HITCHHIKING AND RITUAL AMBIGUITY OF JEWISH SETTLERS IN THE WEST BANK[1]

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Hitchhiking by Jewish religious Zionists along the roads of the West Bank is examined as a ritual of sacred travel. The ambiguous and fluid character of this ritual mirrors the risks of everyday life for Jewish settlers in the West Bank. This article also explores a notion of ritual that pays close attention to the daily dilemmas, tensions, and uncertainties that may be produced through quotidian religious practices. (Religious Zionism, hitchhiking, Israel, ritual, pilgrimage)

Currently, hitchhiking in Israel is almost exclusively practiced by religious Zionists, mainly youth, and primarily within the West Bank. From a practical perspective, hitchhiking is the most convenient—and at times, the only—form of transportation in many areas of the West Bank. For all its advantages, hitchhiking comes with risks, especially in the West Bank.

One chilly November day in 2011 when I was hitchhiking, I was given a ride by a young religious Zionist female driver. After we left the Jewish settlement of Kedumim and were headed south across a small portion of Israel's Occupied West Bank towards the Tapuach Junction—one of the major traffic crossings in the Northern West Bank—and through the occupied Palestinian village of Huwarra, along roads that have neither a speed limit nor traffic enforcement, she asked me to recite out loud the traditional Jewish prayer for the traveler. The beginning portion of the prayer goes as follows:

May it be Your will Master, our God and the God of our fathers, that You should lead us in peace and direct our steps in peace, and guide us in peace, and support us in peace, and cause us to reach our destination in life, joy, and peace. Save us from every enemy and ambush, from robbers and wild beasts on the trip, and from all kinds of punishments that rage and come to the world.

She was not the first driver with whom I hitchhiked to ask me to recite this prayer, nor the last. The traditional prayer expresses some of the concerns, worries, and ambiguities that Jewish settlers experience as they travel across West Bank roads that have witnessed both bloody ethno-religious violence and terrible traffic accidents.

This essay analyzes hitchhiking by Jewish religious Zionists on the roads of the West Bank. I will argue that this practice is a ritual of sacred travel and has an ambiguous and fluid character that mirrors the open-endedness and risks of everyday life. In so doing this article explores a notion of ritual that pays close attention to the daily dilemmas, tensions, and uncertainties that

may be produced through everyday religious practices. In short, the practice of hitchhiking within the West Bank is a ritual of sacred travel.

Sacred travel has long been a focus of ethnographic investigation. In that regard, anthropological research has placed a good amount of emphasis on the relationship between ritual, and pilgrimage. Since Van Gennep (1961), movement across space and time has been closely associated with ritual practices. Turner (1968; 1969) followed Van Gennep's processual under- standing of ritual in his analyses of social dramas (and later directly with his study of Christian pilgrimage sites (Turner and Turner 1978). Turner (1973: 217) emphasizes the status of communitas in pilgrimage activities in which the journey to the sacred site, and pilgrims' experience of the site are moments of anti-structure where feelings of loose commonality and harmony exist among practitioners (Coleman 2002:356). This view of sacred travel has been sharply contested, in part for how it tends to overlook the ways in which pilgrimages are frequently sites of tension, complexity, and heterogeneity (Eade 1992; Eade and Sallnow 1991).

However, hitchhiking within the Occupied West Bank, and perhaps within conflict zones generally, is different from the classic ritualistic understanding of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage typically includes a culminating feature. Individuals make a pilgrimage to a particular location. A ritual of pilgrimage culminates when pilgrims reach their intended site. Moreover, pilgrimage assumes that pilgrims return to their homes and residences after the pilgrimage (Rinschede 1992). In contrast, hitchhiking is a mode of travel that assumes neither a cul- minating point, nor a return. When practiced by Jewish religious Zionists in the West Bank, however, hitchhiking (like pilgrimage) becomes a sacred and political act of travel that entails wider religious and moral experiences.

Turner's (1973) analysis of pilgrimage rituals assumes a direct relation- ship between the ritual signifier and its signified meaning. Individuals know what a ritual either symbolizes or achieves. Eade and Sallnow's (1991) focus on contestation and heterogeneity is compelling in that it leaves room for individual variation and alternate meanings that serve as the grist of cul- tural production. The present ethnographic account attempts to push against Turner's interpretation of ritual and symbolic behavior, while at the same time expanding the possibilities of what Eade and Sallnow (1991) understand as contestation and heterogeneity.

Wikan (1990) offered a similar critique of Turner's (1973) relationship between a symbol and its signified meaning, but from a different theoretical perspective to that of Eade and Sallnow. For Wikan, "cultural analysis … seeks to probe the meanings of key cultural symbols which intertwine with others in a coherent structure that can be read much as we read a text" (Wikan 1990:15). However, analyzing the contextual and coherent arrangement of

symbols "is seductive in that it holds the promise of elegance and order" (Wikan 1990:33).

These critiques point out that the meanings commonly attributed to ritual activity are far from uncontested or even "coherent." It follows that rituals can at times serve as more than just symbolic markers or holders of (contested) cultural meanings (Seeman 2005:55). Rituals can also highlight certain kinds of political and social experiences that are indelibly moral in character, denoting something more than normative and social notions of right and wrong. Moral experience indexes "the local processes (collective, inter-personal, subjective) that realize (enact) values in ordinary living" (Kleinman 1999:71). However, values and moral experience, insofar as they reflect a kind of human experience, can be indistinct and imperfect. As a result, there are some rituals that can point to uncertainty, and to imperfection. The uncertainty and open-ended nature of ritual practices and processes mirror the ambiguities that can be much a part of political and pietistic subjectivities. I believe that such an analysis can widen an appreciation for the daily dilemmas and doubts that inhabit zones of ethnic and religious conflict, and which are often overlooked by popular and scholarly treatment of the issue.

HITCHHIKING, RELIGIOUS ZIONISM, AND REDEMPTION

In Hebrew the word for hitchhike is tremp. The word is similar to the British English term "tramp," and most likely arrived in Palestine during the British Mandatory Period (1920–1948). Very little scholarly material has appeared about the history and practice of hitchhiking in Israel. Furthermore, the State of Israel does not publish any official statistics directly related to hitchhiking (number of people, relative age, location, etc.).

Informants often describe hitchhiking as an essential part of everyday life during the first few decades of Israel's existence. Evidence for this past popularity is attested to by the Hebrew term trempiyada, which designates a location along the sides of roads (usually next to a bus stop) or at traffic junctions where hitchhikers wait for rides. A trempiyada will sometimes have some kind of protective overhang under which travelers may seek shelter. These shelters can be found on the sides of roads throughout Israel. The popularity of hitchhiking within Israel has steadily waned over the past thirty years, and most of these hitchhiking stations now stand empty. Moreover, in the 1990s the Israel Defense Forces placed strict limitations on military personnel hitchhiking, after a series of murders and kidnappings of soldiers.

Along with its practicality, the willingness to hitchhike on the part of Orthodox Jewish teenagers is also related to an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle coupled with a certain youthful exuberance. Whether secular teenagers currently hitchhike for adventure or thrills, I was told by a friend,

Not really. I'm sure secular people have their own wild stories to tell. If a religious teenager wants to do something fun and crazy, he's not going to go to a bar. So what we have is hitchhiking.

Hitchhiking is now a phenomenon that is mainly associated with religious Zionists living in the West Bank.

Zionism began as a political movement for the national liberation of the Jewish people, usually focused on the Land of Israel (Boyarin and Boyarin 1989:627). In Israel and the West Bank, Religious Zionism refers to a widely diverse political and pietistic social movement. For religious Zionists, the establishment of the State of Israel in the Land of Israel bears theological implications that go beyond political or even nationalistic considerations. In Israel the most popular form of religious Zionism is both mystical and messianic. Its major proponents were the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, and his son Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook. In their view, the establishment of the State of Israel is part of a linear process towards the redemption of the Jewish People and the world as a whole. To their minds, the creation of the Jewish State in 1948 led directly to a remarkable military victory in 1967 along Israel's borders with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. This victory served as the stepping stone for the settlement of the Biblical Lands of Israel. A mystical relationship was forged between God, the Jewish people, and humankind in general when the "People of Israel" enjoyed sovereignty over the "Land of Israel" (Ravitzky 1996).

On the face of it the practice of hitchhiking looks like any other mode of transportation. It is a means by which Jewish settlers travel from one place to another. Indeed some informants were quite surprised to hear that I was contextualizing as a religious practice, something that for them seemed quite mundane. However, as Laderman (2009) points out, "Religious thoughts, actions, behaviors, impulses, sensibilities and communities are not all necessarily about God…They are instead grounded by perceptions and experiences of the Sacred …" (Laderman 2009:xiv). Laderman's point, simply put, is that "Today, religious practices and commitments emanate from unlikely sources …" (Laderman 2009:xv). Religious experiences, contexts, and practices can be found within some of the most mundane corners of society.

Traveling the Land of Israel, and asserting Jewish sovereignty through hostile Palestinian spaces, is a realization of a religious vision of redemption. Through these experiences, hitchhiking becomes much more than just a means of transportation. It is a distinct ritual of redemption. It is part of a larger commandment to settle the Land of Israel, becoming one of the ritual elements in the pietistic work of national and universal redemption. However, this is a ritual site wherein religious nationalists also confront and actively negotiate the political, moral, and theological ambiguities that exist around them.

Discursively, this progressive process towards universal redemption is saturated with certainty. This is God's plan and it is moving along just fine. In practice though, religious Zionism's theological message—and certainly its success—is far from assured. The physical risks involved in hitchhiking are emblematic of some of the risks and uncertainties that are affecting religious Zionism. Religious Zionists in the West Bank live along the physical and social border between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. This makes settlement activity a very precarious and uncertain endeavor, both politically and economically. Religious Zionists also inhabit a variety of moral and emotional fissures. In this sense, love for the Land of Israel may often confront one's love and concern for family. An honest progressive desire for a utopian redemption may be juxtaposed against the realities of military occupation. Hitchhiking takes place within this hotly contested political, moral, and religious field.

METHODOLOGY

This study of hitchhiking emerged out of a larger project on contemporary Jewish political piety in Israel and the West Bank. As part of that project, to conduct a multi-sited ethnographic survey among religious Zionists in Israel, I would routinely travel to different areas in the West Bank for weekly study sessions in Jewish thought and for various communal events. I also spent many Sabbaths in Jewish settlements being hosted by hospitable families. During the fieldwork I did not have access to a motor vehicle, and had to find some means of transportation. Israel's bus service to the West Bank is heavily subsidized by the government because, as a friend told me, the government does not want people hitchhiking in the area, and so promotes bus transporttation.

While the public transportation infrastructure in Israel and the West Bank is extensive, its service is often infrequent. This is especially so for the outlying settlements, where there may be only one or two busses a day. Many settlers who do not own vehicles were unimpressed with the unreliable service of the public transportation system and saw hitchhiking as a ready and expedient mode of transportation. I also found hitchhiking to be the most convenient way to reach many of my research destinations and turned a logistical problem into an ethnographic advantage by focusing a portion of the research on hitchhiking. I carefully observed practices during each hitchhiking trip and tried to imitate them myself. After each trip I would also record interesting or seemingly important conversations.

I learned from my observations as well as from the advice of friends that in Israel it is considered rude for a hitchhiker to initiate a conversation with a driver. Drivers will often seem not to even acknowledge the presence of hitch-

hikers in their vehicles and will tend to have personal conversations on the phone or with friends in the presence of complete strangers.

I sometimes was caught between two opposing impulses. On the one hand, I wanted to ask the drivers and other passengers many questions. On the other hand, I also wanted to abide by the cultural norms pertaining to hitchhiking. It was frustrating to sit in a car listening to a conversation that the driver was having over a cell phone or with another passenger and only hear half of the story, or not fully understanding the entire context of the story. I often had to guess the age or religious observance of the driver or other passengers. At the same time, when I did pose a question to a driver, I tended to uncover some good ethnographic data.

At times, I felt out of place questioning a driver. This unease on my part offers a poignant commentary on the limits of this kind of ethnographic research. In one instance, I had received a ride with a young lady heading out of the settlement of Efrat in the Gush Etzion Bloc. Efrat is a large religious settlement south of Jerusalem. Almost all the people driving out of the community are Orthodox Jews. The young lady who gave me the ride was dressed according to the cultural norms of modesty that are common in the area. She was wearing a long denim skirt and a loose fitting shirt that covered her elbows.

As is customary, I spent the ride sitting quietly in the front seat. After about 20 minutes she received a call from a friend. Clicking the speaker phone, she began the conversation, speaking English: "You're the biggest slut ever! The biggest slut," she shouted into the phone. The caller responded, "What, he just told me to fuck him harder." Efrat is a settlement of many Israeli-American immigrants, and where a good number of the children speak fluent English among themselves. Since I was hitchhiking from Efrat, this young lady would certainly have been aware of the possibility that I spoke English. With that in mind, I would never have expected her to say what she did, and on speakerphone no less. It points to the epistemological limits of this kind of ethnography. Unless I was engaged in a direct conversation with a driver, I really only heard snippets of conversations, or observed incidents that ideally should have been contextualized to a better degree.

This ethnographic method is rarely ideal. As Clifford (1983) noted, "There is, of course, a myth of fieldwork, and the actual experience, hedged around with contingencies, rarely lives up to the ideal" (Clifford 1983:119). While ethnographic methods are rarely ideal, I still found myself day after day standing along the same roads, and in most cases asking the same questions, as other native Israeli hitchhikers. In that sense, I believe the data I collected to be a valid representation of a demonstrable emic experience.

SAFETY AND INSECURITY

On any given Friday, groups of religious Zionists can be found swarming around traffic junctions in the West Bank, trying to hitch a ride home for the Sabbath. Some will be lucky enough to find a ride that will take them to the very door of their destination while others will have to catch several rides before arriving at their final destination.

This practice of hitchhiking is popular with religious Zionist young men and young women. Some teenagers even have contests where the winner is the one who arrives first at a destination using two or more rides. They also tell "crazy hitchhike" stories. One humorous story overheard at a Sabbath table was of a young man who was trying to hitch a ride from the center of the country to Eilat, Israel's southernmost city. A car pulls up. The youth tells the driver he's going to Eilat, and the driver tells him to get in. They drive to Ben Gurion airport and fly to Eilat in his personal jet. This young man got a tremp with one of the wealthiest men in Israel.[2]

Regardless of whether this particular story is true or not, it provides insights into the practice of hitchhiking in the West Bank. First, hitchhiking is an acknowledged cultural phenomenon among religious Zionists. They appreciate these stories of travel as interesting and unique to their communities, and retell them. Second, the story points to the most basic ambiguity around the practice of hitchhiking. When standing at a traffic junction waiting for a ride, one has no idea of when or even if one will get home. Hitchhiking locations have been targets for suicide bombers, drive-by shootings, stabbings, kidnappings, and attempts at kidnapping. Hitchhiking stations are dotted with memorial plaques commemorating the victims of these terrorist attacks. As a result, some religious Zionist parents are deeply concerned about their teenagers' choice of transportation.

In the summer of 2011, I spoke with a religious Zionist mother who six years earlier lived in a settlement in the Gaza Strip that the Israeli government evacuated as part of their 2005 Disengagement Plan. She then moved to live with her family in southern Israel at one of the sites used for relocation. After the disengagement, her family had the option of relocating to the West Bank, but chose against it. This woman was uncomfortable with her children hitchhiking. While living in the Gaza Strip between 2000 and 2005, she experienced a near weekly bombardment of mortar and rocket fire. That hitchhiking of all things was on her mind when choosing a new place to live highlights how political determination and religious zeal can be a moral dilemma, and underscores the difficult kinds of political and moral negotiations that occur in the lives of religious Zionists and especially parents.

In traveling, hitchhikers cross political boundaries. They see checkpoints, and sometimes pass through occupied Palestinian villages. Hitchhiking as an

element of ritual is exceptional because it encapsulates physical risk, moral dilemmas, theological imperative, and political uncertainty. The practice points to some basic doubts inherent in political and pietistic endeavors.

HITCHHIKING SIGNALS, BULLETPROOF GLASS, AND AWKWARDNESS

Rituals often take ambiguous quality and forms to create shared subjunctive "as if" worlds (Seligman et al. 2008). These rituals recognize the possibilities of what could be or of how the world ought to be. Most important, these are shared social worlds that recognize inherent ambiguities in life and relationships (Seligman et al. 2008:7). Hitchhiking as a mode of sacred travel adds an important ethnographic perspective to the subjunctive and ambiguous roles ascribed to ritual. Hitchhiking is circumscribed by informal rules and regulations regarding picking up rides and how to request a ride. To hitchhike in Israel, one has to stand at a junction, a bus stop, or a trempiyada, face traffic, lean slightly into the road, and extend an index finger. At busy intersections, with many people waiting, there is no need to stick out a finger. Drivers know what people are waiting for. Sometimes both drivers and hitchhikers signal with their fingers in the direction they are heading. For example, if one is waiting for a tremp at the front gate of the settlement of Tekoa, drivers who point to the right are going to Jerusalem. Those who point to the left are heading in the direction of the Gush Etzion Bloc.

Not all of these hand signals are understood or acknowledged by everyone. Sometimes waiting people complain when a car passes without stopping. "He signaled and I signaled, so why didn't he stop?" On some cold or rainy days I have seen people putting their hands together in a begging motion, pleading for cars to stop. This technique never seemed to work for me.

Hitchhiking in this area of conflict is very different from taking a bus. Most busses heading into the West Bank are armored and have thick sheets of bulletproof glass for windows. When violence is rampant, metal screens are placed over the windshields. Hitchhiking on the other hand is very different. Few cars are armored, and one senses that the boundary between Israel proper and the West Bank is only there to protect the security of Israeli citizens, travelers, and motorists.

There is a liberating aspect to hitchhiking. Whether or not one has a car, it seems as if one could go anywhere in Israel by just sticking out a finger. Turner's (1973:193) view of pilgrimage as communitas, relates to the sense of camaraderie among hitchhikers. While hitchhiking from Jerusalem to a northern West Bank settlement one Friday afternoon, I saw the same people at each leg of the journey trying to get some place for the Sabbath, and telling each other where they are headed, so that when a car passes they can call out its

destination to help the other travelers. However, one cannot be shy. It is important to be assertive.

With that in mind, hitchhiking usually works on a first-come/first-served basis. Those who arrive at the trempiyada first are supposed to be the first ones to catch available rides. When arriving, it is important to look around and take note of the people who arrived before you, and keep an eye on those arriving later. This is not always easy, especially on a busy day, or when one is tired. Awkward situations can arise. When a mistake is made, if one has the gumption, one gently asks the offending person, "Were you here first?" A more assertive "I think I was here first" works as well.

On one hot afternoon I was waiting for a tremp in a neighborhood of Jerusalem when a car pulled up heading in my direction. As usual, I waited a moment to make sure no one who arrived before would get in first, and then stepped eagerly into the car. (At some stations on busy days, people crowd around arriving vehicles, making it difficult to enter into them.) As I got in, a girl shouted, "I think I was here first." I knew that she had arrived after me and said, "I don't think so." These situations can be socially awkward, but they highlight the kinds of contestations that are not connected to politics, violence, or war zones, and surround Israeli hitchhiking.

Other factors also underline ritualistic aspects of hitchhiking. As with many rituals, there are strict, though informal, rules that people abide by with hitchhiking. First, Jews never accept rides with Palestinians, and Palestinians never offer rides to Jews. Hitchhikers in the West Bank are often wary of people who are dark complexioned or not wearing signs of being religious.[3] Conversely, male Jewish hitchhikers want to look religious by wearing a skullcap or undershirts with fringes known as *Tzitzit*. Younger women seem to have an easier time getting rides, perhaps because they are female and seem less dangerous. Once inside the vehicle, the driver should initiate the conversation. Indeed, it is to the driver's benefit to talk to the rider to make sure she or he is not a Palestinian militant in disguise. In that regard, people on the roads tend to be very attuned to accents. There also are locations from which people commonly hitchhike, either from within settlements, just outside of settlements, and at certain junctions—preferably ones with a military presence. This is why on Fridays many more people hitchhike from a settlement called Ofra[4] than from the settlement of Shiloh. Both towns are located along route 60, which is the West Bank's main traffic artery. The entrance to Ofra, however, is directly off the road, whereas Shiloh is atop a mountain. If there is a problem, it is much easier to run into Ofra for safety. As one friend bluntly asserted "you really need balls to wait at [the] Shiloh [junction]." Finally, if at all possible, carry a firearm.

These informal rituals of hitchhiking are examples of Seligman's (2008) "subjunctive worlds." When catching rides, diving into cars, judging accents, and confronting fear, one can easily forget that there is such a thing as a "Green Line." Indeed, it is an illusory world, where Religious Zionists are not bound by the political ramifications of the Middle East conflict. For hitch-hikers and their drivers, the imagined boundaries of Israel are ambiguous. At the same time, they must all find a way to navigate the same boundaries. Hitchhikers share a world where the political boundaries of the West Bank may be overcome, where everything "could be" or perhaps "should be" Israel proper.

CONFRONTING FEAR AND RISK

Many of these informal rules highlight the uncertainties and fears of living and traveling within the Occupied West Bank, and there are many such uncertainties. On the one hand, hitchhiking can be dangerous, but it is also seen as an element of Jewish sovereignty and part of the process of theo-logical redemption. Hitchhiking for some may be somewhat frightening, but it is also necessary and cheap, and it is a recognized and acceptable part of life in the West Bank.

The ambiguities that revolve around fear are rarely discussed openly. Tensions do arise however when something happens. In October of 2011, I hitched a ride in a car heading from the Gush Junction to Jerusalem. In the front two seats were the driver, a middle-aged man, and his daughter, approximately eight years old. During the week, a kidnapped Israeli soldier was released from Hamas captivity in exchange for the release of over a thousand Palestinian prisoners. There was an increased tension, and the fear that there would be kidnapping attempts during the Jewish holidays. Of concern was that the exchange would generate more of an incentive to kidnap Israelis on the roads. This was discussed in the rides that I had at that time. Many people expressed their fear and even some anger that Jewish motorists in the area may suffer from the prisoner exchange. The father and daughter in the car were listening to a radio program that discussed the risks surrounding the swap deal with Hamas. Turning to her left, the little girl looked at her father, and in a squeaky voice said, "it would be so easy to take me, I'm so small. They'd just have to throw me into a sack." The father took his eyes off the road for a second and responded, "It's not really that easy."

Listening to this exchange, it struck me that the father most likely had no way of knowing how easy or difficult it would be to kidnap his daughter. The little girl's declaration in the front seat of her father's Mazda echoes similar uncertainties surrounding physical insecurity that Hayder Al-Mohammad (2012) documented in his ethnography of kidnapping in post-invasion Basra,

Iraq. Marshalling the thoughts of Judith Butler (2004), Al-Mohammad posits an analytic approach that highlights the precarious "slippages, fraying, and importantly, the exposure of life itself" (Al-Mohammad 2012:600). On the roads of the West Bank, life itself becomes viscerally exposed to the uncertain experiences of fear and danger. The conversation between the father and daughter expressed the kinds of personal "slippages and fraying" that parents and children are called upon to navigate when traveling those roads.

Fear and danger are however contextual. For religious Zionists in the West Bank the difference between these two is vague and open for interpretation. One hot afternoon in the fall of 2011, during the Jewish holiday of Tabernacles (Sukkot), I was trying to catch a ride to Jerusalem at the gate of a settlement overlooking Nablus. It was the middle of the day and not many cars were passing or were going my way. A young married woman, wearing a blue head covering[5] and with two small children, stopped and offered me a ride. I got into the front seat of her minivan. We drove south through the occupied Palestinian town of Huwarra. Its main road is usually tight and congested, and during the Second Intifada it was the sight of many violent attacks against Israeli motorists. Wondering if this drive was at all unnerving for a young woman driving alone with two children in the backseat, I waited for us to get through the village before asking her if she was at all fearful for her safety. She thought for a moment, and answered:

You know, I could give you a very ideological answer and say, "this is our land and we have to settle it, even risking our lives." But, yes, absolutely it is scary. But you know what? It's a calculated risk. This is a regular road [she took one hand off the wheel and pointed], lots of people drive on it, and the army drives on it all the time. And I'll tell you, you're only afraid of things you're not used to. If you never come to this area, this road is a little nerve wracking, but if you live here it's different. I'm from Ofra, and I have a friend who lives in Tel-Aviv who absolutely refuses to visit me. She says it's too dangerous. Now, you know Ofra [we both share a knowing chuckle].[6] But she's just not used to it.

This woman linked fear to habituation, and then differentiated between fear and danger. For her, Ofra was perhaps just as central and no more "dangerous" than Tel Aviv. Not all fearsome activities are dangerous, and hitchhikers are attuned to delineating between the two.

This woman acknowledged the ideological and theological aspects to hitchhiking, yet we both found ourselves negotiating the uncertain risks involved in the practice. A few minutes later the young driver asked if I wanted to be let off at a junction that was closer to my destination but with no military presence. She said that she would understand if I declined, especially now with the "Shalit situation." Believing that discretion was the better part of valor, I declined the offer, and we both shared a nervous laugh. The issues at stake were at one and the same time political, religious, and personal. Was I

politically giving in to threats of violence by not exiting the car at Rechalim junction? Or, to ask the question in a religious Zionist idiom, was I not willing to sacrifice myself for the sanctity of the promised redemption?

I often observed others making the same kind of calculations. For example, there was a young pregnant woman who arrived at a hitchhiking station in Jerusalem from Safed in the north. She was traveling to a settlement south of Jerusalem for a medical test. For those who travel this highway regularly, the trip south is considered to be relatively safe. There are no occupied Palestinian villages to drive through, and the road is well lit and wide. This woman, however, was very nervous. Her eyes glanced from side to side, and she kept asking people if waiting for a ride there was safe. "Is it something that is normally done? What kind of people catch rides here, and who picks them up?" People responded that it was safe, and that even elderly people wait there. Her question was deceptively simple: "Is this place dangerous?" The answer, however, is very complex.

The issue at stake here was not one of contestation in the manner that Eade and Sallnow (2000) describe. This woman was simply frightened, just as I was frightened at the prospect of getting out of a car at the Rechelim junction. Sacred travel turned into a site where local moral values were being actively constructed around a sense of fear and the prospect of physical harm. Here, hitchhiking as a ritual of sacred travel does not so much point to meaning or symbolism, contested or not, but rather to uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk.

GENDER AND POLITICAL AMBIGUITIES

Hitchhiking stations and the roads of the West Bank are also sites where social as well as political cleavages are mediated and confronted. In many Jewish settlements, relationships between unmarried males and females are highly structured. Religious youth groups are separated in some of these communities. In general, there is very little approved dating or individual courtship. Marriages tend to be arranged, and couples wed and have children at young ages. It is common to see 19- and 20-year-old women married and with children. From what I have been told and observed, trempiyadas are one of the few locations where the sexes can mix and mingle in an unstructured environment.

I once asked a religious Zionist if Rechelim Junction was safe. He said, "Of course! Young girls go there all the time. You might even find a wife." While I did not find a wife, I did once get a date with a nice young woman who picked me up one night at a trempiyada from a settlement south of Jerusalem. She was dressed in an orthodox Jewish manner, and I knew she was single because she was not wearing a hair covering. We both rode in her car and talked for the duration of the ride. When we arrived in Jerusalem, I

figured it was now or never, and asked if she wanted to go out one night. She gave me her number and said to give her a call. If not for this tremp, the only way we could have met as two Orthodox young Jews was through mutual friends, a matchmaker, or a dating website. In the end things did not work out between us, but hitchhiking did offer us a space where two genders could meet and get to know one another in an open-ended and unstructured environment.[7]

Within some religious Zionist circles, there is cultural angst surrounding this fact. Hitchhiking is certainly a site of contested gendered practices. In Orthodox Jewish law, unmarried men and women or those married to other people are generally forbidden to be alone with each other in an enclosed space. Some religious Zionist rabbinic figures have counseled young girls not to hitchhike at night or alone. The fear is not only that of physical danger, but also that a girl might be forced to accept a ride with a man, and thereby perhaps violate the injunction against being alone with a man. In one written opinion, a Rabbi claimed that since hitchhiking is an activity that can endanger one's life, if a young woman is already hitchhiking, one is obligated to offer her a ride, even at the expense of being alone with her. At the same time, at hitchhiking stations one can spot men and women quickly exiting cars and switching seats, so as not to be sitting next to each other. Rabbinic figures must often negotiate between the strictures of Jewish law and the vagaries of everyday practice. Hitchhiking is a good example of a nationalistic and religious practice that illuminates these kinds of rabbinic negotiations.

At one Sabbath meal, a young married couple from the Northern West Bank settlement of Har Bracha was telling those present at the table how they met. While boys and girls do not freely mingle together in Har Bracha, she said that they do see each other walking out of synagogue on Sabbaths, or while hitchhiking. The sexes do not normally talk to each other at the hitchhiking stations; when they do, the conversations are not extensive. But they see each other and gain impressions of each other: how they act, what their friends are like, etc. These are equivocal encounters that are part and parcel of gender relations among religious Zionists in the West Bank.

In a similar sense, the roads of the West Bank are also one of the few places in the occupied territories where Jews and Palestinians regularly come in contact. This is limited, bounded by religion, politics, and mistrust, but it is contact nonetheless. Palestinian and Israeli vehicles pass each other on the roads, and Israeli vehicles weave through Palestinian traffic. At the Tapuach Junction hitchhiking station a few miles south of Nablus, Jewish and Palestinian pedestrians walk past each other under the watchful eye of the military.

This is a very ambiguous kind of interaction. One Friday afternoon in 2012, I was waiting at the Tapuach Junction with a group of teenagers, young married women, and a few yeshiva students. A young Palestinian man in a military winter coat calmly walked past the station. There was a moment of quiet tension. As the man walked closer, the conversations among the hitchhikers became subtly quieter. Fresh in my mind was a stabbing attempt that occurred a few weeks previously at the Gush Junction. All of us glanced surreptitiously at the Palestinian passerby, wondering if there would be a violent incident. Indeed, a year later, a settler would be stabbed to death at the Tapuach Junction only a few feet away from where I was waiting for a ride that afternoon.

This occurrence was not unique. All of the Jewish hitchhikers at the station would in a few minutes' time be driving through a crowded Palestinian thoroughfare, and Palestinians would often walk past Jewish settlers at the Junction. But a young and seemingly physically fit individual, wearing a military jacket, raised concerns. No violence occurred. The Palestinian man continued walking down the road, and the tempo of the conversations among the Jewish settlers picked up. The incident highlighted how palpable and embodied uncertainty, doubt, and suspicion exist in zones of conflict. While traveling the West Bank's weaving roads, Jews see checkpoints and Palestinians. Rather than erasing boundaries, hitchhiking inhabits an ambiguous position. It is a daily ritual where religious Zionists negotiate the political and religious fissures that absorb their daily lives.

These political and religious fissures also occur with an inescapable ethical dilemma. Jewish settlers and hitchhikers within the West Bank inhabit an area of military occupation that is a source of suffering for their Palestinian neighbors. While this fact was not overtly expressed by my informants, it was also not entirely ignored. In July of 2011, at a Sabbath dinner in a northern West Bank Settlement overlooking the Palestinian city of Nablus, I participated in a discussion with my host family about how the universalist theology of religious Zionism may be reconciled with the particularistic focus on the Land of Israel and Jewish sovereignty. The husband noted how universalism is very important, but that it does not necessarily apply to their Palestinian neighbors who are "evil [*resha'im*] and haters of Israel [*son'ei yisrael*]." His wife, who has lived her entire life on the settlement, contradicted him. In fact, this was the first time she spoke during the meal. "No, not at all. They're not all like that," she said. To illustrate her point, she turned to the roads of the West Bank. "When you see Arabs waiting in the hot sun, with their little kids, you know something isn't right, something isn't normal." She went on to quote a Hassidic rabbi who said that redemption would not be complete when even a single worm is being tread underfoot.

This normally silent woman, who spent her entire life within one of the most politically right-wing and religiously zealous settlements in the West Bank, seemed to imply that Palestinian suffering was delaying an ultimate redemption. This is quite striking, as the presence of her settlement in the West Bank is implicated in that suffering. The wife at the table did not address this contradiction, nor was it appropriate for me at the time to press the issue. It seemed apparent however that religious Zionist theology is confronted with the everyday experience of traveling on the roads. What results is ambiguity regarding the theological process of redemption, and uncertainty surrounding its ethical consequences. Contradictions, ambiguities, and ethical dilemmas are experiences that do not necessarily need to be resolved by religious nationalists.

RITUAL AND THE PRODUCTION OF AMBIGUITY

The anthropology of religion has long observed the ways in which uncertainty and chaos complement ritual behavior. For Malinowski (1955:90), magic and ritual acted as an emotional catharsis when confronted with chaotic phenomenon. In Turner's (1977) view, rituals channel and domesticate powerful emotions. Gluckman (2004) treated rituals of rebellion as a technique through which social tensions are highlighted without unsettling the "structure of the system itself" (Erickson and Murphy 2010:232). For Turner and Gluckman, ritual functioned as a cathartic experience whose purpose was to support the unity of the general social system (Feige and Ben Ari 1991:438). Similarly, Geertz (1973) viewed religion as acting to elicit meaning and order out of chaos. These classic anthropological traditions have placed ritual in the role of mediating a disordered and chaotic world.

In some cases, ritual may not be a response whose function is to alleviate uncertainty, but is a symptom of it. Hitchhiking in the Occupied West Bank is a kind of ritual that elicits complex responses among religious Zionist settlers. Through hitchhiking, individuals negotiate between the theological, political, and moral fissures of their world. Acknowledging the possibility that rituals may not only confront disorder and chaos, but actually produce it, allows for a better understanding of the uncertain and conflict ridden nature of quotidian life to be subsumed under the rubric of political and pietistic experiences.

CONCLUSION: STRUGGLE AND THE WORK OF RITUAL

In the eighteenth century, deep within the Russian Pale of Settlement, a Chassidic Master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, authored a mystical tract entitled *Sefer Shel Beinonim* (The Book of Average Men). The author would become the founder of Lubavitch Hassidism, and his work is a staple of

modern Jewish Kabbalistic thought. This text is currently a classic studied by religious Zionists within both Israel proper and the West Bank. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a Lubavitch rabbi and religious dean of a seminary in the West Bank settlement of Tekoa, described Schneur Zalman's text as follows:

In this book comes the novel idea that there are some people for whom the conflict for good and evil is never solved completely, and there are people for whom the struggle will be permanent and eternal. These people are important people, not failures, and are fulfilling the divine plan, by their permanent struggling.
(http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts/article/q_a_with_rabbi_adin_steinsaltz_20031107)

This view has most people in the world as neither righteous nor evil. People live with and struggle with the world around them all the time. In this perspective, the religious hero is not one who vanquishes disbelief, but one who bravely lives with doubt and ambiguity. This insight is as relevant for the understanding of sacred travels as it is for an analysis of political and pietistic movements generally. Religious nationalists make choices and also struggle. That struggle often defines the moral, religious, and political contours of their experiences within the world. Coleman (2002) has argued that a pilgrimage may take forms that cannot easily be subsumed under the analytic categories of communitas or contestation. He asks, "Why should we assume that pilgrimage must be 'about' any one thing, whether it be heightened conflict or the heightened absence of it?" (Coleman 2002:363). Likewise, hitchhiking as sacred travel within the Occupied West Bank offers a moment when the everyday dilemmas and stakes of life become most clear. There, the interplay between politics and religion is more about ambiguity and the production of uncertainty than it is about locating a harmonious sense of communitas or of constructing ordered or even contested meanings.

Within the private cars of Jewish settlers, and along the hitchhiking stations scattered throughout the West Bank, exist ritual sites where the daily moral struggle of religion and politics takes place. This kind of sacred travel has the potential to encompass much more than ritual process or even contested meanings. Ritual, religion, and politics are just as likely to entail ambiguity and tension as to provide certainty and ideological zeal. Cultural anthropologists ought to use this insight to rethink some of the classical theoretical associations in the discipline. Relationships between the signified and the signifier, between cause and effect, and between right and wrong are all immersed in ambiguity. When applied to issues of politics and piety, we are reminded that there are no angels, just imperfect people trying to reach their destinations as perfectly as they possibly can.

NOTES

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2.   See Mukerji 1978 for an analysis of road lore among young hitchhikers in California.

3.   In Israel, "religious" (*Dati* in Hebrew) generally refers to Orthodox Jewish practice. That is how the term is used here.

4.   Ofra, a large community north of Jerusalem, was one of the first Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

5.   Many married orthodox Jewish women cover their hair, according to the precepts of Jewish Law. Religious Zionist married women in Israel tend to cover their hair with a cloth known as a *mitpachat*.

6.   Ofra is considered by most Israeli inhabitants of the West Bank as one of the most central and ideologically mainstream settlements.

7.   Now I have my own crazy hitchhike story.

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