

**Towards an Anthropology of Doubt:
The Case of Religious Reproduction in Orthodox Judaism**

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Work in progress – please do not circulate!

Introduction

The reproductive narratives of Orthodox Jews¹ in Israel reveal an obscured model of stratified critique regarding reproduction standards. Even though scholars of religious critique (Antoun, 2001; Davidman, 2014; Fader, 2017; Stadler, 2009) have demonstrated how religious elites act as actors and leaders of resistance, my findings illustrate an opposite pattern. This ethnographic study of religious critique regarding high fertility norms reveals how doubt and critique are based on particular social and cultural capital that is only available to the religious elite. Based on an ethnography of Israel's reproductive landscape, I demonstrate how, instead of disseminating this critique and contesting norms publicly, religious elites engage in personal strategies of secrecy and creative performances of failure that enable these individuals to diverge from norms without publicly contesting them. Following Shellee Colen's term "stratified reproduction" (Colen, 1995), I found how secrecy evokes hidden power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered. Secrecy creates a distinction between different sub-groups of Orthodox communities as it is specifically the newcomers, the *ba'aley teshuva* (regenerated Jews)² that are currently carrying most of the fertility load. I argue that not only is stratified critique based on hierarchies of piety, levels of literacy, and social status, it also reproduces these inequalities. In this process, the following questions will be addressed: As contemporary ideals of rational and calculated family planning, gender, parenting and work/balance ideals challenge religious and national high fertility norms,

how do Orthodox members rethink communal norms? What forms of religious knowledge and critique are elicited and whom is this critique directed at? And finally, how do these new perspectives affect local configurations of piety, gender, power and authority?

Religious Doubt, Critique and Power

Even though doubt has served as a constant analytic theme in theology and philosophy, it has rarely surfaced in empirical disciplines such as sociology and anthropology (Pelkmans, 2013). According to Mathijs Pelkmans (Pelkmans, 2013), this academic lacuna is linked to analytic and methodological difficulties that are unique to ethnographic data collection and analysis. As verbal communication, to some extent, necessitates at least some level of overcoming hesitation or ambivalence, it is almost impossible to ‘try and catch doubt in mid-air’ (Pelkmans, 2013, p. 16), let alone try to analyse it. Exploring doubt among religious communities is even more of a rarity. It may seem strange to say that anthropology of religion has rarely focused on doubt, since the disciplinary record is filled with descriptions of people’s beliefs, ideologies and convictions. However, these records of doubt have tended to highlight the various strategies used by religious leaders to prevent ambivalence, hesitancy and doubt from leading religious members astray (Ammerman, 2005; Antoun, 1989; Davidman, 2014; Fader, 2017). These descriptions have also tended to focus on theological and life-changing beliefs and neglected everyday practices (Ammerman, 1987; Antoun, 2001).

Recent scholarship of everyday religiosity has critiqued former studies for constructing normative and harmonious pictures of religious life, while calling for a focus on unstudied topics: “struggle, ambivalence, incoherence and failure, which must also receive attention in the study of everyday religiosity” (Osella & Soares, 2010, p. 11). By focusing on everyday struggles, these scholars show how various religious groups are currently questioning the accepted norms, ideologies and practices in their communities and how they reinterpret them (Deeb & Harb, 2013; El-Or, 2006; Fadil & Fernando, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Marsden, 2005; Ochs, 2005, 2007; Osella

& Soares, 2010; Schielke, 2015; Stadler, 2009). In the pages ahead, I build on these insights to address the ways in which Orthodox Jews struggle, critique and doubt whether (and how) to continue one of the pivotal communal ideals – having a large family.

Pelkmans has described how times of uncertainty are a fertile ground for exploring ‘lived doubt’ (Pelkmans, 2013). Shifting away from purely epistemological and ontological questions to everyday doubt may be used as an analytic framework to ‘unravel the ways in which convictions gain and lose their force’ (Pelkmans, 2013, p. 1) at historical moments or across the individuals life course. Based on fieldwork conducted among Israel’s Orthodox Jews (between 2012-2015), I explore religious doubt and critique from the perspectives of Orthodox couples during a unique moment of uncertainty regarding high fertility norms. Ever since the establishment of the State of Israel, the bodies of Israeli women have been targeted for bearing large families through the argument that the Jewish population must be enlarged in order to ensure a Jewish majority (Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2004; Gooldin, 2008; Ivry, 2010; Kahn, 2000; Shalev & Gooldin, 2006). However, social and economic factors have contributed to a critique of this post-Holocaust and Zionist ideology. While secular Jews are currently having one to two children, religious couples have between four to seven children (Hleihel, 2011; B. Okun, 2013). The reproductive narratives of Orthodox couples reveal how economic, social and structural transformations have contributed to an ideological and practical uncertainty regarding reproduction norms. During this time of uncertainty, Orthodox couples debate how and if they should live up to the high fertility norms that are customary in their communities. (Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2004; Kahn, 2000). On the one hand, having a large family is a well-established communal norm that is transformed into a personal dream. On the other hand, everyday difficulties have turned the process of actualizing these high fertility ideals into an almost unattainable goal.

Following the insights of current anthropologists of reproduction, reproductive decision-making serves as a conceptual tool to unpack painful negotiation processes about significant social

concepts such as: femininity, masculinity, the home, nationalism and modernity (Dow, 2016; Franklin, 1997; Kanaaneh, 2002; Paxson, 2004). Furthermore, I follow Laura Briggs conviction that “There is no outside to reproductive politics, even though that fact is sometimes obscured” (Briggs, 2017). As scholars of reproduction have widely documented, reproduction is not only about “managing or improving reproduction, but is itself a means of producing other things, other relationships, other values, or other identities” (Franklin, 2013, p. 153). By using Shellee Colen’s term “stratified reproduction” (Colen, 1995), I explore how secrecy evokes hidden power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered. Leaning on an in-depth analysis of Orthodox Jews narratives and discourses regarding reproduction, I reveal how religious knowledge about birth control and contraception is based on particular social and cultural capital. Following Nurit Stadler’s work on the way Yeshiva students act as agents of resistance by criticizing their own authorities (Stadler, 2009), I examine the ways in which elite Orthodox members critique some of the most basic social norms and authorities in their communities. While scholars have tended to focus on elite and leading groups as the creators and perpetrators of communal norms (Antoun, 2001; Stadler, 2009), my examination attests to the exact opposite. As religious elites create religious discourses of resistance without publically proclaiming them, this stratified mode of religious critique creates invisible power relations within religious communities based on levels of literacy, piety, and social status. Whereas much literature has focused on boundaries created to distinguish between religious ‘enclaves’ and host societies (Ammerman, 1987; Deeb, 2006; Mahmood, 2005), these findings explore how religious knowledge and resistance shape boundaries between different subgroups of religious communities. Even though well-established, knowledgeable and assertive religious members find ways to bypass the almost unachievable levels of fertility, a veil of secrecy leaves other groups lagging behind. Exploring this phenomenon, this paper will ask: How do religious members learn to critique well-established communal norms? How is critique of hushed topics,

such as birth control, formed? What type of critique is elicited and whom is it directed at? And finally, how are local configurations of power affected by these critiques?

Contextualization: Religiosity and Reproduction in Contemporary Israel

It was a chilly Tuesday morning in mid-November when I detected colorful balloons adorning the walls of the seminary as I entered through the small green gate. Esti, a cheerful brunette with large glasses ushered me swiftly into the nearest classroom – “Quick, she is almost here!”. “What is going on?”, I ask. “Racheli got engaged!”. Esti gives me all the details and I watch as two girls head over to ask the teacher: “Mrs. Friedman, can we go greet her at the gate?” She hesitates and says: “Yes, but I don’t want to hear any singing until everyone is back in the classroom. No by-passers should hear female singing coming from the seminary garden”. The girls squeal with joy.

We leave the classroom and move towards the garden. A few minutes later, Racheli enters. She is beaming but looks down shyly at the ground. Surrounded by a circle of excited friends jumping up and down silently, she is pulled towards their classroom. As the last girl enters, they all start singing a Jewish wedding song: “*Mebera Mebera Hashem Elokenu...*”, the tables are magically moved to the sides of the room, “*Od Yishama Be’aray Yehuda*”, Racheli invites her best-friend to dance with her, “*Kol Sasson vekol Simcha*”. Racheli invites the teacher to dance in the inner circle and everyone sings even louder: “*Kol Chatan ve kol Kallal*”. I leave the classroom to take a short break from the soulful singing. “I can’t believe she will be the first one in our class to be a mother!” I hear two girls talking outside. “Who would have guessed?”. “I am so excited”, the other squeals as they embrace quickly before getting back to the dancing.

-Field notes, November 2011

This vignette demonstrates the shared excitement an engagement brings forward in the Israeli ultra-Orthodox community. Beyond the balloons, dancing and (modestly conscious³) celebrating, it also reveals the immediate expectancy a wedding entails – to become a mother. Even

though this communal expectation is turned into a personal dream for most girls, during the time of an engagement (which usually does not exceed a few months), sexuality is systematically approached for the first time. Brides-to be are taught the “laws of purity⁴” as well as given a concise, yet detailed sex education by a professional bridal teacher⁵. In these lessons, they are also taught that procreation is one of the central missions of the Jewish family, which they are expected to realize post-haste. While this description focused on the ultra-Orthodox setting, similar reproductive expectations are common in other Orthodox communities. Even though modesty norms, dating patterns and marriage preparation vary between communities (and can be viewed as hallmarks of each group) (Engelberg, 2011; Lehmann & Siebzehner, 2009), the immediate link between marriage and reproduction dominates most Orthodox communities in Israel.

Even though a survey of the sources about procreation in historical Jewish texts indicates that fertility requirements are not uniform and were continually being reinterpreted⁶, the biblical command to “Be fruitful and multiply” has had supreme importance in Jewish religion and tradition. This religious ideal was part of a communal quest for Jewish survival during centuries of diaspora existence, an ideal which intensified after the trauma of the Holocaust (Kahn, 2000; Sered, 2000). Once the Israeli state was established, another goal was added to the mix: that the Jewish population in Israel must be augmented for the sake of ensuring a majority vis-à-vis the country’s Arab sector (Berkovitch, 1997). Scholars have shown how this Zionist ideology was connected to religious ideals as well as political interests (Gooldin, 2008, 2013; Ivry, 2010; Rosenberg-Friedman, 2015). As such, childbearing was constituted an important contribution to the Zionist nation-building effort after the Holocaust. In this sphere “the political converged with the private, under the equation of individual and community survival” (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2003:102) as the bodies of Israeli women and their reproductive capacities have been targeted for bearing large families. Today, the importance of reproduction and of the Jewish family still dominates Israeli-Zionist discourse and ethos (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999). Unsurprisingly, even though most other developed countries have under replacement levels of reproduction, current

demographic studies show that the total fertility rate in Israel is 3.13 (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) 2016), about 50% higher than that of European women.

While Israel's fertility technology and government policy has been widely documented (Amir, 1995; Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2003, 2004, Gooldin, 2008, 2013; Hashiloni-Dolev, 2007; Seeman, 2010; Shalev & Gooldin, 2006; Teman, 2010), little research has focused on family planning among Israel's Orthodox groups (Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2008; Ivry, 2010). Reproductive patterns among Israeli's Orthodox Jew reveal a consistent and clear positive relationship between the level of total fertility rates (TFR) and religiosity (Hleihel, 2011; B. Okun, 2013; B. S. Okun, 2000). Between 1979-2009, ultra-Orthodox women had between 6-7.5 children, religious women had birth rates ranging between 3.5-4.3. whereas secular women levels ranged between 1.7-2.4 (Hleihel, 2011). Even though these findings show the extent to which religiosity affects fertility in contemporary Israel, few scholars have attempted to interpret these findings from the perspective of Orthodox Israelis (Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2008; Teman, Ivry, & Bernhardt, 2011). In my understanding, academics have tended to perceive the link between religion and fertility as obvious and straightforward and thus have left it unexamined.

By exploring everyday struggles of Orthodox members, I found that religious members are currently questioning the high fertility norms that are customary in their communities. This critique of a dual national/religious ideal is linked to many changes, some inter-communal and some external. The first part of this paper describes the economic strains and cultural changes regarding parenting ideals, gender, body, and work/family balance that challenge the second and third generation of Israel's Orthodox Jews (Avishai, 2008; Stadler & Taragin-Zeller, 2017). The second part of this paper, addresses the stratified strategies couples employ in response to these difficulties. Building on Nurit Stadler's (Stadler 2009) work on resistance in the ultra-Orthodox world, this study poses the following questions: As contemporary ideals of rational and calculated family planning, gender, parenting and work/balance ideals challenge religious and national high

fertility norms, what types of religious critique are emerging? What strategies do couples employ as they rethink the customary high fertility norms? Furthermore, what forms of religious knowledge and critique is elicited and whom is this critique directed at? And finally, how does this knowledge affect local configurations of piety, power and authority?

Methodology

Orthodox Jews account for roughly 19% of Israel's population (ICBS, 2016). The community's religious mores purportedly adhere to the Hebrew Bible as well as a voluminous body of rabbinic literature, commentary, and rulings. The sector consists of multiple groups that are differentiated by origin, ethnicity, and customs and each possesses its own religious leaders. Israeli Orthodoxy can be loosely divided into the following streams: the Lithuanian yeshiva-based Haredi community, the Hassidic dynasties, the Religious Zionists (i.e., modern Orthodox), and *hardalim*.

My multi-site ethnographic study (Coleman & Von Hellermann, 2011; Marcus, 1995) of the approaches to family planning among Orthodox Jews was comprised of field observations, interviews, and textual analysis. Between 2012 and 2015, I surveyed over fifty communal gatherings, conferences, and classes on this topic,⁷ which were held by organizations affiliated with the National Religious, *hardalim*, and both moderate and conservative Lithuanians.⁸ Moreover, some of the participants put me in touch with acquaintances who were also interested in, or already using, family-planning techniques⁹. As I attended conferences and classes regarding reproduction I was surprised to find members from the entire spectrum of Orthodoxy at these settings. I learned that these sites were non-sectorial spaces through which Orthodox (women especially) exchange ideas and practices in all that concerns fertility and contraception. Following this ethnographic set-up, even though most scholarship on religion in Israel treats these sectors as distinct groups, this ethnography includes Orthodox couples that originate from the ultra-Orthodox, modern-Orthodox and Hardal communities¹⁰. While this empirical phenomenon created a flexible and

varied sample of couples who come together through their everyday struggles, the analysis of each narrative takes the differing backgrounds and social contexts into account.

In aggregate, I held thirty comprehensive, semi-structured interviews with Orthodox couples¹¹ between the ages of 25 and 45 from throughout the socio-economic and above-mentioned Orthodox spectra. Interviews were conducted, by and large, at the couple's house (though some preferred to meet at a nearby coffee shop), and usually lasted between an hour or two. After gleaning some background information, I asked each subject to discuss the meaning of procreation in his or her life and to share the "backstory" behind their particular family unit. To enable couples to speak freely about critique and failure, I also asked couples to offer practical insights to newlywed couples. This turned out to be a wonderful way to share everyday difficulties as it was framed as 'helping others' and enabled couples to share particular struggles as 'general issues'. As family-planning consultations are quite common in Israel's Orthodox landscape, I interviewed rabbinic and medical advisors, who turned out to be a rich source of information regarding changes in the field of reproduction. I also collected books, manuals, pamphlets, and newspaper articles about family, fertility, and reproduction at bookstores and communal gatherings. Recordings from interviews and other encounters in the field were transcribed verbatim and analysed on both a separate and comparative basis.

As an anthropologist, I struggle to highlight the individual experiences of each couple I met while also seriously taking into account the structural, economic, and political framework in which these stories are being shared with me. This is an issue that anthropologists always grapple with. However, anthropologists working in contested spaces deal with this question with even greater care. Large Jewish families in the Israeli context may be easily critiqued as a Zionist project and dismissed all-too easily. This ethnography seeks to share Orthodox members' reproductive experiences and reproductive strategies from their own perspectives while situating and taking into account the political ramifications of such ideals and practices.

Cracks in the Large Family Dream

I walk up cold stone stairs to the fourth floor of an old building in the centre of Jerusalem. As I knock on the door, I can hear Miriam and Shlomo tidying up their house. They open the door a few moments later and invite me to join them as they prepare a fresh pot of herbal tea. I brush away a toy car as we sit down on their family-friendly sofa and explain that I would like to hear their story of building a family. They look at each other, hoping the other one will start first. After a few moments of awkward silence, a few shrugs and a big sigh, Miriam starts. Miriam grew up in a secular home but was attracted to religion during high-school and decided to attend an ultra-Orthodox seminary. Shlomo, born to a rabbinical family, grew up in a religious-Zionist settlement in the outskirts of Jerusalem. After dating for a few months, Shlomo and Miriam decided to get married. As part of their preparation for marriage, Miriam studied weekly with an ultra-Orthodox bridal teacher and Shlomo had a meeting with one of the Rabbi's in his community.

A baby boy was born ten months after they got married. Miriam smiles proudly at me. "I was so happy to be one of those women who gets married and almost immediately you can see that tiny stomach starting to show". Shlomo felt differently: "We didn't really discuss it¹²... as we got closer to the wedding I starting worrying. I suddenly realized that she was going to get pregnant. This put me into a lot of stress. It was already the week that we don't see each other.¹³ I went to speak to my rabbi.

Miriam starts moving in her chair – "I want to tell the rest of this story". I start laughing as Shlomo goes on: "The Rabbi said that at this point there aren't many options. According to Jewish law, condoms are not permissible. Maybe I should try a sponge...? I had no idea what he was talking about so I called a secular friend and asked him to buy some for me. I said to myself – I have to talk to Miriam so I call her on the day of our wedding...

Miriam can't hold herself back and says:

“I am g-e-t-t-i-n-g m-y m-a-k-e-up d-o-n-e. I was so upset!! I am with my friends, getting my make-up done and I am like – I am going to kill you. I remember you said you were scared. The timing was terrible. I didn’t want to prevent [conception] ... I didn’t want to close the gate. I wasn’t sure so I told him we could use prevention on the night of the wedding. He was calmer after the wedding and realized it will be fine. I got pregnant a month after and we were so happy to have a baby boy nine months later”,

Shlomo continues the story: “After he was born, we were trying to prevent but if it does happen – it’s OK. We did not want to totally prevent. So we tried to use contraceptives during her fertile days. After a year she was pregnant again. But this time, it was harder. Life turned into chaos. We had been living in a small community in Southern Israel and were happy. It was a typical situation of a low income but highly spiritual community. But, at some point, after we had two children it started frightening me. I saw women who were already having their fourth child, they are amazing, they are my friends but what it does to their bodies... to their children, to what they talk about... I would look at the Rabbi’s wife who had nine children, and look what she looked like and what her life looks like. I told Shlomo it scared me. You know, two more years like this and I am not sure if we will be able to navigate our life in any other direction. We didn’t want to end up like that, so we moved.

“When I look back at it I realize how there are so many things we don’t see. It is like a negative. You can see what there is, but you can’t see what isn’t there. This situation of parenting, birth... it doesn’t enable me to see what the price is at that moment. What I am losing? What is not happening? I was in a very positive place. And now, I am looking at the negative. At what I don’t have. I look at the damages. What it means to have three young children one after another. Everything that isn’t happening will continue not happening. And I am not willing. I have chosen. Because all the things that aren’t happening are starting to hurt me”.

Miriam takes a deep breath. She inhales in and out.

Shlomo speaks instead: “After all these years, we never really had time to build our own relationship. We don’t have time to just be together. Now, after summer break and all the festivals. It has been very hard. Things have gone crazy. I have had the longest summer of my life. Now, three kids, a mortgage, we have responsibility. We have work. We aren’t playing around anymore. As the children grow older they turn into humans with needs. You know? (He starts crying). Our oldest has special needs and we are just too busy. We are not breathing”.

Miriam: "I feel helpless. You can't get everything done. I keep on asking myself: Who is first? My husband? My children? The house? Work? My body? Who is first?"

Miriam and Shlomo’s reproductive narrative is but one of the stories I heard from Orthodox couples who shared their dreams, difficulties and struggles with me. They described how they met and set-off on a journey to fulfil their dreams of having a family together. Although Shlomo had jitters before the wedding, they overcame these anxieties and had a child within a year, a success Miriam is especially proud of. However, a combination of unsuitable birth control and an undermining conviction “not to close the gates”, as Miriam described it, concluded with three children in five years which transformed their beautiful dream into chaos. At the time of the interview, the couple was in midst of a painful debate trying to balance between competing needs as the painful path of reality unravelled. Miriam’s uncertainty still resonates loud and clear: “Who is first? My husband? My children? The house? Work? My body? Who is first?”

I heard this question during many interviews. This uncertainty had many faces and many particular settings from which it emerged. For Miriam and Shlomo, like many other couples I interviewed, the heart of this debate was the understanding that birth control and family planning decision-making were a negotiation process about significant social concepts such as femininity, masculinity, parenthood, the body and the home. Shlomo and Miriam’s narrative reveal the

constant feeling of frustration as economic concerns, bodily strains, and professional advancement challenge the dreams they shared at the beginning of their journey.

Among most Orthodox communities, economic concerns were considered problematic, as Hannah, an Orthodox educator said to a room filled with Orthodox mothers in one of the conferences I attended: “What, are we like the secular Jews who don’t have a fourth child because they would need to get a new car?” But in real life economic struggles challenge Orthodox couples daily. Even though couples like Miriam and Shlomo described these as personal struggles, these issues are deeply linked to and embedded in economic and structural changes. Large families have been especially vulnerable to the steep cutbacks in Israel’s child allowance since the 2000s (Toledano, Frish, Zussman, & Gottlieb, 2009). These cutbacks have forced couples to move out of geographically central, religious neighborhoods, like Jerusalem, to more peripheral, smaller communities¹⁴ and settlements¹⁵. For Miriam and Shlomo, like other couples I met, it was hard to make ends meet. As I entered the homes of married couples, I got used to sitting on couches with torn cloths, dining room tables with missing chairs and bedrooms with three sets of rickety bunk-beds. I also got to see how mothers prepared food carefully, buying food in bulk, reusing bread-crusts for croutons and shopping at the end of the day to get cheaper prices. I also encountered couples who were not struggling financially, but also seemed to experience economic difficulties as their struggles were deeply linked to the contemporary ideals of ‘intensive parenting’ (Faircloth, 2014) that construct parenting standards which are unachievable for large families. I vividly remember Chani’s remark, a Religious-Zionist mother of eight: “Do you know how much pizza costs when you have eight children to feed?”. Also, as more Orthodox Jews engage in the workforce, financial stress was linked to questions of career and life/work balance as well as personal growth and leisure ideals (El-Or, 1997; Finkelman, 2011; Frenkel & Wasserman, 2016; Layosh, 2014). Furthermore, as gender ideals and practices transform, men and women are expressing discontent with their one-dimensional gender roles and some were even clamouring openly for reform (Leon & Lavie, 2013; Stadler & Taragin-Zeller, 2017). Questioning these ideals

in the context of the family unit, couples debated the traditional gender-division of household labour, gendered parenting strategies and ideals of romance. As these ideals shift, couples struggle to find suitable models. Miriam and Shlomo, shared this difficulty with me. They explained how they “never really had time to build our own relationship”. Romance seemed to be an extremely painful topic in their narrative and in many others. As couples tended to marry quickly (usually with very little physical involvement beforehand) and have a child within twelve months, they did not have much time to be a couple. Exacerbated by a dearth of religious ideals of romance due to issues of modesty, Orthodox couples searched for ways to be intimate in appropriate ways (Engelberg, 2011)¹⁶. As Meir, one of the ultra-Orthodox fathers, shared with me: ‘I had a wonderful idea of how to be a caring father, but I had no idea how to be a spouse. I never saw my parents in that way’. Female interviewees also shared how pregnancies had taken a toll on their appearances and bodies. They struggled as consecutive births weakened their pelvises and left their bodies with stretch marks and varicose veins. These economic, social and bodily struggles were amplified by a spiritual and theological debate that was prevalent among many couples I met. Yitzchak and Sarah, an ultra-Orthodox couple from Modi’in Eilat, outlined this debate as follows:

Most religious leaders have been against this [i.e., contraception]. It’s not just because of Jewish law. . . You see, the moment a child is born is one of the special moments in my life. . . I feel God’s presence... ; there is some divine interference. . . In medieval times, they didn’t know what ovulation was and all these other things. Kids just arrived. When we moved to modern times, we have to ask ourselves: ‘What is left of God?’ The moment I know more and more, what is left for God in this world of knowledge? I think this is what lies at the heart of the objection to modern family planning.

In Yitzchak’s view, the capacity to tinker with procreation has instigated a religious dispute. Reproduction had traditionally been a sphere of life in which God’s presence was tangible. Modern knowledge and family planning were dislodging Providence from this realm. Even though religiosity and spirituality seemed to be central to debates among married couples, I was surprised

that nationalism was rarely discussed in the conferences I attended and in the interviews I conducted¹⁷. Once, during a conference, a religious-Zionist educator, compared religious mothers to soldiers: “You don’t have to go to war to get a badge”, she told a room full of women, “your children are your signs of courage”¹⁸. In contrast to the vast literature described above, I found that educators rarely inspired Orthodox couples through post-Holocaust and Zionist ideals; it was more common to focus on existential and everyday difficulties. I began to wonder if I was missing something, so I decided to ask some of my interviewees. I was surprised at the following answer I received: “Do you think that is a good reason to have a child? Having a child to win a war with the Arabs? What a terrible thought!”¹⁹. Whereas nationalism seemed to be a powerful source of motivation in the establishment of the state (Rosenberg-Friedman, 2015), this does not seem to be the case today.

Before moving on to describe the strategies couples employ as economic, social, bodily and theological difficulties create cracks in the large family dream, one more issue must be addressed. One of the main things that struck me while hearing these struggles was how long couples debated. “*Who is first? My husband? My children? The house? Work? My body? Who is first?*”. For most couples I interviewed, choosing a spouse was probably the biggest life-decision they made and children were a natural outcome. They never really asked themselves whether or not they wanted to become parents. Thus, most couples started to question these high fertility norms only after they were parents. Moreover, it was not easy to realise that “they need a break”, as many of my interviewees put it. Similar to findings of other anthropologists, this realization was understood as a failure to succeed in one of the most basic and important roles in life, particularly for women whose fertility performance is critical to their social status (e.g. Inhorn, 2003). Also, as sex education was scarce, this debate was accompanied by limited knowledge regarding permissible birth control techniques. Even after one person made a decision, they had to find courage and create a language to speak to their spouse about a topic which was almost taboo. Some couples felt differently about this issue and it could cause tension between them. Even after deciding to pursue birth control,

many couples complained about the limited options available. As Rivka, a modern-Orthodox woman from a small village in northern Israel, shared with me:

“I started taking the pill and suffered from terrible headaches. I went back to the doctor and she suggested an IUD. That seemed like too much. I went home and didn’t know what to do. Mikveh night was approaching... I spoke to my husband and he said that I should go to the mikveh. We would touch without... you know... I am lucky to be married to such a gentle and understanding man. We were like this for six months. I just couldn’t do it”.

Rivka explained how she and her husband refrained from sex for six months because she could not find suitable contraception. Other couples tried sponges, various spermicides, some even used condoms even though they were considered non-permissible. Even though many secular women in Israel used IUD’s, religious women, like Rivka were hesitant to use them. After inserting an IUD there can usually be a few months of spotting. For a religious woman, this means a few months when she may not be able to even touch her husband, which added to the woman’s reluctance. Women I interviewed would share how happy they were when their period arrived and how restless they would get when their periods were late. Some succeeded in preventing pregnancies but babies were still conceived during this time. Sometimes a few babies were born while couples were still deliberating. Sometimes, as hard as it was for them to admit, this baby may have been one child too much.

Secrecy, Stratified Reproduction and the Power of Verbal Taboos

As economic, social, bodily and theological difficulties challenge Orthodox couples, I found that the strategies couples employed depended on levels of literacy and their social status. Secrecy was a strategy I mainly detected among well-situated and knowledgeable Orthodox couples. This is how Esti, an ultra-Orthodox Bais Yaacov teacher described their reproductive choices:

“As the wedding approached, Dovid Yisrael told me he wanted to wait with children. I was very surprised. How could he not want children? He told me it was fine according to Jewish law but I didn’t believe him. I suggested we go to a Rabbi. The rabbi said it is his obligation and if he feels like he needs to wait, it is fine. I was so surprised. After we got married he would say to me – Isn’t it nice? Having a quiet house. I really did enjoy it. But people started worrying. I had an accident right after I got married. I was fine but people thought it had harmed my fertility. They would come over and say – I am praying for you! At the beginning, I felt bad not telling the truth, but after a few times I started to thank them politely. Their prayer will be helpful at some point...”.

Whereas most couples usually had children (or at least tried) to have a child before their first anniversary, some couples have recently started to use contraception before the birth of their first child. This has become common among modern-Orthodox Jews and is also slowly seeping in among various ultra-Orthodox communities. Dovid Yisrael and Esti are a wonderful example of an ultra-Orthodox couple who must negotiate the divergence from this norm together. Interestingly, even after they receive rabbinic permission, the couple was uncomfortable to share this decision with their community. Both from prominent ultra-Orthodox families, their family and friends were sure they were having trouble conceiving. Even though this made Esti feel uncomfortable, they decided to conceal their choice. Indeed, I found that couples who decided to go down this trajectory were usually faced with family pressure and critique from friends.

During my fieldwork, I realized that I usually detected this strategy among couples with a noticeable level of literacy as well as a relatively high social status. While this secrecy may have empowered these couples on a personal level, it also created a particular mode of stratification. I suggest the use of Shellee Colen’s term “stratified reproduction” (Colen, 1995) to understand this phenomena. Stratified reproduction describes the power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered. I argue that

secrecy creates a distinction between the learned elite and less knowledgeable members of Orthodox communities. This finding really struck home during a course for bridal instructors I attended in Safed in northern Israel. An ultra-Orthodox ba'alat teshuva named Michal, with seven children, shared some of her daily struggles with the class and then remarked: "I don't have any family to help me. I am an only child and even when my parents want to help... they don't know how to handle all the kids... and I can't send them to my parents or in-laws because their homes are not kosher". As I followed the conversation this remark inspired, I realized that, within Orthodox communities, nuclear families were deeply supported by their wider families. Sharing hand-me downs and cooking meals together were just some examples of this everyday help. In large families, young and unmarried siblings would contribute daily to their married sibling's households. Also, within nuclear families, the oldest children, especially the oldest girls would serve as "little mothers" from a very young age. When these "little mothers" grow-up they will also support their aunts who helped them when they were younger, creating a perpetuating circle of familial help. Unfortunately, ba'aley teshuva did not have this type of help. Even though they seemed to be pursuing the almost unachievable ideal of large families in extremely difficult conditions, they did not want to let go of this mission. As my intuition regarding this phenomenon grew, I raised this issue with one of the Orthodox Rabbis I interviewed. He smiled at me and said: "It is like chatting during prayer. Everyone does it but only the ba'aley teshuva will sit there silently. It takes a while for them to understand that Jewish law is not always black and white but many shades of grey". In other words, a direct outcome of these verbal taboos was that ba'aley teshuva were unlikely to understand which deviations were socially accepted²⁰. In contrast to this, Esti and Dovid-Yisrael, whom I described earlier, are a great example of a couple from well-established families that had both the knowledge and social positioning to decide to do something different. In fact, in the Talmud the religious obligation to procreate includes only one (JT Yevamot 6:6) or two children (BT Yevamot 65b)²¹. In addition, within the debate about procreation and family planning there is also an entire system of individual concerns that may be taken into consideration,

such as physical and mental health, financial issues, and child welfare, to name a few (e.g: Shulchan Aruch, Aruch Hashulchan Even Haezer 1:8). Dovid Yisrael grew up in the Yeshiva world. He knows the canonical sources well enough to know that grey areas exist and that personal elements can be taken into consideration. Sadly, this knowledge was not available for all.

Succeeding to fail – The Social Power of Failure

As research progressed, I realized that couples were telling me stories about their personal failures. Furthermore, they were sharing with me how they came to experience and perform their parenthood in terms of failure. It took me a while to notice that failure was not just an emotion, it was a strategy. Such was the case of Miriam and Shlomo, whose story I shared at the beginning of this paper. As they continued to ask the question “*Who is first? My husband? My children? The house? Work? My body? Who is first?*”, they reached a breaking point:

“We are not breathing. The Sabbath has turned into a nightmare. You cannot even imagine. It is really hard. And do you know what? We have changed. Sometimes, I think that on the long summer days of Shabbat I should just take the kids to the pool²²... just to get them out. We have changed but the only thing that can’t change is the fact that you have children. You can get a divorce if you want, but your kids will not disappear...I think that we both feel that if we had a choice, if we knew then what we know now, I think we would have waited more before having our first child and we wouldn’t have rushed so quickly to have our third. Shlomo goes on and then stops. He plays with his tongue and then looks up. “We have decided that at this point we don’t want to add any more variables. We need to love what there is”.

Sometimes the timing of an interview can be very important. Interviewing a couple at the end of August in Israel, where there is no subsidized childcare during July and August, certainly seemed to raise the level of frustration. Shlomo shared with me how their difficulties pushed him to rethink some of the basic rules of the Sabbath. Thinking of taking the children to the pool on the Sabbath,

a sin in his community, reveals the extent of their difficulties. Following these difficulties, they had recently decided to change their reproductive strategy and at the time of our interview, Miriam already had an appointment to insert an IUD. I sat with many other couples who shared moments of acute stress with me. One of the common phrases they shared as part of their narrative was: “I don’t know how other families do it...but I know that I can’t. It is too much for me”.

I heard statements like this over and over again. I realized that this mantra was not made up during our interview but was something couples learned to share when asked about their family status. It was through a personal performance of failure that they navigated the various forms of social critique they came across. It is the way in which they explained their divergence from accepted norms to their family and their friends. It was also the way they received permission from their communal Rabbi. It was a brilliant strategy. They did not critique the norm directly rather differentiated themselves from it for individual reasons. “Succeeding to fail” was a powerful and individualized performance that enabled couples to critique and continue unachievable norms simultaneously. A key factor in this performance was explaining how their failures were impairing them from being the parents they wanted and needed to be. For example, I met Yaakov, an ultra-Orthodox father of seven at a coffee shop in Jerusalem:

“I had three girls first and loved playing with them. Then, I had a son. While the girls were young, I was happy to go on having children but then my son started school and I started learning with him. I realized that if I want him to be able to be a learner, I need to learn daily with him. How could I do that if I have four more boys?”

Yaakov’s narrative reveals an intriguing phenomena. His decision to engage with birth control was based on his understanding that in order to educate his son(s) in the proper way, a way that would enable him to live up to the communal expectations of a boy, he would have to limit the number of children he had. Namely, Yaakov situated this decision in inter-communal gendered norms in which a father-son relationship was defined by the father’s ability to teach his son to become a

learned Jew. This adds another dimension to understanding the social power of failure. The power of failure must be rooted in accepted communal norms for it to gain its power. When done properly, couples who performed their parenthood as failure beget individual liberty. Resonating deeply with Judith Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1990), they did not criticize the norm loudly. They did not shout it out. They may not have even spoken about it or admitted it to themselves. But, bit by bit, one performance after another they learned to perform parenthood as a failure. This successful performance of failure may have continued the constitution of large families as a social norm but it also enabled individuals to challenge the norm without uttering a word. This, as I have shown, however, has been mainly used by deep-seated and highly educated Orthodox members. However, even though this performance may have empowered the religious elite it simultaneously disempowered others. As I have shown in this paper, regenerated Jews did not understand the many shades of grey this performance entailed. Even if they were able to read between the lines, they did not have the social status or capital to take part in this performance.

Discussion

As Orthodox couples struggle with high-fertility norms, religious elites use secrecy and a creative performance of failure to diverge from norms without publicly contesting them. Even though this performance is capable of issuing a small island of resistance, it simultaneously recreates and reifies contemporary norms, thus constituting the importance of parenting and of succeeding at it. Furthermore, my findings reveal that these moments of resistance are deeply stratified and rely on specific cultural and social capital. I argue that while these strategies are employed by knowledgeable and well-established members, less learned members, and especially regenerated Jews continue to follow the prevalent norms of pursuing large families.

This phenomenon raises many questions about the modes through which transformation occurs within religious communities. Even though transformation is not usually at the focus of

anthropological analysis (Robbins, 2004), scholars have tended to focus on elite and leading groups as the creators and perpetrators of communal norms (Antoun, 1989; Stadler, 2009). My findings, however reveal the exact opposite. Whereas well-established, knowledgeable and assertive religious members find ways to bypass the almost unachievable levels of fertility, a veil of secrecy leaves less educated groups in the dark. How can we explain the unique findings of this ethnography? I suggest that the divergence from the scholarship on religious critique is linked to the sensitivity of the topic at hand. When Orthodox members critique 'public' norms like participation in the work force (Stadler, 2009), critique cannot be hidden.. As Yeshiva students wish to leave their Yeshiva centres to pursue academic studies and advance professionally, they must critique their leaders publically in order to receive public recognition and approval (Hakak, 2011; Stadler, 2009). However, if a couple does not have a child within a year of marriage, no one will know what the reason is for that unless they choose to share their motivation with their community. Private matters, thus, can enable more room for flexibility and secrecy. Similar to the private modesty practices documented in the works of Ari Engelberg and Naomi Marmon-Grummet (Engelberg, 2011; Hartman & Marmon, 2004), the findings of this study reveal that during a time of uncertainty regarding reproductive norms, religious elites act secretly. I argue that not only are these strategies linked to social inequalities, these practices have the capacity to further deepen these differences. As the elite members quietly lower the amount of children they have or widen the gaps between offspring, they give themselves more opportunities to focus on their parenting and, ultimately, on the socialisation of the next generation. They also allow themselves more time to focus on deepening their own relationships and invest more time and effort in personal and professional advancement. Ronit Irshai has described how the distinction between private and public Jewish law entails a selective concealment mechanism that primarily hurts disadvantaged populations (Irshai, 2014) Whereas Irshai has elaborated about this in terms of rabbinic decision-making, this project illustrates the social cost this type of strategy entails when it is further employed by religious

elites. Hence, these findings show that as Orthodox couples debate about high-fertility norms, stratified reproduction takes new shape.

These findings also enable us to refocus our inquiry of power structures within the Israeli community. Scholarship on reproduction in Israel has been largely perceived as a political and racial Zionist project focusing on disempowering Palestinians (Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2003, 2004; Gooldin, 2008; Kahn, 2000; Shalev & Gooldin, 2006). However, my findings reveal that my interviewees frame their own stories in personal discourses while disengaging from national ideology. After more than fifty years of a national-religious hyper-fertility discourse, Orthodox Jews are currently addressing parenthood primarily in personal terms. While these secret and undetected strategies are still limited to those with particular social and religious capital, this is nevertheless the project they are constructing. Will these hushed modes of resistance create more than a silent ripple? Only time will tell.

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¹ Throughout this paper, the term Orthodox refers to couples from modern-Orthodox, Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox, or Hardal communities. As discussed at length in the methodology section, during fieldwork in the Israeli Orthodox reproductive landscape, I found that couples from different groups attended non-sectorial settings to share their everyday difficulties. Based on this empirical set-up, this study includes Orthodox couples from varied backgrounds while the analysis takes the different social settings into account.

² Ba'aley teshuva (regenerated Jews) grow up among secular families and choose to lead religious lives as adults.

³ The realm of sexuality is governed by strict modesty rules and intrusive monitoring: boys and girls are segregated from a young age; and sartorial modesty is tightly enforced (Stadler & Taragin-Zeller, 2017; Taragin-Zeller, 2014; Zalberg-Block, 2011)

⁴ Even though the laws of *niddah* were originally part of the economy of impurities associated with access to the Temple, today it organizes marital sexuality through a recurring cycle of purity and impurity (Avishai, 2008; Hartman & Marmon, 2004). In accordance with these laws, married women self-regulate their bodies as bleeding, spotting, or other irregularities demarcate a woman as a *niddah*, a time in which sexual intercourse as well as any other physical contact is prohibited between a married couple until immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath).

⁵ In Israel, any couple (even secular) who wish to marry through the rabbinate must attend bridal lessons. Bridal teachers usually offer basic sex education as well as detailed instructions regarding the laws of Niddah, a concept in Jewish law regarding menstruation, a time in which sexual intercourse is prohibited until immersion in a Mikveh (ritual bath) (see: Avishai, 2008; Hartman & Marmon, 2004).

⁶ Jewish law on contraception entails an entire system of individual concerns that may be taken into consideration. Contraception is allowed, depending on the timing and method (Irshai, 2012).

⁷ Due to strict gender separation, I was unable to participate in male-only lectures (rare as they were).

⁸ Hassidic sects were not incorporated into this study as they usually attend communal gatherings and thus, did not attend these non-sectorial venues.

⁹ While I tried to keep the sample as diverse as possible, these findings do not mirror the entire complexity of these communities.

¹⁰ As geographical and cultural boundaries between Israel's orthodox communities become more porous and less clear, this method resonates with others scholars who are rethinking these boundaries (Cahaner, 2009;

Finkelman, 2014; Leon, 2009; Salmon, Y; Ravitsky, E; Ferziger, 2006; Stadler & Taragin-Zeller, 2017; Zicherman & Cahaner, 2012).

¹¹ Colleagues often ask me how I managed to find couples who were willing to discuss intimate topics, especially Orthodox men that were open to interactions with a female researcher. I discovered that the fact that birth control is considered taboo actually worked to my advantage, as the couples were more amenable to sharing their stories with someone who they would probably never cross paths with again. In cases where men were uncomfortable discussing these issues with a female researcher, a male substitute was provided.

¹² “It” is a way of hinting to questions of birth control without using the exact term, a typical use of verbal taboo.

¹³ Among Aschenazi Jews, it is customary for couples not to see each other during the week leading to the wedding.

¹⁴ Within ultra-Orthodox communities, poverty and unemployment are ballooning as the ascetic yeshiva-based ideology has become an onerous burden. Unlike the Jewish education system in pre-war Eastern Europe where only a few gifted men pursued full-time Talmudic studies, upon Israel’s establishment all ultra-Orthodox men were slated for a path of life-time study. A society of learners, as Menachem Friedman coined it (Friedman, 1988) was enabled by ultra-Orthodox women who participated in the workforce to support their husbands. These models are currently being recalculated, see (Hakak, 2004; Stadler & Taragin-Zeller, 2017).

¹⁵ Recent studies have highlighted the economic and political role the Israeli government plays in promoting low-cost suburbs around Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv. Even though modern-Orthodox communities were the initial targets, recent settlements are catering for ultra-Orthodox communities (e.g., Modi’in Ilit, Beitar Ilit, and Elad), see: Maggor, 2015.

¹⁶ Ari Engelberg has documented this frustration and demonstrated how couples search for ways to create intimacy before marriage (Engelberg, 2011).

¹⁷ Ecological questions about population size rarely emerged. When it did, it was only among modern-Orthodox couples.

¹⁸ This statement may have been linked to the fact that this remark was made by a female educator who is married to a high-ranked army officer.

¹⁹ For a critical analysis of the controversial anti-abortion group “Agudat Efrat” which continuously promote this national ideology, see: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/leading-israeli-rabbi-blasts-anti-abortion-group-efrat-for-irresponsible-language.premium-1.492457> (retrieved 27.3.17).

²⁰ To clarify, this does not mean that all regenerated Jews continue this ideal blindly, nor that the Orthodox elite are purposefully hiding their critique.

²¹ Rabbi Joshua asserts that one must never stop procreating (BT Yevamot 62b). Some authorities interpreted this as a rabbinic (*Derabanan*) determination meant to annul the limitation on the number of children needed (e.g Rif, Ba’al Hamaor, Rosh) while others understood it as a suggestion (e.g Ramban). The *Halachic* debate about procreation also includes lengthy debates about permitted birth control methods. Today, the pill and the IUD have become the most preferred method of birth control (Irshai, 2012).

²² Customarily, it is not permitted to go to a pool on the Sabbath.