik gravesite enabled the success of fertility treatments, there was no direct experience of the supernatural; rather, there was a chain of events that could be interpreted in a manner that was scientific, spiritual, or a combination of the two, through vernacular dialectics.

Tradition and legend, told in secular language, are the main sources that pilgrims trust. Most tradition-related social discourses have revolved around the appropriate means of incorporating interpretations of the past into present social conditions (Handler and Linnekin 1984). It is thus effective to use the term *tradition* to represent ways of using the past to create a future (Glassie 1995:395). Tsaddik gravesite veneration is an example of how new technologies like the internet enhance spiritual worship in an unprecedented manner (Hannerz 1998). The agency and responsibility of contemporary people in their choices of religious practices are inherent in urban religiosity worldwide (Howard 2011; Ruah-Midbar 2006; Winslade 2000). Understanding how vernacular dialectics works in this process offers insights into ways in which individual and group identities can be formed using several contradictory bases, such as scientific thinking and spirituality.

In his writings about the virtual vernacular in Christian fundamentalism in the United States, Howard notes that the scope and accessibility of virtual Christianity innovated religious identity formation by allowing people to feel knowledgeable while remaining detached from religious places such as churches (2011). Those Christian believers did not emerge from the shelter of internet privacy, in contrast to the centrality of tangible real-world practices in Israel's grave pilgrimages. While not all Israelis who visit websites related to tsaddik veneration go to the actual gravesites, all my non-pilgrim interviewees agreed that the actual geographic travel was important. Moreover, many pilgrim interviewees said that they were enticed to perform the pilgrimage by promises of success that they read online. In both cases, legends and rumors served as central conduits to convince website audiences that supernatural forces exist and require attention. Pilgrims' agency within the cultural dynamics of virtual and locational tsaddik veneration is related to the continuous quest of hiloni Israelis to establish a coherent personal identity. Israel is a country that has absorbed a constant influx of immigrants who continuously shift and mix cultural norms. Israelis often label themselves according to ethnic origin, racial appearance, and religious markers. Thus, certain traditional practices carry implications beyond personal choice. Traditional practices are linked to social criteria formation and the establishment of hierarchies.

A negative stigma was attached to tsaddik veneration in the 1960s and 1970s because it was practiced mainly by North African immigrants, who sometimes lacked formal education. Tsaddik veneration was then viewed as an imported tradition from underdeveloped countries, out of step with modern rational thinking. Second- and

third-generation North African immigrants are often labeled by Israelis of European origin as less clever and less sophisticated. According to this stigma, Jews of North African origins are prone to decision-making based on emotion and superstition rather than logic and reason. In March 2015, a heated debate arose in Israel when the artist Yair Garbus gave a speech in downtown Tel Aviv City Hall Square stating that the country has become ruled by "charm kissers, idol worshippers, and those who prostrate on saint graves." The angry responses called him racist, since he was clearly referring to people of North African ancestry (Yarkchi 2015).

As a result of this lingering stigma, many hiloni Israelis of North African and other origins fear being labeled "primitive" if they admit to seeking a tsaddik's help. It is crucial for them to convince themselves and others that their practice is reasonable and logical. The need for hybrid argumentation that imitates logic and conventional dialectics while being flexible enough to allow people to live in peace with contradictory activities and emotions has resulted in what I am calling vernacular dialectics. Vernacular dialectics is a combination of logical structure and forms of speech infused with emotions such as hope and trust. If the social environment of these practitioners was to challenge their semi-logical argumentation, they might sense the inherent contradictions in their thesis. Therefore, many hiloni pilgrims compartmentalize their daily urban environment and their veneration practices. They are able to maintain an outwardly rational, inwardly spiritual duality and avoid subjecting themselves to public scrutiny. This way of handling the complexity in their lives allows psychological comfort and diverse social grouping. It is likely that vernacular dialectics offers a framework not only in the religious realm, but in other realms as well. Further investigation of vernacular dialectics in other fields, such as economics and politics, would shed light on the interplay between tradition and contemporality in interconnected hyper-technologized cultures.

Notes

1. The concept of *pilgrimage* has been debated extensively (for example, in Cohen 1992; Eade and Sallnow 1991; Morinis 1992; Nolan and Nolan 1989). I employ *pilgrimage* here in its emic meaning as practices that include travel to reach sacred locations in order to perform religious rituals.

2. All quotations are from recorded interviews. They have been translated from Hebrew to English by the author. Hebrew was romanized using the new 2006 system of transliteration of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. Since the romanization of Hebrew in many sources is inconsistent, quotes from websites and titles of texts keep the form of their source. Names of places and people are romanized according to generally accepted forms.

3. The male form of the noun *tsaddik* is used throughout the article since the few female figures who are venerated in traditional Jewish gravesite pilgrimage are not discussed. This is because the groups that I examined and accompanied rarely visited such graves. Rachel, the wife of the Old Testament patriarch Jacob, is probably the most notable female figure whose grave is a major pilgrimage site in Israel.

4. The exact credibility of the survey, which includes both face-to-face and internet questionnaires, is problematic, but it demonstrates the centrality of religious identities in tsaddik veneration.

5. Another tsaddik promotion film, with a less secular tone and no famous protagonists, was shown on the website Shemayisrael (2005).

6. In the past two years, the Rentgen's offices and educational facilities in Netivot, his hometown, have suffered a financial crisis. Some of his supporters went bankrupt, and other rabbis, some from his own family, began establishing competing spiritual advising offices of their own (Yagne 2017). Amuka's

nightly tikkun rituals became infrequent, and other religious groups have attempted to generate substitute events, but with much less success. The Rabbi and his assistants did not agree to comment on these developments. Moreover, the site of Yonatan Ben-Uziel's veneration has undergone serious renovation, which included building gender-segregated walkways toward the shrine, plastic tent roofing, and semipermanent stalls selling amulets and souvenirs, which changed the desolate nature site atmosphere that used to be prominent there.

7. This specific quote is from an organized bus taking people from Tel Aviv to a nightly pilgrimage excursion in March 1998. During the 2-hour drive, Yossi, the tour guide, talked constantly over the microphone, telling the passengers about single pilgrims who got married after visiting tsaddik gravesites near Amuka, the pilgrimage tour destination. Most of the stories began with an opening phrase that showed his awareness of the skepticism of his audience.

8. Howard discusses how believers in End-Times theory work to incorporate current events into their grand scheme, even when apparent contradictions exist (2006). The main event that he studied was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in relation to which he asserts that the plasticity of the narrative enables it to survive in changing conditions.

9. Veneration of tsaddikim of Eastern European origins is also practiced in Judaism. Their worship sites are mostly in Europe, the most popular being the tomb of Rabbi Nahman of Braslaw. For an extensive discussion of some such Eastern European worship sites and their philosophical meaning in Judaism, see Green (1977).

10. Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Uziel is mentioned in several legends in the Talmud, the most central and studied text in Judaism, which contains a series of rabbinical debates regarding a broad spectrum of issues.

11. Arthur Green discusses the ways in which tsaddik graves become sacred places, secondary only to Judaism's principal holy places such as Jerusalem (1977). See also Eliade for a detailed description of various locations and cultures where certain places or people are perceived as points of conjuncture between different realms of existence, that is, the world of human beings, the world of spirits and ghosts, and the world of the gods (1964).

12. In 2009, a heated public debate erupted when scattered bones were found while excavating a new bomb shelter/emergency room for a hospital in the city of Ashkelon. Ultra-Orthodox groups claimed that the site needed to be sealed and protected; archaeologists thought that the bones belong to pagans and could therefore be removed and kept elsewhere; the majority of the secular public thought that it was more important to construct the new wing of a lifesaving facility. Articles regarding this debate can be found at http://www.nrg.co.il/online/54/ART1/844/257.html; http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1158283 .html; and http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3890273,00.html (all accessed August 23, 2010).

13. In contrast, internet gaming arenas are often based on invented locations and characters, which allows players to apply their knowledge of the world to manipulating imaginary characters with superhuman powers (Golub 2010; Turkle 1995).

14. I have not included personal blogs or home pages here. All the websites analyzed here are in some way institutional and are mostly sponsored by not-for-profit organizations.

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