Praying with a camera-phone: Mediation and transformation in Jewish Rituals

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Abstract

Digital cameras are now intensively used by ordinary participants of Jewish mass rituals. The article explores how their introduction led to religious change and re-definition of sacred time/space. I first outline the development of new religious techniques-of-self, in which videos of mass rituals are used for mediated interaction with the sacred and for emotional, moral and spiritual management and self-disciplining. I then address the transformation of traditional rituals: Seen as embodied motional and vocal performances, rituals are affected by the physical engagement with cameras, whereas photography is incorporated into ritual script as a ritual role.

Keywords
Judaism; photography; rituals; technologies-of-self; video

It's two o'clock in the morning, the night before Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. About 20 thousands people have come to the football stadium of a southern Israeli town. Some have come a long way for this mass Selikhot (penitential prayer). Some are ultra-orthodox, but most of them are not. On a small stage, the rabbi cries out in prayer with a sobbing, broken voice. Then it is the audience's turn to join the prayer: at once, the huge mass starts singing in great voice 'god is the lord'. At once, hundreds of hands are raised, holding camera phones, filming the holy moment. Some are extended forwards and upwards, others pan the camera slowly back and forth from one side of the site to the other, emphasizing the audience's volume.

The introduction of photography into the religious world has resulted in a dramatic transformation of the religious worship of many Israeli Jews, which seems to have passed unnoticed. New rituals have been introduced, widening the traditional repertoire. Traditional rituals have been reshaped, and are now practised by many practitioners in new ways. Sacred time/space is being redefined, and is gaining new functions. Interestingly, these transformations don't refer to the Israeli laity (Khilonim) or the Reform movement, but rather to Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) circles.

Documentation of some Jewish rituals by their participants is becoming common practice. Photography is most common in mass-events in sacred places and times, or attended by sacred rebbes: hundreds of worshippers practice photography simultaneously. Yet, Photography of (Jewish and other) religious rituals has hardly been studied. The existing literature refers to the televisual aura and the status of importance with which photography endows rituals (cf. van de Port, 2006; Gore, 1998). Notwithstanding the symbolic significance of photography, it has at least two more effects on rituals:

a) Photography and video-photography are technologies that enable the translation of a concrete prayer-event in a particular time and place into an artefact, a product to be consumed in different times and places, and shared with other people. Consumption events may be given a religious meaning, become ritualised themselves, and be integrated into disciplinary projects. Sections two and three of this article refer to the introduction of new Jewish ritualistic events, while specifically focusing on the category of time and place within Jewish rituals.

b) Photography may also impact traditional rituals: The need to hold and operate the camera and the wish to achieve results of a certain quality may encourage transformations of many aspects of rituals, including rhythms and manners of bodily movement, voice volume,
payment and division of attention, subjective experience, etc. The fourth section of the article is dedicated to the re-structuring of established Jewish ritualistic events, while focusing on their corporeality and choreography.

Films and photos are often shared with friends and strangers via e-mail or video-sharing sites. Some photographers have missionary motives: 'publicizing the miracle' (Pirsum Hanes), giving non-believers safe access from home to the religious experience. Others are commissioned by their Hasidic court, or by Ultra-Orthodox websites. Yet, most of the documentation is lay photography by people who wish to view the film themselves or share it with their acquaintances. It is lay photography, and its impact on Jewish rituals, which is at the centre of the following discussion. But first, I briefly present my theoretical framework.

Seeing with theory

The religious transformation I portray below hasn't been studied, and there is a reason for this. It represents a blind-spot, since it involves no transformation of Jewish sacred texts or sacred symbols, doesn't challenge the juridical-textual corpus called 'halakhic literature', and involves artefacts not usually conceived of as sacred. Put differently, it doesn't concern any of the traditional foci of religion (and Judaic) studies. To make things worse, the practices I study are more privatised than collective, contrary to classical concepts of ritual. The cultural importance of religious documentation is only revealed when, following Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour, we replace traditional notions of religion and culture, and assume that what groups share, their source of cultural unity and continuity, is not a symbolic code to be interpreted and translated, but rather repertoires of practices, patterns of routine action which take place in and through human bodies and material artefacts.

The importance and richness of these emerging rituals, which are based on the consumption of filmed materials, are only revealed once we start thinking of rituals as instrumental actions, not symbolic ones (Asad, 1993). I suggest we give up the concept of photography as a symbolic 'representation' of the world, and start thinking of photos and videos as a tool that may produce emotional and spiritual effects, depending on the ways they are used. This tool doesn't represent the holy time/space but rather enables people to spiritually use it as a mediated resource. Following Mahmood (2001) and Crossley (2004), I address rituals as techniques that people use to impact their social and supernatural worlds; and to change (or discipline) their own consciousness, feeling and behaviour. I contend that consuming religious documentation is often close to the Foucauldian notion of technologies-of-self (Techniques de soi): the ways people manipulate themselves, transforming their bodies, souls and thought in order to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on' (Foucault, 1993:203).

Religion is affected by many technologies and artefacts, and by the actions they seem to afford or preclude: one cannot sacrifice without an altar, nocturnal devotion became much more common since coffee was available (Horowitz, 1989). Contemporary technologies transform all sorts of religious practices: In the U.S.A, Protestant ministers incorporate Powerpoint-presentations within sermons and as hymnal-substitutes, and e-mailed prayer-requests undermine the separation between work and religiosity as separate spheres (Wyche et al. 2006); while online-access to sacred objects encourage American Buddhists to leave institutionalised churches (MacWilliams, 2006). As I'll show below, the materiality of the camera-phone enables the emergence of new techniques-de-soi which are reshaping Jewish religious praxis.

Whereas religious lay photography has scarcely been studied, the role of painted religious images has been discussed by David Morgan (1998) from a praxis-oriented perspective. According to Morgan, images have the magical power to make the absent present, enabling people to experience the presence of supernatural beings. Looking at images in particular ways evokes and shapes religious feelings, yet images are not only good to look at. People communicate and interact with images: they talk to them, touch and kiss them, ask for their help, give them offerings, pray in front of them, give and receive them (Morgan, 1988:50-58). The images also look back and talk back. They help people solve problems and cope with problems that can't otherwise be solved. Thus, images play a major role in religious world-making. Morgan terms these interactive practices 'visual piety'. He also notes that images may transform mundane spaces into devotional/sacred spaces, places to encounter the sacred (pp.56-57). Morgan's insights and
analytical frame are highly relevant for the study of religious documentation. However, the materiality of camera-phones and online videos is sharply different than that of Jesus paintings studied by Morgan, the Israeli-Jewish context is different than the American-Protestant one, and the ways people use images are consequently different.

**Sacred time/space inside my pocket**

The growing trend to document religious rituals is undoubtedly due to the fact that mobile phones are carried permanently by Israelis, and digital cameras became a default-gadget in mobiles: Photography no longer necessitates planning in advance (bringing a camera), nor expenditure of money on film, development or video-cassettes. Most of the documentation I refer to was produced using tiny digital video cameras integrated in mobile phones.

Yet, technology has no deterministic effect: People choose to document certain prayers and rituals while avoiding the documentation of others. Most heavily documented are mass-events in sacred places and times, like Priestly Blessing (Birkat Kohanim) at the Western Wall on Passover and Sukkot, the Tikun Klali prayer in Uman, Ukraine on Rosh-Hashana, and penitential prayers (Selihkot) before Yom Kippur. Also documented are pilgrimages to tombs of Jewish saints (Tzadikim), which follow the old tradition of travel-photography; prayers integrated in political protest; rituals attended by important rabbis; (first) prayers of children and toddlers; and obviously, personal rites-de-passage. Daily prayers of adult individuals or small groups in local synagogues or at home remain undocumented. Rituals that take place on Shabbat and other Holidays are also not documented due to halakhic prohibitions. Also within each mass-ritual, not all moments are born equal: some stages of the ritual invite photography, whereas in others photography would be inappropriate. Occasionally a dispute erupts over the propriety of photography at a particular moment. Different actors evaluated documentation differently (some say it makes concentration in prayer difficult, others emphasise photography's merits), yet as far as I can tell from my observations and interviews, the legitimacy of photography in general is never disputed. In mass-events I attended I witnessed hundreds of cameras at work, and videos from other events show a similar picture.

The preference to document rituals in exceptionally sacred places and times is telling: It's the co-presence in sacred time/spaces, whose boundaries participants try to manipulate with documentation. Co-presence plays a dominant role in Judaism: Most Jewish prayers require a minyan – a quorum of at least 10 male Jews adhering to the unities of time and place. Judaism is relatively strict compared with the Methodist 'virtual church', where real ordained ministers hold online services that contain real online-worshippers (Kluver & Yanl 2008); the online Holy Communion offered by the Anglican church in Alabama (Casey 2006); or the e-mailed sacrament of penance given to Catholics in the Philippines before it was declared invalid by the local church (Bell 2006) and the Vatican (Kluver & Yanl 2008), not to mention techno-pagan rituals which lack any sense of physical co-presence, manipulating mostly or exclusively virtual objects (O’Leary, 2004). Jewish halakha is much more conservative: Halakhic rulings given by rabbis of different movements agree that participation in minyan through phone or internet mediation is impossible, and that recorded blessings are not valid. Many also argue that blessings heard through electronic mediation (like broadcast, phone, or even amplification) are invalid. Apart from the significance of unmediated co-presence, most rituals can only be performed at certain times. Place also can't be easily mediated: Prayers may be e-mailed to the Western Wall, but they're physically printed out and placed between the stones.

Insisting on co-presence as a prerequisite for traditional ritual, the halakhic framework surely constrains potential transformation of the place of place within Jewish ritual. However, digital photography technologies lead to the introduction of new religious techniques among Jews (albeit of lesser importance than traditional rituals, occupying a position closer to the middle of the sacred/profane continuum). These techniques are centred around the consumption of videotaped primary rituals.

Can the Jewish sacred time/space retain its ritual efficacy in a mediated form, as a video? Can it be ritually efficacious beyond its traditional boundaries? Following Catherine Bell (1992), I suggest there is no definitive answer to these questions: the sphere of ritual/religious activity is not an entity with inherent characteristics, but rather a practical achievement, the product of ritualisation/differentiation processes in
specific contexts. Thus, 'national-religious' interviewees living in mainly secular towns didn't ritualise the consumption of religious documentation: for them, the videos they filmed are not unlike birthday videos: mementos to evoke memories and share experiences with others, without expecting any spiritual, moral, or even strong emotional effects on the viewer. Some Breslov Hasidim and Ultra-Orthodox interviewees clearly ritualised the consumption of religious documentation, annexing it to the sphere of emphatically religious practices (as demonstrated below). If ritual is 'a mode of paying attention' (Smith, 1987:103), it's no surprise that seemingly similar videos function differently and have different meanings depending on how people attend to them and interact with them. Making part of the sensory experience of the ritual available is not enough to change the boundaries of sacred time/space and neither are abstract assumptions concerning the videos' 'sacredness' (many interviewees didn't have any coherent opinion on the subject). These boundaries are reshaped only when people are willing to let the sacred time/space function beyond its traditional boundaries, and develop a new attentiveness to documentation-products.

The new religious techniques I study are not indifferent to physical place and co-presence, but they do manipulate the place of place within ritual in an inventive manner. In the following, I'd like to briefly introduce two of them: the secondary ritual and the mediated surrogate ritual.

The Secondary Ritual is the consumption of videos documenting a ritual by a person who participated in the primary ritual and documented it himself. Here, the experience of the sacred is detached from sacred time and place, and may be evoked at will, similar to the consumption of music for mood management. However, this detachment is only prima facie: that the viewer was present in the primary ritual qua worshipper/photographer and remembers it) undoubtedly contribute to the video's efficacy as a spiritual technique.

Menachem, a Sephardic-Haredi, told me how a video he filmed during mass-selikhot in a football-stadium always evokes his spiritual excitement, 'each time anew'. He carries the video on his mobile phone, and watches it in different times and places, 'following the muse'. The video shows the plentitude of worshippers who assembled to pray for absolution. Menachem was highly impressed by 'watching 20 thousand people shouting 'God is the Lord'', an indication of his belonging to a large cohesive corpus of believers, contrasted with his everyday experience, where Menachem can hardly be seen as related to one group with most other attendees (who were moderately-orthopractic 'Traditionalists' [Massorti'im]). Thus, it is also efficacious as a ritual in Durkheim's classical terms (1969). The same experience of Jewish unity is also mentioned by Jews describing their pilgrimage to the gravesite of rabbi Nachman of Breslov (in Uman, Ukraine), and their videos taken there. This rare feeling of unity may be now consumed at will, without physically visiting the holy place with an unusually large ritual congregation. Photographers try to make this experience of mass unity reproducible in their video-taping practices: They often pan the camera slowly back and forth from one side of the site to the other, emphasizing the audience's volume, as if not quite believing how numerous they are. If, as Durkheim (1969) suggested, ritual is worship of the group by the group, an emotional re-production of collectivity, then the consumption of these videos is undoubtedly a ritual, although often performed solitarily. However, this notion of ritual is far too narrow: in other religious technologies-of-self, collectivity plays no major role.

An ultra-orthodox Breslov Hasid told me of two alternative technologies that he and his fellow-Hasidim use for self-energizing and interaction with the sacred in times of 'Hitrakhakut' (being distant from god) and 'Yerida' (spiritual descending): The first was imagining the pilgrimage to the rabbi's grave at Uman during seclusion. Seclusion is a privileged spiritual technique among Breslov Hasidim, recommended by the rabbi himself and in official theology. The second method however was watching videos from Uman, which document the Rosh-Hashana 'Kibbutz' (assembly of followers). The very fact that my interviewee described both technologies as equal alternatives to cope with the same practical problem (lack of financial means to pilgrimage more often than once a year) is strong evidence that watching videos taken during the primary ritual functions as a secondary ritual, a ritual in all senses. An informant also supplied me with a kabbalistic theoretical explanation for it: The videos were efficacious only due to former inscription or impression (Reshimu). The experience of closeness to rabbi Nachman is best inscribed on the believer through a first-hand visit to Uman, but possibly also through hearing pilgrims' stories, reading religious texts, etc. He watched videos in order to re-activate this inscribed closeness to the rabbi, just like he used a commercially-bought large photo of the rabbi's grave hanging on his living room's wall. The young Hasid I interviewed did not film himself (claiming that intensive, tourist-like photography in Uman is more typical of first-timers and may identify the photographer as a
neophyte not yet feeling 'at home'), but he uses photos and videos taken by a friend and co-pilgrim. Once his wife identified him in a commercially-distributed video from Uman and alerted him. As he saw himself, he started crying and trembling, 'back there again' – an extreme experience of transcending the mundane. Another young man, from a moderately-religious (Massorti) background, told me that when he watched the video he took in Uman, it 'lit a light within my soul'.

A poor craftsman who went on pilgrimage to Uman for Rosh-Hashana, videotaped and published online a video of the pilgrimage's peak-moment: the Tikun-Klali prayer, experienced as his conversion moment. He watches the film to get rid of 'bad thoughts' and 'the evil inclination' (yetzer hara): whenever he struggles with financial or other distresses and improper coping methods pop into his head, he watches the videos from Uman and the bad thoughts are replaced with an 'indescribable happiness'. Watching also helps him cope with his 'longing for the rabbi', yet it fosters it too: It makes longing bearable, yet it does not extinguish longing but rather fans it: 'watching is like, how should I explain it, like, an addict who needs his drug is dope-sick, and when he gets it he's high, but with me it's the other way around, I'm always dope-sick for the rabbi, even when I watch, so yes, it increases the longing'.

The young Hasid mentioned earlier also consumes videos as part of a longing management strategy: both to cope with longing and in the last two months before Rosh-Hashana, when longing should be awoken, as a preparation for pilgrimage. While asked whether the videos are sacred, the craftsman answered, 'but of course, our rabbi is in there', i.e., just like the rabbi is physically in Uman (where he is buried), and the spatial affinity brings his followers spiritual merit, so too is the video of Tikun Kla li a physical presence of the rabbi brought back to Israel (even if somehow depleted): he's simply 'there'. Perpetuating the moment of spatial affinity between the worshipper/photographer and the rabbi's tomb, it opens a constant communication channel. What is described above is a wide range of religious technologies-of-self: The video is used for self-disciplining, moral re-formation, coping with both financial and moral difficulties, and for the manipulation of religious emotions: fostering of religious longing (in a diluted, domesticated form), happiness and self-contentment. These techniques partly solve the inaccessibility of the sacred time/space by making it efficacious through the mediation of audio-visual documentation.

The sacredness of the video-representation is also indicated by the respectful attitude towards it. Almost everyone I spoke with told me that according to halakha, a video of a sacred object is not sacred. Time and again I've been told that halakha allows taking those videos to the toilet (some said it without being asked, in a provocative manner). However, when I asked if they did, the answer was 'no' – they explained that it was not recommended, even inappropriate. The oft-quoted halakhic dogma that videos have no holiness stood in stark contrast with the actor's actual attitude. A Breslov Hasid insisted that whereas videos are halakhically profane, they're holy in the 'spiritual' sense, at least subjectively for himself. This conflict was most apparent in another Ultra-Orthodox interviewee who swung alternately between contradicting narratives: According to the first, his photography in Uman aimed at documenting the place's sacredness, claiming to have caught it in so evident a manner that even non-Jews could feel it; while the second insisted that the photos and videos are completely profane, mere expressions of his interest in photography and beauty and of his ego as a photographer.

The videos most honoured are those of rebbes (admorim). These videos are taken during prayers and other community-events, often by teenagers, and being in great demand, distributed via viral e-mail, and occasionally published on video-sharing sites like youtube and the Ultra-Orthodox Tsofar. A young ultra-orthodox from a small court told me of some acquaintances who habitually put on their hat, suit and girdle (worn otherwise only during prayers and on Shabbat, to separate the heart from the genitalia) before watching the videos, preparing themselves as if they were to meet the rebbe in the flesh. The strict ritual preparations and prayer attire are required, since watching is a (mediated) encounter with the rebbe's sanctity. Moreover, the attraction power of these videos is at least partly derived from the Hasidic belief that the slightest movements of the rebbe – the way he eats, moves or speaks – are meaningful and significant, expressions of embodied wisdom. Another interviewee told me that watching rebbes' videos endow the viewer with piety (yire'at shamayim). Although it needs to be established by further research, it seems plausible that these videos have become a site of religious education: learning which is not textual, but rather carried by imitation and discipline (cf. Asad, 1993).

The secondary ritual enables the participants to experience the very same ritual from a double perspective, bypassing constraints laid by the ritual's choreography. Thus, in the Priestly Blessing, most
worshippers (those videotaping are the exception) bend their heads and many also close their eyes. However, before bending their head, some passed their camera to their children, who sat on their shoulders and filmed the rite from above, their hands held high and their faces directed to the Western Wall, where the Kohanim (priests) stood. Similarly, one participant positioned his hand-held camera outside his tallit (prayer shawl) that covered his head (as he was a Kohen) and videotaped the blessing. Back in the bus, half an hour later, he watched the event from the point of view of non-Kohanim. However, this was not his main objective while videotaping, but rather to enable his father to watch the prayer, which brings us to the surrogate ritual.

Crossing gender and community boundaries

The Mediated Jerusalem ritual was invented long before the camera phone. For example, the late 15th century German Jerusalem-pilgrim Felix Faber wrote the 'Sionpilgerin', a special edition of his pilgrim's account, aimed at a readership of nuns: The detailed descriptions of the holy places and of Faber's own contemplation aroused by these places served as a contemplation aid, to substitute the hard and dangerous pilgrimage that many women refrained from taking (Hannemann, 1980). Similarly, in contemporary Judaism, religious documentation plays a greater role for women, since in many Jewish religious rituals they are either not allowed, or restricted to a separate space.

Among Uman pilgrims Women, who are not allowed to join the Kibbutz in Rosh-Hashana and often lack the money to make the journey at other times, experience the event and the sacred place through videos taken by their husbands and husbands' co-pilgrims, sometimes at their explicit request. The Hasid I interviewed told his wife in detail and at length about every single photo and video (made by his friend and co-pilgrim), so that she could imagine the pilgrim's feelings moment-by-moment, so that 'she felt as if she was entering the gravesite'. He felt obligated to do so, saying she had an 'equal share' since he traveled on their common meagre resources, leaving her alone with their young children. For Breslovites, representative of the stress on experience in contemporary religiosity (Luhrman, 2004), earlier practices like praying for relatives in the holy place need to be supplemented by sharing experience, since in experience lies much spiritual merit.

A video of prayer in a well-known tzadik (saintly person)'s synagogue published on a Haredi website received excited responses from female viewers. One of them praised the 'strong feeling of sanctity and spiritual elevation which pass even through the media'. Another one wrote she was present at the filmed event, but as a woman she 'was in the women's side, and only listened. Bravo to the photographer; thanks to him I could also see what happened in the men's side. Really exciting'.

However, Video-based surrogate rituals aren't identical to text-based surrogate rituals. Unlike texts written in retrospect in order to reconstruct an event, videos have indexical qualities: they're electronic vestiges of sacred events and time/spaces on the camera's memory-card. As such, their functionality resembles not only that of pilgrim's accounts, but also objects brought from sacred places like holy water and holy soil. Like the secondary ritual, the surrogate ritual's power also derives from the physical presence in the sacred place and time, but unlike it, here the producer and consumer diverge.

Gender lines are not the only ones that may be crossed thanks to the camera. In the ultra-orthodox Hasidic world, video-documentation is a way of going beyond the religious community's boundaries and bypassing norms that demand that every Hasid, especially in small courts, celebrate holidays with his rebbe. One Hasid told me that he always obeys this norm, although he occasionally wants to attend impressive events conducted by rebbes of larger courts. The hardest temptation is the desire to visit Uman in Rosh-Hashana. Every year people ask him to come, and every year he declines, remaining faithful to his rebbe. Instead, he watches videos filmed there in Rosh-Hashana and imagines himself there. Watching, he says, 'helps you feel and experience what has been there. Because you know how you feel during prayer, and the whole outpouring of the heart (hishtapchut) (...) you take this... this experience, close your eyes, watch the video and say 'wow, me among 25,000 people, how would I conduct myself? It's.. it's.. it's an experience'.

This unusual style of watching deserves careful attention: It is watching that involves closing one's eyes, the very opposite of 'watching' in the secular, usual sense: not the passive act of beholdling, the sight of a past event attended by others, but rather a body-technique that affords disengagement from the
physical environment and transcending into another spatiality (that of Uman). Watching that way, his personal experiences and the photographed experience converge, and the holy time/space may reveal something of its power and act upon the viewer. This bodily technique produces unique attentiveness, without which no 'representation' may re-present sacred time/space. This technique is related to common techniques like eye-closing or covering the head with tallit during prayer to limit the scope of vision. It's also close to the practice of many worshippers who, upon arriving at a sacred place, close their eyes. They come to see the sacred place, yet after seeing it they close their eyes. Closing one's eyes is part of the performance which constitutes the experience of a place as sacred, an act of ritualisation which differentiates pilgrimage from secular touristic experiences, and this technique is re-employed from the primary ritual to the secondary one to produce similar effects.

Preparing your soul to meet the rebbe

Religious time is not Cartesian, neutral time. Judaism is especially renowned for its pre-occupation with time, with its organisation and division. We've seen above how the encapsulation of primary rituals through video-documentation allows Jews to challenge not only the boundaries of place, but also those of time. However, this should not be misinterpreted as a technologically determinist argument on documentation technologies' cultural 'impact'. Videos by themselves don't necessarily challenge the Jewish calendar, and surely don't replace it with homogeneous time. However, secondary rituals may impact temporal hierarchies, making the documented event which is re-used in disciplining techniques no less important then traditionally more sacred times (Shabbats and most holidays) in which photography is forbidden.

Videos may also reinforce the traditional calendar. An urban nationalist-religious interviewee told me about a video of a prayer taken on Sukkot's Chol HaMoed, which he found online and has watched ever-since on Chol HaMoed, when it's religiously relevant. For Breslov Hasidim, videos play an even more important role in self-discipline and reinforcement of the calendar: The Hasidim's year is centred around Rosh-Hashana, when they visit their rabbi's gravesite, and the two months before it are used for spiritual preparations. This, as Hasidim told me, is necessary in order to get the most from the visit, and requires self discipline oneself and the avoidance of worldly activities and conversations during the pilgrimage, thus guaranteeing optimal spiritual benefits. Videos are one more instrument in this spiritual preparation: Not only do they evoke longing for Uman, they also refresh the inscription (reshimu) of past religious experiences, making future visits even more spiritually efficacious. This is another disciplinary practice, in which video-documentation is an instrument for religious self-improvement, but here video consumption is preparatory for the primary ritual, rather than a post hoc complementary practice.

Photography as a ritual role and the invention of new choreographies

This section explores how cameras transform Jewish (primary) mass-rituals, while focusing on two events in which I conducted participant-observations in October 2008: mass penitential prayers (Selikhot) in a football-stadium on the last night before Yom Kippur; and the Priestly Blessing in the Western Wall on Sukkot. In this exploration, I'd like to stress the role of objects and their materiality in cultural change.

Material objects play a major role in the differentiation and the framing of situations and events (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Latour, 1996). They help those who use them to construct events as religiously significant. Not only do physical objects have both symbolic and instrumental roles in ritual, the engagement with objects is also central to the emotional aspect of religiosity (Mitchell, 1997). Before prayers, and more so before festive prayers, people brush off the everyday, wear their best clothes (usually white shirts), and leave all objects related to the secular world behind them, at home. However, mobile phones have become an exception, a single non-religious object taken and used by worshippers during these Jewish rituals. One Haredi interviewee told me of his anger at fellow synagogue-goers who check who's calling them in the middle of the 'Standing' (Amidah) Prayer in which, according to halakha, worshippers ought to remain still and self-absorbed even in situations as extreme as the approach of a snake. The above-mentioned craftsman told me that in the peak-moment of his visit to Uman, 'I didn't
cease praying, the Tikun Klali [prayer book] in one hand, and in the other hand, held high above my head, the camera. This attitude towards mobile phones was most evident in the Selikhot event. Most of the attendees (Haredi, national-religious and Massorti'im alike) carried mobile phones (often with built-in cameras). Some attendees also brought stand-alone cameras. Most participants didn't bring any bags, bringing only objects which could be carried on their own body – cigarettes, mobile phones and small prayer-books. This may be explained by both the prosthetic status of mobile phones, taken everywhere and often grasped intimately even when not in use; and the instrumental uses of mobile phones as both clocks, video-cameras, and aids for micro-coordination with other attendees (Ling, 2004), including spatially separated attendees of the opposite sex. Throughout the various stages of the event, the mobile phones oscillated between being used, held by hand on standby and stowed in pockets – thus enhancing the temporal structuring of the event. In general, photography wasn't characteristic of the less pious or less religious participants: if it was unevenly distributed, it was rather Haredim and those worshippers who seemed most absorbed in prayer who were over-represented among photographers. Rather than an act of desecration, photography became an act of sanctification (similarly to its ritualising role in non-religious contexts).

Religious events as the two under discussion are structured into different phases, characterised by different levels of audience participation and emotional intensity, covering the entire range, from boring waits to ecstatic mass praying accompanied by intense choreography. The Selikhot-event started with officials and rabbis giving speeches and sermons, and continued with various prayers: some spoken and others sung, some performed solo by the hazzan (cantor) while others where collectively recited by the crowd, and yet others were dialogues between hazzan and audience (the audience either repetitively rehearsing a single line known by heart, or, in other prayers, reading more complicated texts from the prayer-books). In both events, in spite of different photographers' personal preferences, clear patterns could be discerned: Photography stressed, reinforced, and maybe even reshaped the tempo of the ritual. In some moments, up to a quarter or third of the people around me photographed simultaneously; in others, there was no single camera to be seen.

Photography also varied qualitatively across phases. Thus, video-photography stressing the crowd's magnitude was usually filmed at the beginning, soon upon arrival at the event. In the Priestly Blessing it was usually practised at the more distant upper court or at the staircase descending towards the lower court and the Wall itself (some photographed in motion while approaching it). In the Selikhot-event photography of this kind was practised during the opening speeches, thus enabling the attendees to expand the exciting experience of being impressed by the huge masses rather than listen to the speeches, which didn't seem to interest most of the audience.

This preliminary stage was also characterised by salient still photography, which almost completely disappeared when the prayers began: Still photography usually means lurking for the decisive moment, which requires much more concentration than video-photography (which is usually continuous over time, often done without even watching what is being filmed).

Throughout the Selikhot-event, the cameras came and went at different phases. As a rule, no photography took place during the most dialogical parts, in which the worshippers and the cantor take turns reading one sentence each (with no refrain), presumably due to the concentration and attentiveness required. Peak-moments were divided between moments of collective enthusiasm during collective singing, in which almost all camera-owners used their cameras, and tense moments of stillness and awe, in which nobody photographed (e.g. when the Hazzan supplicated god, wailing with a broken voice; or when the worshippers enumerated their sins in an introverted posture, some beating their own breasts). The Priestly Blessing was less temporally-structured than the Selikhot, since here different groups of worshippers arrived at different times and prayed in different tempos. Only a few moments before each of the peaks (the two blessings, the 'Hosannas', and the 'acceptance of the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom') they assembled as a single congregation – and then multiple cameras were pulled out and used for video photography (compared with the other phases, in which the number of cameras was dramatically smaller and some practised still photography). In both events, there were moments in which photography was individual rather than collectively structured: I saw young Haredim who photographed for a while, then put their cameras in their pockets and started swaying more than usual, moving their body weight alternately from one leg to the other, as a bodily technique to shift between different modes of action and regain engrossment in prayer, re-joining the praying collective.
However, in certain peak-moments (Blessings, Shofar-blowing) photography was not an individual engagement as opposed to the collective, ritual engagement: In these moments, photography was rather the role ascribed to the audience: Facing the Shofar-blowers or the Kohanim, hundreds of worshippers stood and reached out with their cameras. At the blessing event, when the blessing itself began, almost all the cameras were directed forward, at the Kohanim (in sharp contrast with other phases, in which many photographed those standing behind them). This happened even though most participants couldn't see anything apart from the backs of those standing before them. The blessing priests or the shofar-blowers were usually not in the picture: The camera at the end of the extended hand was an instrument of self-alignment, an aid to the direction of one's body and consequently of one's attention at the Kohanim. This is especially important, since the traditional role of the audience in the Priestly Blessing is rather passive. The hundreds of worshippers who extended their hands towards the event's focal point did not create visual documentation of the ritual, as an outsider would (although they did perpetuate the event for future consumption, as indicated above). Rather, they participated in the ritual in an embodied way, directing their bodies at the main happening, simultaneously constituting and expressing their excitement and their recognition of the moment's sacredness with their own corporeality. Stretching out the mobile phone became part of their ritual role, just like singing dialogic-prayers with the cantor.

Since camera phones and most digital cameras have LCD-screens instead of viewfinders, they usually don't physically separate the photographer from the photographed world. Hence, users may film while simultaneously engaged in other activities, including prayer. However, this does not mean that digital cameras don't set demands on users. For example, intense moving during prayer turns into a problem, since unstable cameras result in low-quality videos. Traditionally, Jewish prayer is not still: According to Jewish orthopraxy, prayer should involve constantly swaying back and forth, a mode of motility aimed at the arousal of emotional and spiritual moods (Ehrlich, 1999). The Selikhot-ritual demands even more dynamic a choreography, including standing up and sitting down, bowing and straightening one's back while shouting 'lord', beating one's breast, covering the face with prayer-books etc. This choreography is not fully compatible with photography. Participants adopted various tactics to cope with this conflict: some ceased to film when bodily movement was required, whereas others restrained their bodily movements to facilitate continuous photography. The differences between the choreography of photographers and non-photographers during the Priestly Blessings were conspicuous: whereas most members of the last group reclined their heads and/or closed their eyes, many photographers looked forward and upward, directing themselves towards the ritual's focal point. A few looked at the camera's screen, but the majority didn't, yet they looked forward, in the same general direction as the camera. Some photographers tried to combine both worship-styles. Holding one hand up, stretched forward with a camera, while simultaneously lowering their heads and their gaze; or covering their face with one hand while holding the camera at breast level in the other hand, without controlling the photographed material.

In both cases discussed above, choreography is anchored in canonical halakhic literature (i.e., Maimonides, Rashi and Yosef Karo): During the Priestly Blessing, the audience is supposed to avoid looking at the priests, for many reasons – historical (temple tradition), pedagogical (to avoid the impression that the priests bless with their own power), technical (aid to concentration), and magical/Kabbalistic (the presence of Shechina). During mass Shema-Israel prayers, worshippers are supposed to cover their eyes to achieve concentration. In both cases, many photographers ignore the choreographic tradition, about which they are aware (and which, however, many rabbis view as recommendations rather than as prohibitions). An influential national-religious rabbi wrote that filming the priestly blessing and watching the photos (unlike watching the Kohanim directly) are permitted. Thus, photography changes official and explicit choreographic requirements.

Another difference between photographers and non-photographers, alongside choreography, was vocal performance: Among the former, many were either silent or prayed in a whisper, rather than praying aloud. One interviewee explained that he was aware of the video and didn't want to take over the video's soundtrack: After all, it was the mass-prayer that he wanted to perpetuate, not himself.

This is significant, since the main dimensions of the rituals under discussion are aural and textual (prayer) and corporeal (spatial movement), rather than visual. In the huge stadium where the Selikhot-event took place there were a few video screens, to allow the audience to watch the rabbi's face while praying, but only a few could see them, and even they usually preferred to look forward – at the empty
court. The void is indeed a strong visual image, yet it remains unchanged during the long hours of the event. The engagement with photography thus privileges a dimension originally marginal in the ritual, yet predominant in television culture. This conflict concerning visuality's import is encapsulated in one minor anecdote: when a religious child whose father photographed intensively wanted to get farther from the Western Wall in order to see better, a family-friend who took care of the child rebuked him, telling him that hearing was what was important, not seeing. However, many photographing participants experience parts of religious events as framed by the LCD screens or viewfinders which they (at least partly) watch at real time, not unlike the Claude Glass (framed dark glass) which transformed nature into ‘landscape’ for 18th century tourists (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

Thus, visuality stands in potential conflict with the ritual’s embodied and aural dimensions, as well as with the belief that sacredness works through physical proximity rather than through sensory perception. However, unlike the Andalusian pilgrimage described by Crain (1992), here visual and embodied styles of worship cannot be clearly identified with different social groups: visual religiosity is not conceived to be any less authentic than its traditional alternative.

To conclude, the introduction of photography into rituals has contributed to the development of new ritual patterns (at least at the peak moments of mass events), characterised by different directionality of the worshipper (forward and upward rather than inward and downward), different modes of motility (e.g. avoidance of intense swaying), different vocal performance (preference of whispering to loud prayer), and a new privileging of visuality in ritual.

Conclusions

Religious documentation facilitates an unusual leakage between sacred and profane time/spaces. During the primary mass ritual, people are aware of the time of future consumption. This awareness impacts choreographies and increases reflexivity and performativity. Later, back in the secular time/space, the reification of the primary ritual makes it possible to summon it at will as a ritually-efficacious object, provided that consumption has been ritualised.

These practices are unique to our time: unlike earlier mediated uses of holy places, like holy water, or medieval Holy Sepulchre replicas, here it’s not only place which is summoned, but also time; not an objective time/space, the reification of the primary ritual makes it possible to summon it at will as a ritually-efficacious object, provided that consumption has been ritualised.

This leakage produce religious change: whereas Jews continue to read the same sacred texts as before and obey the authority of the same halakhic traditions, major rituals are transformed. Photography is incorporated into the ritual script as a possible ritual role for worshippers. Playing this role may conflict with traditional patterns of worship, calling forth the emergence of multiple adaptation and adjustment tactics, thus remoulding rituals. Alongside the transformation of traditional rituals, we are witnessing the development of manifold new religious techniques in which people use religious documentation to manipulate their own emotional or spiritual state, as a disciplinary tool and as a site where religious emotions like longing for the sacred are produced and cultivated.

In economic terms, religious documentation (like most contemporary documentation) represents a trend for increased ‘exploitation of the present’: while being in the sacred time/place people invest attention in the conscious production of documentation (often experienced as a cost, a depletion of real-time experience) in order to make ritual re-usable. This makes sense, since sacred time/place is rare: holidays occur yearly, flights to Uman are expensive, etc. Videos are still considered pale shadows of the original events’ sacredness, yet in videos experiences are freed from constraints like the Jewish calendar, money, distance, or community norms. No longer subjected to the presence/absence dichotomy, sacred time/place turns into a mediated resource, an actant which may work in different ways through different
media. This investment opens new channels to the sacredness of moments, places (e.g. Uman) and people (live and dead rebbes), now available for personal consumption, occasionally in a highly mundane context and in a mode similar to the one of text-messaging. Situations as different as selikhot on the night before Yom Kippur and a free moment at work converge into 'middle-regions' (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Though camera phones are the same across the globe, and Israeli Jews are surely not the only ones to document rituals, the ways in which these gadgets are introduced into religious praxis surely aren't homogenous: as we've seen, even within Israeli Judaism, ritualisation tendencies aren't even. Comparative research of religious engagements with cameras (beyond the sparse work done by van de Port, 2006; Gore, 1998) is urgently needed.

We ought to see beyond the 19th century liberal dichotomy of religion and technology as opposites. Like any other cultural sphere, religion was always constituted by the material through objects like scrolls, cathedrals, or statues (cf. Kluver & Yanl: 138), and by repertoires of human engagement with these objects. The introduction of digital photography into the heart of ritual gives us a fascinating opportunity to see a non-textual religious transformation coming into being.

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References

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